

“Ain’t No Rest for the Weary:” Continuing the Historical Legacy of Educational Praxis and Advocacy for Black Youth

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Abstract: This essay addresses the role of historical and socio-political nexus of educational praxis and advocacy in educating Black youth. The motivation for this work extends from the critical need of educators of Black youth to contextualize the general experiences of Black education as part of a greater trajectory of liberatory activism. By connecting the historical precedents of Black education, this essay also suggests that while the contemporary educational challenges of Black youth plague an ever changing national landscape, the methods of effectively addressing these deficiencies are historically rooted. Contemporary educational challenges for Black youth, which are the byproducts of neo-liberal agendas, can be addressed through deep historical analysis and by modeling many of the solutions-based methodologies of past generations.

Keywords: educational praxis, Black Freedom Struggle, Pan-Africanism

Historical Antecedents: The colored people are called today to mark out on the map of life with their own hands their future course or locality in the great national body politic. Other hands cannot mark for them; other tongues cannot speak for them; other eyes cannot see for them; they must see and speak for themselves, and make their own characters on the map, however crooked or illegible.²

J. Willis Menard

J. Willis Menard’s passionate statement captures the history of Black people in America who worked to regain their humanity and freedom through the enterprise of education. Menard’s foretelling statement in 1866 indicates that he and other white philanthropists were astonishingly aware of the actions of newly freed slaves in many sections of the South and were “taken aback to discover that some Blacks preferred to teach in and operate their own schools without the

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² Anderson 1988. Anderson’s groundbreaking work highlights the socio-political advancement of the newly freed slaves during the era where Jim Crow politics and de facto Southern mores effected the development of post antebellum life for African Americans. Significant and seminal, *Education of Blacks in the South* also informs students and scholars alike of the proactive measures taken to address illiteracy in the South.

benefit of northern largesse.”³ Black people throughout the South not only resisted intervention but also supported their own educational endeavors and their children alike.

Prior to emancipation, Black people risked limb and life to challenge the unjust Black codes that made it illegal for slaves to be educated.⁴ Despite having been subjected to draconian penalties of Black codes post 1865 emancipation, Black people wanted to gain the educational tools to navigate a new frontier; and the newly freed slaves insisted that the endeavor must be self-determined, constructed, and achieved on their own terms. Historian V.P. Franklin furthers this sentiment by adding, “the values of education, advancement, and self determination underpinned the numerous efforts by Afro American communities and organizations to open classrooms and schoolhouses for themselves and for their children following the Civil War.”⁵

The scholarship of Christopher M. Span suggests that prior to emancipation, no free schools existed in Mississippi (for whites or Blacks). However, by 1869, Black folks sacrificed and advocated for education throughout the state for all children. According to a former slave George Washington Albright, “We paid to have every child, Negro and white, schooled equally.”⁶ Throughout the South, education had been viewed largely by the general public as an endeavor for the privileged classes beyond racial or ethnic standing.

The tireless efforts produced brilliant results as illiteracy rates among Black folks decreased dramatically by 1910. U.S. Census records advance that the 1880 seventy percent illiteracy rate (defined as the ability to write) that had plagued the newly freed population had decreased to thirty percent by 1910.⁷ Scholar of education history, Joel Spring, echoes this historical phenomenon:

Despite school segregation and harassment from the white population, the African American population of the United States made one of the greatest educational advancements in the history of education after emancipation. Denied an education by law in slave states and facing inequality of educational opportunities in free states, only 7 percent of the African American population was literate in 1863. This 7 percent was composed mainly of free African Americans in Northern states. A small part of this 7 percent was composed of enslaved Africans who broke laws to become literate. Within a ninety-year period after emancipation, the literacy rate jumped to 90 percent.⁸

³ Ibid: 12.

⁴ Franklin 1992: 163.

⁵ Ibid: 169. Also groundbreaking and complimentary [do you mean “complementary” (to complete the historical period) or “complimentary”(to praise or thank the historic period)] to this historic period is the work of Vanessa Siddle-Walker, *The Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*.

⁶ Span 2002: 196.; Also see the seminal work of Christopher M. Span., *From the Cotton Field to the School House: African American Education in Mississippi 1862 -1875*.

⁷ Franklin 1992: 175.

⁸ Spring 2001: 220. Additional and significant scholarship by Spring that echoes and supports the historical

Entering into the twentieth century, the quest and intentions to increase educational advancements were further developed through the first wave of a great migration period of Black folks heading to northern cities. Following the failures of the Reconstruction era, and great debates over the direction to which education for Blacks should take—industrial education or education for future leadership—advocacy for educational advancement wasn't deterred but persisted in both southern and northern spaces. Many Black folks perceived Northern migration to the cities of Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore as an opportunity to escape white violence in the South.

However, entering into the 1920s, Black people who arrived north of the Mason-Dixon line found that Jim Crow had no regional bounds. As mass migration efforts “to the North and southern urban areas began to threaten northern interests in a manner new to these areas, it became abundantly clear that the ‘separate but equal’ system was failing to educate properly”⁹ the many new migrants in their cosmopolitan Northern abodes. Though affected by a separate and unequal distribution of economic wealth on a national basis, education for overall societal acceptance for Black folks remained as an overall objective. Continuing the traditions of achieving such a feat remained in the realm of self-determinative initiatives. None better reflect the plight of the sons and daughters of the formerly enslaved Africans than the 1933 seminal work of Carter G. Woodson's *Mis-Education of the Negro*, which affirms his awareness that the descendants of the enslaved Africans needed to continue the quest for literacy by being taught to read. However, Woodson in 1933, well aware of the errors of his earlier treatise, implores Black folks to redirect their attention to grapple with why and how advocating for a specific type of education was vital to their liberation. As powerfully stated by Woodson,

The Negro's mind has been brought under control of his oppressor. The problem of holding the Negro down therefore is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him to stand here or go yonder. He will find his “proper place” and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact if there is not back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.¹⁰

position of Black self-determination for literacy and education is, *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States*.

⁹ Carruthers 1977: 291-304, 301. For scholarship that examines the intersections of ideology, philanthropy, and racial stratification post antebellum to the historic *Brown v Board* decision, see the work of the late William H. Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education, Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954*. For scholarship that addresses the migration waves of Black folks migrating to Northern locals in search of new opportunities, see the work of Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns, The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Also see the oral histories compiled by writer, Timuel D. Black, Jr., *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration*.

¹⁰ Woodson 1990: xiii.

Woodson’s frustration speaks to the measures of educational purpose that were evidently absent from the intention of manumitting Black folks from whip and lash. Woodson’s perspective, while not singular, was complemented by W.E.B. DuBois’ 1935 query *Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?* which provides a radical perspective on how Black folks must continue to teach their own people for civic and social advancement. Like Woodson, DuBois critically assesses the social conditions of the day that have prohibited steady advancement as well as education opportunities for Black folks. DuBois, who became well aware of the apartheid conditions of the North, made it apparently clear in his writings of the 1930s that not only did the so called Negro need separate schools, but a paradigm shift needed to occur in the thinking of Black teachers, pupils, and parents in order to reclaim their humanity in the process. Beyond the thrust for educational advancement, the type and method of education proved to be the most compelling of Du Bois’s arguments. Fittingly, Du Bois wholeheartedly believed “that until American Negroes believe in their own power and ability, they are going to be helpless before the white world, and the white world, realizing this inner paralysis and lack of self-confidence, is going to persist in its insane determination to rule the universe for its own selfish advantage.”¹¹

In response to these critical perspectives, Black folks not only continued their quest to educate through multiple institutional avenues, but they were increasing the cultural capital of the race to ensure that education consisted of more than just an orthodox schooling process. By 1954 and 1955, the historic *Brown v Board of Education* decision changed the socio-political landscape of the nation. This decision may have been deemed a victory to smash the unethical ruling of *Plessy v Ferguson*, yet Black folks’ existence on an uneven playing field had already bore the fruit of this unholy civic undertaking.¹² Thus, advocacy and cultural praxis emerged through the Black press, study groups, public speeches, editorials, and dialogues. And these actions provided the “political and philosophical imperatives that undergirded the Black Power Movement.”¹³

Educational Lessons of the Black Freedom Movement

In 1963, the great novelist, social critic, and activist James Baldwin presented an essay entitled *A Talk to Teachers*. Baldwin begins by acknowledging the revolutionary elements that have

¹¹ Du Bois 1935: 328-335, 333.

¹² Wilkerson 2010: 436. Scholars of educational history have noted in previous works the challenges of school desegregation. Wilkerson in her seminal text also provides a stark reminder regarding the historic 1954 and 1955 *Brown v Board* decision that dismantled segregation, according the court ruling, “with all deliberate speed” on a national level. However, the stubbornness and power of states rights prevented the application of the federal decision in a number of states into the 1990s. According to Wilkerson, “much of the South translated that phrase loosely to mean whenever they got around to it, which meant a time frame closer to a decade than a semester. A county in Virginia—Prince Edward County—closed its entire school system for five years, from 1959 to 1964, rather than integrate.” See also the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Landing on the Wrong Note: The Price We Paid for *Brown*.” *Educational Researcher* 33 (7) (October 2004). Also see the work of Raymond Wolters, *The Burden of Brown: Thirty Years of School Desegregation*.

¹³ Joseph 2003: 182-203, 182.

evolved in the decade's infancy. Baldwin is forthcoming regarding his lack of professional purview in the educational field. However, he is courageous enough to sincerely express what he feels an education should produce—a critically freethinking individual. Baldwin bravely states that it had become clear to him that “any Negro who is born in this country and undergoes the American educational system runs the risk of becoming schizophrenic.”¹⁴ Baldwin's fear, while sensationally stated, reflected the sentiments of many Black folks subjected to unforgiving slum school conditions. Poverty schooling conditions relegated millions of Black Americans to the armed forces, prison or menial wage work positions. According to Baldwin, Black people were experiencing a total loss of self in the process.

The 1960s Black Freedom Struggle not only provided racial uplift and cultural pride but also educational and political solutions through the work of the freedom schools, mainly in the southern regions of the country. Initiated by the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the freedom school movement was SNCC's attempt to provide Black people in the South with the experience of alternative institutions and educational advocacy. Late historian, SNCC worker, and civil rights activist Howard Zinn noted that the SNCC freedom schools “were a challenge to American education, embodying the provocative suggestion that an entire school system can be created in any community outside the official order, and critical of its suppositions.”¹⁵

The late 1960s and much of the 1970s provided the educational vestiges of the Black Power Movement through the emergence of alternative education spaces. The anti-colonial and counter-hegemonic Independent Black Institutions (IBIs) were born out of political struggle in the Black community as the result of think tanks, study circles, and college campus protests on a national level. Among the formations were The Communiversity of Chicago; Center for Black Education, Washington, D.C.; Malcolm X Liberation University, Durham & Greensboro, North Carolina; Uhuru Sasa Shule, Brooklyn, New York; Nairobi Schools Movement, East Palo Alto, California; Pan African Skills Work Center, Atlanta, Georgia; and the Floyd McKissick Community School of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Many of the aforementioned institutions comprised the larger national federation that emerged in 1972, the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI), which fought to ensure collective support for African-centered educational advocacy for curriculum that infused the political and social culture of Black life with the African diaspora at the center of pedagogical intentions.¹⁶ Though a significant number of the

¹⁴ Baldwin 1963.

¹⁵ Carson 1995: 121. College of Charleston scholar, Jon Hale, has produced a groundbreaking work on the subject of Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom Schools. Hale's work, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, provides a wealth of information on the role and importance of the SNCC Freedom Schools in the context of the greater Black Freedom Movement. Also see the classic work of the late Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The Abolitionists* and the work of important SNCC activist, Robert Moses, *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*.

¹⁶ The past decade saw the emergence of the “Black Power Studies” subfield of history from which significant contributions had been made in unpacking a complex era of American history. From this scholarly awakening, a number of insightful manuscripts have been produced that highlight the nexus of the Black

alternative educational formations of the Black Freedom Movement were not able to survive into the twenty-first century, the invaluable lessons gained from their emergence and function not only requires investigation but the institutions are also models of institutional praxis and proof that school advocacy for Black youth can yield tangible results.

Contemporary Application: Educational Praxis and Advocacy

In an age of Empire, neoliberal agendas and mass populations of poor city dwellers are subjected to so-called urban renewal plans that create disposable populations upon intentions to increase capital. As a socio-political and economic framework, neoliberalism is a set “of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere.”¹⁷ In layman terms, neoliberalism creates consequences of outstanding social inequities, especially in the educational processes for Black youth. Because of this phenomenon, indigenous city populations of Black families are forced to reconsider what home will look like and continually scramble for resources in a post crack cocaine era in America.

Educational policy scholar, Pauline Lipman in her groundbreaking scholarship, *New Political Economy of Urban Education* provides a keen analysis of the centrality of race, funding and value of space in the context of schooling for Black youth. Lipman states,

Constructing people of color as the underserving poor (lazy, pathological, and welfare dependent) provides policy makers with a rationale to restructure or eliminate government-funded social programs and to diminish state responsibility for social welfare. In particular, the “inner city” and the public institutions with which it is identified are pathologized in a racially coded morality discourse that legitimates their dismantling. This racialized logic justifies privatization

Freedom Movement and the alternative education institutions that emerged from the outgrowth of the era. Contributing to this canon of works are: Peniel E. Joseph, *Dashikis and Democracy: Black Studies, Student Activism, and the Black Power Movement*, and *Waiting till the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power*; Richard D. Benson II, *Fighting for Our Place in the Sun: Malcolm X and the Radicalization of the Black Student Movement, 1960-1973*; Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*; and Kwasi Konadu, *Truth Crushed to the Earth Will Rise Again: The East Organization and the Principles and Practice of Black Nationalist Development*. Recent works that examine the relationships between the Black campus movement and the emergence of both Black Studies departments and alternative community educational institutions and formations are: Cecil Brown, *Dude, Where’s My Black Studies Department?: The Disappearance of Black Americans from Our Universities*; Ibram X. Kendi, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965-1972*; Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*; and Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline*.

¹⁷ Lipman 2011: 6.

of public housing, schools, and health clinics and gentrification through dispossession of urban Black communities.¹⁸

The remaining communities that adapt to school closings, corporate Charter school takeover, and socio-political engineered conflict in community spaces are still in dire need of persons willing to identify and nurture relationships on the basis of educational praxis and advocacy.¹⁹ Though insurmountable, socio-political and economic factors subject poor Black youth to the many inequitable whims of society, solutions of which are available in the very spaces out of where they come from. Educational scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings remind us of the type of community activist and teacher that “seeks to help students see community-building as a lifelong practice that extends beyond the classroom.” Additionally, “teachers have to work hard to help them see beyond the decimation caused by federal, state, and county neglect to the strengths of their community.”²⁰ Echoing the perspectives of Ladson-Billings is the work of the late Asa Hilliard, whose concept of Deep Restructuring also requires the critical factors of creating conditions of success for students and communities. This requires the “design [of] human institutions, of the creation of professional work environment, of the linkage of school activities and community directions, of creating human bonds in the operation of appropriate socialization activities.”²¹ Essentially, the charge and reminder of scholars like Ladson-Billings and Hilliard is that education for the preservation of Black life and Black youth is found in a rich historical lineage of analysis and vision. But most importantly, education for Black youth is a Call to Work. Supporting this perspective is the work of Critical Race Theory scholar, David Stovall, who reminds teachers, community partners, and youth that, “we engage in praxis that not only deconstructs the negative realities of the public school, but also supports the models that have proven effective in providing students with an education that reflects their self-worth and importance to the world.”²²

An example of building and sustaining such a vision for Black education in the twenty-first century can be exemplified in the preparation of teachers for Black youth. Classroom/community efforts of achieving such a feat can be applied in teaching future teachers about the communities for which they will work in and also utilizing these opportunities to learn from the school-community environments as well. In relation to Black youth, future teachers, community partners, and students should engage in a type of two-phase data collection and community analysis process that requires assessment and developing advocacy plans that encourage growth.

¹⁸ Ibid: 12.

¹⁹ Stovall 2017.

²⁰ Ladson-Billings 1994: 73.

²¹ Hilliard III 1991: 31-36, 35.

²² Stovall 2005.

School/Community Analysis:²³ Students engage in community analysis over school semester (at minimum) that requires questions asked and answered regarding:

- Students
- Subject area – curriculum area targeted to assist teacher and student development
- Politics of place (political economy) – institutional knowledge

Developing an Advocacy Plan: Based on the findings and data collection from the school/community analysis, the student teacher, community partner and/or student utilize the information to develop an advocacy plan. The plan can be adjusted or framed in a number of methods. A useful outline for such a plan should include the following:

- Plan rationale
- Advocacy plan – problems and proposed solution
- Resources and preliminary data collection
- Advocacy in action – praxis
- Intended outcomes and contingency plan

This bi-part solutions approach is historically couched in the legacy of advocacy work done by Black folks for self-determinative measures. This process assists in not only addressing the curricular challenges faced by Black students in classroom and school institutions, but the use of such work enables Black youth and social change agents to develop a critical solutions-based lens from which to continuously engage work for Black student success. Overall, the legacy of Black contribution, innovation, and determination to develop liberatory means for educational outcomes to neutralize the societal deficiencies finds itself in a rich history. This legacy of educational activity rests in proactive methods of institution building, ideological creativity, and community involvement to ensure educational success. Most importantly, the historical vestiges of such work can affect current efforts to increase improvements for continued outcomes for Black

²³ Dr. David O. Stovall, Professor of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), first developed the community analysis/school analysis assignment for an Educational Policy course on Race and US Schooling at UIC in 2007. The community analysis was developed as a result of Dr. Stovall’s discussions and work with educators, Laurence Tan and Salina Gray. My adoption of the community analysis framework began in the fall of 2010 during my second year of teaching a course entitled, Advocacy in Urban Schools in the Education Department of Spelman College. After developing a partnership with Raising Expectations Inc., a community/youth development organization to assist Black youth in the Southwest Atlanta area, the community analysis assignment was altered specifically to address the contours of the EDU 407/Raising Expectations partnership. After two academic years of utilizing the community/school analysis assignment, I later developed an Advocacy Plan framework for students to construct as an addendum to the community/school analysis for which teacher education students would engage in praxis and actualize one of the critical pillars of the Spelman College Education Department’s Conceptual Framework.

youth. Educators, community social change agents, and the Black youth must identify their tools from historical antecedents provided throughout the time of a rich history. As the great historian reminds us, “History is not everything, but it is a starting point. History is a clock that people use to tell their political and cultural time of day. It is a compass they use to find themselves on the map of human geography. It tells them where they are, but more importantly, what they must be.”²⁴ And for those who work to decolonize Black education to benefit Black youth, wedding the solutions found throughout the history of Black education with contemporary challenges further informs twenty-first century Black people—What We Must Be.

²⁴ King and Swartz 2014: 163. The seminal contributions and works of John Henrik Clarke to the fields of history, pan-Africanism, and African studies were pioneering to say the least. Clarke provided critical history analysis and insightful historical prose for what many students and scholars of Black studies may refer to as the ‘missing pages of history.’ Principally self trained, the legacy of John Henrik Clark can be found in his many writings and general influence in African and Black studies. See New York Times. John Henrik Clarke, Black Studies Advocate Dies at 83. 20 July 1998.

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