

The Modern School Oral Histories

Interview Themes

Revised April 2019

Special thanks to Karen Taylor and Modern School alumni Cherilyn 'Liv' Wright, Deidre Flowers, Melanie Edwards, Diana Lachatanere, and April Bowie for participating in discussions with Teachers College students & faculty that shaped this document.

Purpose of this project

In collaboration with Modern School alumni and the local history organization While We Are Still Here, Teachers College faculty and students are working to preserve the history of The Modern School via oral history interviews. We seek to document how students, as well as former teachers and parents, experienced life at the school, how their experiences at school related to their experience as Harlem, New York City, and US residents at various points in time, and what meaning they make of that experience in their lives. We work to ensure that Harlem residents, members of The Modern School community and their families, current and future educators, and interested members of the public can access and learn from this history.

We do this work because we recognize the importance of The Modern School as a distinct independent educational institution created by a Black woman educator for Black children, which evolved over time and that was situated in a shifting Harlem and New York City context. The Modern School's history helps convey the place of working-class and middle- and upper-class people in Harlem's history, demonstrates how African American communities pursued educational excellence, and captures one example of Black women's leadership and entrepreneurship. While some documentation of The Modern School exists in the manuscript collection of the Schomburg Center and in the published writing of former students, oral histories bring that material alive and complement it.

Purpose of this document

The goal of this document is to help interviewers identify prompts that will help interviewees shape the conversation toward the narrative they want to tell. It is not a script or list of questions to proceed through in fixed order. Which questions come up for discussion will depend on the interviewee's interest and experiences and the flow of the conversation. Interviewees are welcome to introduce new topics beyond this list. As the interviewer focuses on listening and responding to the narrative the interviewee offers, follow-up questions on topics mentioned by the interviewee can be more important than moving on to a new topic.

This is a long list - not because all of these topics can be discussed, but because there are many possible directions to take in the interviews, and we want to have a range of possibilities in mind.

Interview Themes

- Childhood & Family
 - Home - where? With whom?
 - Important places for you as a child, outside of school
 - Impressions of Sugar Hill/Harlem/NYC, especially in relationship to race, Black community life, racism, segregation
 - Family history in/coming to Harlem
 - Parents' occupations and educational experience

- Choosing The Modern School
 - How you/your family came to know of the school
 - What motivated parents to send you
 - Initial impressions of the school
 - Contrast with previous or later schooling
 - (If relevant) Family connections - via parents, siblings - to The Modern School

- Life At School
 - Route to school
 - Typical day at the school
 - School culture
 - Interactions with peers
 - Interactions with teachers
 - Important school routines
 - How these communicated class and/or race and/or gender
 - How these related to your sense of your identity in terms of race, gender, class
 - Impressions of or encounters with Mildred Johnson Edwards
 - School practices that supported you
 - School practices that you found negative/did not support you
 - What was "proper comportment" at The Modern School?
 - What/who was an "ideal" Modern School child?

 - Curriculum & Classroom life
 - Memorable classroom experiences
 - Meaning/consequences of having black teachers
 - Curriculum - in history, art and music, as well as in school routines
 - How these communicated class and/or race and/or gender
 - How these were aligned with/different from your experience other areas of your life

 - Spaces of the school
 - Memorable places for you
 - Spaces at the school that you liked/disliked

- Any spaces where you felt especially comfortable/safe
 - Any spaces where you felt uncomfortable/unsafe
- Modern School in Harlem/NYC/US context
 - Similarities or differences between life at home/neighborhood and school
 - Sense of identity (race, class, gender) as experienced differently in different spaces.
 - Gap or alignment between school and neighborhood or other spaces of your life?
 - Meaning of The Modern School for Black students living in US at the time you attended (in relationship to segregation, to contemporary political and social movement contexts, other broader forces)
- Identity (repeats some themes included above)
 - Important experiences that shaped your sense of racial/gender/class identity
 - Sense of this identity at school in comparison to other spaces (neighborhood, church, etc)
 - What sense of identity The Modern School sought to foster
- After The Modern School
 - Transition to other schools, if did not stay through all grades at TMS
 - High school
 - Transition
 - Contrast with TMS
 - College
 - Your sense of the school's impact on your life course.
 - (If relevant) Impact on later decisions as a parent, or in your professional life.
- Meaning-making of The Modern School
 - What did it mean to be a TMS student?
 - How has your understanding of TMS and what it meant changed over time
 - Moments when your understanding of the school shifted.
- Documents or ephemera (if relevant)
 - Please describe this document/item
 - Its meaning to you/why you chose it
 - What it reminds you of about The Modern School
 - What it communicates to others about The Modern School
- What else should we talk about? What do you want to talk about that I haven't brought up?