AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION AND SOCIAL STUDIES: TEACHING THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION WITHIN A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

When social studies educators take a multicultural perspective in their classrooms, there is often an overemphasis on European American history. Topics that explore minority groups in any serious way are often presented as an afterthought (Banks, 2007; Pinar, 2006; Zimmerman, 2006). When educators teach African American history, they often focus narrowly on slavery and the civil rights movement. Although these topics are an important part of Black history, this narrow focus omits the rich cultural complexity within African American studies (Anyon, 1979; Garcia & Tanner, 1985; Provenzo, Shaver, & Bello, 2011).

The philosophy of critical pedagogy addresses inequalities in the American education system and explores ways to make curricula and learning more equitable. Critical pedagogues point out that knowledge is not neutral and that American public school curriculum is dominated by Eurocentric ideologies (Apple, 2013; Childs, 2014; Darder & Torres, 1994; Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1994; McLaren, Macrine, & Hill, 2010). Using critical pedagogy as a framework, this article discusses how educators can lead students in exploring another important aspect of African American culture; namely, the history of African American education. This article provides a survey of the development of African American education prior to the 20th century, showing how middle and secondary educators can effectively and creatively explore the topic in their social studies classrooms.

Keywords: popular culture, African American, Black education, African American history, critical pedagogy, American history, African American education, social studies education, slavery, slave history, Civil War, curriculum, unit plans

Often when middle and secondary social studies educators attempt to take a multicultural perspective in their classrooms, there is an overemphasis on European American history. Topics that explore minority groups in any serious way are often presented as an afterthought (Banks, 1989; Pinar, 2006; Zimmerman, 2006). When educators teach African American history, they often focus narrowly on slavery and the civil rights movement. Although these topics are an important (even critical) part of Black history, this narrow focus omits the rich cultural complexity within African American studies (Anyon, 1979; Garcia & Tanner, 2010; Provenzo, Shaver, & Bello, 2011). A short-sighted curriculum that lacks diversity affects the quality and depth of education in general (Banks, 1989).

Derived from the 20th-century tradition of critical theory in Frankfort, Germany, the philosophy of critical pedagogy addresses inequalities in the American education system and explores ways to make the educational process and curricula more equitable. Scholars from the critical tradition point out the dominance of European American culture in public school curriculum, and that lessons and units often de-emphasize groups outside of the dominant culture (Apple, 2013; Childs, 2014; Darder & Torres, 1994; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2011; Held, 1980; hooks, 1994; McLaren, Macrine, & Hill, 2010) Critical pedagogues argue that teaching is not apolitical, that knowledge is not neutral, and insist that social justice and democracy be integrated into the act of teaching. When

achieved, critical consciousness encourages individuals to affect change in their world through social critique and political action, and in and outside of the classroom (Apple, 2013; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1994). Using critical pedagogy as a framework, this article discusses how educators can lead students in exploring another important aspect of African American culture; namely, the history of African American education. This article provides a survey of the development of African American education prior to the 20th century, showing how middle and secondary educators can effectively and creatively explore the topic in their social studies classrooms.

The first section outlines the framework of critical pedagogy and discuss how it applies to curricular transformation and teaching about minorities. The second section offers an overview and historical analysis of African American education in the 19th century, showing successes and challenges of the Black community in the realm of education. The last section consists of a sample unit plan that incorporates material on the history of African American history that middle and secondary social studies teachers can use in their own teaching, connecting the curriculum to Common Core (CCS), National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), and Kentucky and Ohio social studies standards.

Critical Pedagogy

The theoretical framework of critical pedagogy can offer tools to develop a more equitable curriculum. Critical pedagogues deconstruct the American school system's dominant ideology that privileges European American culture and upper middle-class values. They aim to empower students, leading them into becoming conscious of their freedom and power (Apple, 2013; Burbules & Berk, 1999; Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2015). Bell hooks (1994)—who writes in the critical tradition—in *Teaching to Transgress* argues that teaching must go beyond the idea of simply sharing information but teachers must "share in the intellectual and spiritual growth" of students (p. 13). This can be done by allowing students of color to see positive examples of their own race and culture embedded into the curriculum (Banks, 1999). In Freire's (2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he critiques traditional education, calling it the "banking" model of education, wherein students are thought to be empty vessels that teachers simply deposit knowledge into (p. 72). But instead of the learner being an empty vessel, he elevates the role of the learner and teachers as both shaping knowledge, that it is a shared process between the teacher and student to obtain a higher consciousness of the world and what it means to be human. This is akin to Palmer's (2007) notion of the educator having a transcendent, almost spiritual calling to teach.

In much of school curriculum in the United States, a Eurocentric point of view is presented as the *best* and *greatest* culture, especially while systematically omitting important information about minorities (Banks, 1989; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2006; Zimmerman, 2004). Critical scholars examine the social construction of knowledge, the relationship of power and knowledge, and the notion of hidden curriculum (Childs, 2013; Childs, 2014; Darder & Torres, 1994; Giroux, 2011; Gordon, Bridglall, & Meroe, 2005; McLaren, 2015). In regard to hidden curriculum, Sager (2013) states that American students learn the values of the dominant culture throughout their schooling experience, and this process "so often happens unconsciously, without awareness, and without critical reflection on these contexts" (p. 4). In this way, the dominant curriculum implicitly privileges the culture, values, and norms of upper middle-class Europeans. These dominant cultural norms are thought of as common sense by educators and viewed as exclusively true, factual knowledge, but unfortunately, this hidden curriculum oppresses students of color and those of a low socioeconomic background (Kumashiro, 2009).

Schooling and Culture

Critical scholars critique the dominant culture in the United States and its influence on American public school curriculum. Because schools are sites that privilege the knowledge and ideals of the dominant culture, classrooms are often spaces that devalue students of color and of low socioeconomic status. Many students of low socioeconomic status are demonized and viewed as deviant, as they lack the proper sociocultural capital to be successful (Heitzeg, 2016; Laura, 2014; Singleton, 2014). Curricula that provide a more varied and robust presentation of minority groups helps challenge this flawed ideology (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2006; Sarroub & Quadros, 2015).

The Denial of Education to African Americans During Antebellum Times

Resistance to Black education had stemmed from Southern political and social obstructions that were intended to inhibit African American progress. Many of the laws in the antebellum South were designed to reinforce and perpetuate the system of slavery. Laws of that era made it illegal for slaves to be educated and

punished those who taught them. Regardless of the many perils slaves faced, thousands of them still learned to read and write. In describing the importance of education among African Americans, author Harriet Beecher Stowe observed that freed slaves "rushed not to the grog-shop but to the schoolroom—they cried for the spelling-book as bread, and pleaded for teachers as a necessity of life (Span & Anderson, 2002, p. 296)."

At the advent of American slavery in the 17th century, there were no laws in place that strictly prohibited the education of Blacks. Christian ministers were one of the first groups to teach slaves reading and writing. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel believed that "all children of God should be baptized (Span & Anderson, 2002, p. 296)." Thus, they were instrumental in teaching thousands of slaves the fundamentals of Christianity and basic literacy. "Fearing baptism equated to manumission, and that time spent learning catechism meant time away from the plantation work, South Carolina slaveholders" put pressure on their government to pass laws against teaching slaves (p. 296). In 1740, North Carolina was the first state to pass a law against Black education. Shortly afterward, nearly every American colony had passed similar laws. By 1830, the state of Georgia had established laws that punished anyone caught educating Blacks by publicly whipping, fining, or jailing them.

A slave named Gordon Buford remembered that they never learned to read because their master threatened to "skin them alive" if they were ever caught learning to read. In many cases, if a slave was found writing, he suffered the penalty of having his forefinger cut off. One slave stated that his owner "hung the best slave he had for trying to teach others how to spell" (Span & Anderson, 2002, p. 297). Charlie Grant was beaten by his mistress with a cowhide because she saw him with a book. Another slave was kicked by her master with his muddy boot after she was found studying a blue-back speller (Williams, 2005). However, all of these obstacles and challenges seemed to only urge Blacks to seek education even more diligently.

Social Construction of Knowledge

For critical pedagogues, knowledge is socially constructed, meaning knowledge that is privileged in public schools should be understood in how it has been shaped within a certain sociohistorical and/or cultural context (Childs, 2015; Willard, 1982; Willard, 1996). The dominant class determines which knowledge and language is important and which is not. This is why schools have done a poor job of teaching African American history and culture. Knowledge is never completely objective and value free, but it is arranged in such a way that emphasizes certain values and de-emphasizes others. Critical pedagogues argue that society and culture have been socially constructed, and therefore the notions of knowledge that are taken for granted as common sense have a certain cultural and historical background that leads one to think some cultural knowledge is more important than others (Banks, 1989; Childs, 2015; Sarroub & Quadros, 2015). The normal way one thinks public schools should be conducted and organized, and how knowledge is disseminated can only be properly understood within a certain sociohistorical context. (Asante, 2003; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2006). Critical pedagogues argue that the knowledge taught in schools works to the advantage of White students of middle- and upper-class backgrounds, but disadvantages those of lower and working-class backgrounds (Childs, 2014).

Students of color can be empowered when they recognize their own oppression. This can be done through offering a more culturally diverse curriculum. One major way of doing this is to teach a more comprehensive African American history that goes beyond a poor treatment of slavery and the civil rights movement. Let us offer a survey of the history of African American education prior to the 20th century as an example of a more culturally relevant social studies curriculum. The historical narrative below is contextualized within the eras of slavery and Reconstruction.

Black Education Prior to the 20th Century

From the beginning of United States history, the pursuit of education has been an integral part of Black culture. Historians have shown that as early as the 17th century, Blacks were educating themselves individually and collectively, and by the 18th century, starting their own private schools (Jacobs, 2002). The earliest slaves learned quickly that education offered them access to political, economic, and social freedom. Anthony Johnson, who arrived in Virginia as a slave in 1620, in 20-year's time had purchased his freedom and had become familiar with the legal system. Johnson's story demonstrates the adversities that many African Americans overcame to obtain an education. In order to gain a more thorough understanding of the history of African American education, it is necessary to explore the many laws and restrictions that were placed on Blacks in the South before the Civil War (Span & Anderson, 2002, p. 5).

Informal Antebellum Educational Initiatives

Because African American education was frowned upon and outlawed in the South, Blacks had to come up with ingenious ways to obtain literacy and education (Duitsman, 1999; Jacobs, 2002). Slaves obtained a type of literacy by eavesdropping on their master's conversations when they spoke of politics or affairs that involved African American conditions. Slave children would often memorize conversations in earnest, return to their parents, and repeat the discourse verbatim. Slave masters spelled words that they did not want slaves to know; Blacks would memorize those words and meet up with a literate slave to recite them and learn what the words meant. Some learned to read while fighting in the Civil War as union soldiers. In some circumstances, Union soldiers left slaves newspapers to read, much to the chagrin of their masters. Another way slaves learned to read was by hiding blue-back spellers under their hats while working in the fields. Allen Allensworth's mother encouraged him to "play school" with his young master who attended school everyday (Span & Anderson, 2002, p. 20). Former slave Frederick Douglass detailed in his narrative how he obtained literacy subversively while enslaved. He traded bread with the poor White children in his neighborhood in exchange for reading lessons (Douglass, 2002).

Formal Antebellum Educational Initiatives

The limited educational opportunities that were available to African Americans in both the North and South came largely through benevolent organizations such as Christian churches and other groups. Daniel Payne received his childhood education from the Minor's Moralist Society in Charleston, South Carolina, in the early 19th century. In his autobiography, he states that the objective of the Society "was to educate orphan or indigent colored children, and also to provide for their necessary wants. It consisted of 50 members, who contributed five dollars each at first, and paid thereafter the monthly sum of 25 cents each. As many as six children were at one time receiving its care and attention" (Payne, 1888, p. 13). The society was in existence from 1804 to 1848. Organizations like the Minor's Moralist society often educated free Blacks in the South, but excluded slaves.

Northern benevolent societies and the Freedman's Bureau contributed greatly to the cause of Black education (DeBoer, 1995; Soltow & Stevens, 1981) and "were essential for the survival of [Southern] schools, especially in the early stages" (Powers, 1994, p. 136). These organizations provided many resources for African American schools such as teachers and their salaries, books, and other important supplies. The resources and financial support from these organizations helped underwrite many of the public schools that arose in the 19th century. The Black community often worked with these groups to begin their own educational initiatives. Ex-slave George Washington Albright was an example of one of the earliest ex-slave teachers during the Civil War in Mississippi. Barely literate, he was known to have conducted his first classes under a shade tree; from there, the school moved to an abandoned barn, and eventually held sessions in a church.

Government-sponsored common schools often provided at least an elementary education to some free Blacks, primarily in Northern states. Fueled by their eagerness to learn, ex-slaves initiated the first crusade of common schools in the mid-19th century. Common schools were founded primarily in response to the large population of uneducated Blacks who were of school age. However, because of the opposition to Black education in the South, there was not an adequate number of schools to service the educational needs of African Americans. Although some Southern states had adopted common schools even before the Civil War, the few Southern public schools were racially segregated, and the facilities for African American students were often inadequate. As a result, common schools did not gain broad acceptance in the South until the early 20th century (Urban & Wagoner, 2008).

When government-sponsored educational efforts failed, religious organizations took up the cause of African American education. After the Civil War, Northern missionaries often traveled south to assist Blacks in their educational endeavors (Span, 2002). In order to receive funding and resources for education, former slaves and free Blacks in Natchez, Mississippi, received assistance from the American Missionary Society (AMA). The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) was perhaps the greatest champion of African American education throughout the 19th century. The AME Church was the first Black-owned religious institution in the United States (Childs, 2009). Organizations like the AME Church offered African Americans some of the educational autonomy they so greatly desired.

Black Education After Reconstruction

During Reconstruction, public schools were established by both freedmen and White educators, initiated by the Republican party (Anderson, 1988). However, by the 1870s White Democrats regained power in Southern states and began to impose Jim Crow laws that limited the freedom of African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Siddle

Walker, 1996; Williams, 2005). Despite the low percentage of Black students in schools overall, the schools were still overpopulated due to poor funding. Legal segregation, backed by the doctrine of separate but equal, the Supreme Court case, *Plessy V. Ferguson*, Black students received much fewer resources compared to their White counterparts. By the early 20th century, it was routine for Black schools to receive few to no books and to operate out of dilapidated buildings. With the exception of teachers in the nation's capital, Black teachers received far less pay than White educators (Anderson, 1988).

By the early 20th century, many schools were being built due to the support of wealthy philanthropist Julius Rosenwald. Taking an interest in the plight of African Americans, Rosenwald assisted financially in the building of schools throughout the South. He partnered with the Black community by providing matching funds for the schools to be built. More than 5,300 schools were built in the South by the time of Rosenwald's death in 1932, and African Americans were often responsible for completing the construction of their own schools (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001).

With an in-depth study of the African American struggle for education, students can come to a greater appreciation of education in their own life, as will be noted below. The last section is a sample unit plan that demonstrates how social studies teachers can use this material in their classroom.

Unit: "Black Education: A Critical Component of African American History and Freedom"

As was noted earlier, critical pedagogy highlights inequalities in public school educational processes and curriculum. Because school curriculum privileges European American culture, good progressive social studies teaching involves a deeper treatment of African American history. Please follow this URL: https://tinyurl.com/mtkrdgw to see the sample unit plan that offers in-depth lessons in African American history, with a particular focus on African American education up to the late 19th century.

Conclusion

Critical pedagogues recognize injustices and inequalities within American schools. They point out the downfalls of a curriculum that is Eurocentric and critique lessons that privilege and perpetuate middle-class values. A historical study of African American education can be a resource for addressing educational challenges in the 21st century. African Americans faced many obstacles in the arena of education throughout history. Because education was illegal for slaves, they often developed innovative ways to learn that were undetected by slave masters. In modern times, young people have difficulty understanding the value and merits of education. When they gain a real sense of the obstacles African Americans underwent to obtain their education in the past, they can begin to appreciate its value. Furthermore, when youth understand the benefits and rewards of education, they can perform at higher levels in the classroom and in turn transform society. Education is a key component in creating a just and progressive society, and this transformation must involve America's youth.

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