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# Roles of Black Women and Girls in Education: A Historical Reflection

Brian Arao

As I reflect upon the wide range of course content we have read, written about, and discussed as a class over the past several weeks, a clear and consistent thread runs through it all: the central importance of African American self-agency and persistence in the struggle for access to quality education in the face of equally persistent and constantly changing barriers erected by racism. From the days of slavery, though decades of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation that continued to constrain educational opportunities for Black Americans even after emancipation, to contemporary times in which Black children are still poorly served and underperforming relative to their peers of other racial groups in public schooling, African American commitment to education has remained strong. As Williams (2005) asserts, this unwavering dedication likely springs from the clear equation of education and freedom, originating in the days of slavery and continuing still today, for “the ability to read and write, they knew, could provide them with access to centers of power and could enable them to both shape and gain access to rights for the freedpeople” (p. 47).

I brought to this course my own academic interests in the intersectionality of identity. I value narrowing the scope to focus on particular social identity groups—hence, my enthusiasm for the topic of this course—but I also recognize that no single aspect of our identities exists in isolation from the others. Rather, I believe our identities are overlapping and connected; our experience of one identity can profoundly impact our experience of another, particularly when we account for privilege and oppression. Sometimes, the privileges we receive due to our agent-group identities can mitigate the challenges we experience due to our target-group identities (Jones, 2009). I am particularly interested in the intersections between race and gender. As such, I have paid particular attention throughout this course to

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the roles Black women and girls have played in African American education in the United States, as both teachers and students.

During slavery and the time shortly after its abolition, the salience of gender with respect to education seemed comparatively small by today's standards. Perhaps because of the overwhelming inhumanity and injustice of race-based slavery, race overrode other identity considerations amongst African Americans when it came to education. As a result, Black women and men worked together in unique ways to gain access to education for community members of all genders, despite the fact that antiliteracy statutes in many states made such action punishable by violence and even death (Williams, 2005, pp. 203–210). Often, the gendered division of labor amongst slaves shaped the roles played by Black women in educational efforts. Women who worked in the Master's house were privy to news and other information that they could then share with other enslaved people. For example, Williams (2005) recounts tales of illiterate Black women who memorized the letters in notes and newspapers found in the master's home, and shared them with literate slaves who could then make meaning of the messages and share them with the entire community. These same women also had greater access to literate Whites, including the children of the slave masters, who assisted (sometimes unknowingly) in efforts to advance Black literacy:

Women who worked inside the owner's household could entice their young white charges to pass on what they learned in school. Alice Green recalled that her mother had learned to read by keeping a schoolbook in her bosom all the time and asking the white children to tell her everything they had learned in school each day. In this way she learned enough to teach school once slavery ended. Likewise, Allen Allensworth's mother encouraged him to "play school" with his young master who attended school every day. (Williams, 2005, p. 20)

Following the end of slavery, freedwomen participated in African American education as both teachers and students. For a time, in

fact, women and men alike were believed to have “important roles to play in building black communities” (Williams, 2005, p. 111). This belief was attended by roughly equal enrollment of Black girls and boys in the schools available to their communities, and similar numbers of Black women and men in service as teachers. This phenomenon stood in contrast to schooling trends amongst White Americans, who valued education for boys more than for girls and, paradoxically, amongst whom most teachers were women. Over time, however, sexism, division of domestic labor, and school segregation arrayed particular challenges against Black women and girls in the educational realm. For example, it was challenging for women with children to gain education, although many did so at schools where it was permissible to bring their children along; however, those freedwomen who pursued schooling generally did not have to work full-time outside the home (Williams, 2005, p. 170). In this manner, while there was a philosophical commitment to education for Black women and men alike, the realities created by the sexist expectation that women would maintain the home and raise children made it more difficult for them to access education in the same manner that men could.

African American women and girls were also impacted by school segregation, which maintained that Black and White children must be schooled separately. The court-decision matrix activity we completed in class illuminated the decades of legal struggles against what the Supreme Court would eventually describe in their unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* as “inherently unequal” (Franklin & Moss, 2000, p. 453) schooling conditions for African American children. After the ruling in the 1899 *Cumming v. School Board of Richmond County, GA* case edified *de jure* segregation within the relevant case law (p. 445), it would be 55 years before the *Brown* decision finally outlawed it. In the interim, smaller but important victories were attained, such as a legal precedent for assuring that Black teachers received salaries equitable to those earned by their White colleagues (p. 447), as well as a Supreme Court ruling that

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states must provide education for all citizens within the state, without regard to race (p. 451).

It bears mentioning here that, though the importance of *Brown v Board of Education* and its positive impact on African American education should never be diminished, little attention has been paid to the myriad ways that White resistance has hamstrung its full implementation. As we learned during Lori's presentation on the film *With All Deliberate Speed* (2004), the Supreme Court's phrasing in its decision allowed for more than two decades of delay in its implementation. Lipsitz (2006) also details this long delay and describes how it "encouraged whites to view the inconvenience of busing as worse than the systematic practices of discrimination that provoked it . . . as if whites were innocent victims of remedies for a disease that did not even exist" (p. 35). These attitudes towards efforts for educational justice persist today in the form of resistance to affirmative action and support for school reforms such as No Child Left Behind which, while demonstrating a degree of positive impact, still fail to bring the achievement of educational outcomes for African American children to par with that of students from other racial groups (Center on Education Policy, 2010).

What, then, is the status of contemporary African American girls and women in the United States' educational system? In reading Thomas and Jackson's (2007) summary of several decades' worth of scholarship about Black women in education, we see that this population has achieved much and provided significant leadership in the field. I enjoyed learning about Lucy Diggs Slowe, a pioneer in the field of student affairs who was one of the first deans of women, and also amongst the first education scholars to articulate the importance of Black female self-authorship in college as an essential component of their preparation for leadership in their communities following graduation (p. 363). Also of significant interest in the article is that, in almost every way, Black girls and women have been found to achieve more academically than Black boys and men. African American girls earn higher grades and test scores than African American boys in

primary and secondary schooling, and graduate at higher rates (p. 366); Black women enter and graduate from college at higher rates, for both undergraduate and graduate degrees (p. 367); and they are more widely represented in the professoriate and postsecondary administration (p. 367). Thomas and Jackson take care to point out that these accomplishments cannot be understood as evidence that Black girls and women do not face unique struggles in American education. For example, they point out that Black girls are much more likely than White children of any gender to feel “too unsafe” to attend school (p. 367). The authors exhort us to conduct more research to explain why Black girls and women have fared better educationally without obscuring ways that they are marginalized in the academy, and while also seeking ways to close the gender achievement gap amongst African American children.

In summary, African American girls and women have persisted since the days of slavery in the United States to become exceptionally accomplished scholars. Moreover, they have done so despite the many obstacles that have threatened, over the course of hundreds of years, to curtail such achievements. As stated by Thomas and Jackson (2007), “the educational advancements of African American women have clearly afforded them opportunities to play a critical role in the empowerment of African American communities and ‘uplift’ of the African American race” (p. 368). In many ways, their shared stories illustrate the veracity of the belief shared by enslaved Africans in the United States that education would be the key to true and enduring freedom. Still, as the scholars cited in this essay agree, we must be careful not to presume that the struggle for equity for African American girls and women is over. Freedom, after all, is a process, not an endpoint; there are still questions to explore as we continue along the journey.

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