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Karen Selby

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The Intellectual Legacy of Black History Month: Using Story to Connect Students to Cultural Accomplishments

Karen Selby

As an elementary school teacher at an inner-city public school in the Harlem section of New York City, I worked hard to prepare my students for academic success. We started each day with writing workshop, followed by reading workshop then math and the rest of the academic subjects. My students worked hard. They usually showed on a daily basis that they deserved the gifted and talented label bestowed upon them by the district office. Although we were a class that was proud of our accomplishments, the day that the new library teacher entered our school, doubts began to creep in.

The library had been a room where books were kept. There was no order to the book collection nor were students and teachers allowed access to the books. The law mandated that each school maintain a room with books to be called the library and that was what we had, until the new librarian came.

This new librarian wore her hair in dread locks and wore clothing that was carefully selected from the pseudo-African clothing bazaar on the Avenue of the Americas at 125th Street. My students fell in love with this beautifully dramatic story lady immediately. She told my students that they should be proud of their African heritage and that they should share her dream of traveling off to Africa one day. As the children recounted all they had learned from their story lady, they turned to me, assuming that I would share the dream of returning to Mother Africa. I explained to the children that during my college preparation

I had an opportunity to study in Africa, but elected to study in England instead.

It was difficult for the students to realize that two, college-educated, African American women could hold such different views on the subject of travel to Africa. It was difficult for me to watch as my students began to view the Afro-centric stories of the librarian as more powerful than their own stories crafted during writing workshop. My first reaction was to devalue the dreams of travel to Africa, but that would not necessarily have helped students value their own stories. I quickly realized that here was an opportunity to approach Black History Month from a new perspective. Rather than emphasizing the unity within the African American community, I decided to present students with opportunities to look at the dissidence.

I used a poem in an old Science Research Associates series about Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. The poem spoke to the fact

that while they were each viewed as intellectual giants in the African American community, they did not view the road to progress in the same way. While Booker T. Washington as the "Wizard of Tuskegee" embraced the manual arts as the means for African Americans to further themselves in this country, W.E.B. DuBois thought that the pursuit of higher education and political justice would be the right path (Aptheker).

To involve the students in the poem, I asked them to chant it aloud being aware of the rhythm and the diction as they did so. After this brief introduction, we studied both men portrayed in the poem. By looking at the contrast between what these two African American writers thought, students could begin to see that Black History embraces multiple perspectives and that the African American intellectual community is one filled with many rich traditions just like their classrooms were filled with many rich stories. In trying to get the students to see that there are many sides to the African American experience, including the one being taught to them by the library teacher, I had engaged them in a beginning debate about the African American intellectual traditions.

. . . the African American intellectual community is one filled with many rich traditions . . .

I recount this story to my college students and ask them whether or not they believe that they should include Black History Month materials in their year-long overview of classroom topics to be addressed. Some students will ask, "Aren't Black History Month materials and topics part of the curriculum we will be given by the school district?" But the majority of students say, "Black History Month should not be recognized in the elementary social studies curriculum. After all, if the government mandated Black History Month then we would have to set aside a month for everyone." And other black students may even wonder, "Why is it that Black History Month is the shortest month of the year? It is an insult." Black History Month has become a problem for my

preservice student teachers and for classroom teachers in part because it is usually treated as a litany of heroes, heroines, and food festivals. The story of how and why the celebration began has been lost.

Teachers and students must come to understand that Black History Month is part of the intellectual story of African Americans in this country. To celebrate the contributions of African Americans in the month of February by including literature in which African Americans are represented, while better than allowing the African American to go unnoticed, may no longer be inclusive enough. African Americans should be included in the classroom throughout the school year.

The humble beginnings of Black History Month as Negro History Week in 1926 is part of an intellectual story worthy of being shared with students. Carter G. Woodson, the son of slaves and recipient of a Ph.D. from Harvard University, organized Negro History Week as a national salute to the achievements and strides blacks made in America (Goggin). The second week in February was designated for the celebration because it included the birth dates of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Celebrations of Black History Month spread in the African American community from the gatherings of intellectuals to gatherings of church and civic organizations. The inclusion of Black History Month in the schools grew out of these community-based celebrations.

So that all students have more opportunities to explore the intellectual legacy of multiple cultural groups including African Americans, the National Council for the Social Studies established the Carter G. Woodson Book Award in 1973. The award was created to encourage the writing, publishing, and dissemination of outstanding trade books for young readers that treat the topics related to ethnic minorities and race relations. (The list of recipients is included in the appendix.)

Back in Harlem, where this piece began, stories were used to encourage the students to study the intellectual legacy of our own people. The poem that students performed in the classroom told the story of a single dinner party during which DuBois and Washington met. Teachers

use story in their classrooms all of the time, even as part of their Black History Month celebrations. It is possible to make the use of story even more powerful for students when we ask them to look across stories at the dissidence among African Americans. In my classroom I looked at W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, but a teacher could just as easily look at the intellectual legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. The story of Martin's childhood and measured approach to ending racism in this country is at odds with the struggle for black unity and separatism often preached by Malcolm. Both men sought to improve the lives of African Americans, but their approaches throughout their lives were different. Beyond retelling the lives of these two men, teachers can invite students to reconstruct the stories of their separate visions of Black America by reading writings across their lifetimes.

Providing students with examples of the diverse intellectual powers possessed by people within their cultural group can be used to motivate students to begin their own intellectual legacy. When students are asked to connect the stories of others to their own lives we encourage them to think through where they stand within a cultural group rich in diversity.

Works Cited

Aptheker, Herbert. *The Literacy Legacy of W.E.B. DuBois*. White Plains, NY: Kraus International, 1989.

Goggin, Jacqueline. *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993.

Appendix

National Council for the Social Studies

Carter G. Woodson Book Award

and

Outstanding Merit Book Award Recipients

National Council for the Social Studies established the Carter G. Woodson Book Awards for the most distinguished social science books appropriate for young readers which depict ethnicity in the United States. First presented in 1974, this

award is intended to "encourage the writing, publishing, and dissemination of outstanding social studies books for young readers which treat topics related to ethnic minorities and race relations sensitively and accurately."

1974 *Rosa Parks* by Eloise Greenfield (Crowell)

1975 *Make a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord: The Life of Mahalia Jackson, Queen of the Gospel Singers* by Jesse Jackson (Crowell)

1976 *Dragonwings* by Laurence Yep (Crowell) - fiction

1977 *The Trouble They Seen* by Dorothy Sterling (Doubleday)

1978 *The Biography of Daniel Inouye* by Jan Goodsell (Crowell)

1979 *Native American Testimony: An Anthology of Indian and White Relations* edited by Peter Nabokov (Crowell)

1980 *War Cry on a Prayer Feather: Prose and Poetry of the Ute* by Nancy Wood (Doubleday)

Outstanding Merit Books

A Cry from the Earth: Music of the North American Indians by John Bierhorst (Four Winds Press)

James Van Derzee: The Picture Takin' Man by Jim Haskins (Dodd, Mead and Company)

1981 *The Chinese Americans* by Milton Meltzer (Crowell)

Outstanding Merit Books

The Hardest Lesson: Personal Accounts of a School Desegregation Crisis by Pamela Bullar and Judith Stoia (Little, Brown and Company)

1982 *Coming to North America from Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico* by Susan Carver and Paula McGuire (Delacorte Press)

1983 *Morning Star, Black Sun* by Brent Ashabraner (Dodd Mead)

1984 *Mexico and the United States* by E.B. Fincher (Crowell)

1985 *To Live in Two Worlds-American Indian Youth Today* by Brent Ashabraner (Dodd, Mead and Co.)

Outstanding Merit Book

Our Golda: The Story of Golda Meir by David Adler
(Viking Press)

1986 *Dark Harvest: Migrant Farmworkers in America* by Brent Ashabrunner (Dodd, Mead and Company)

Outstanding Merit Book

Issues in American History: Racial Prejudice by Elaine Pasco (Franklin Watts, Inc.)

1987 *Happy May I Walk* by Arlene Hirschfelder (Charles Scribner's Sons)

Outstanding Merit Books

Children of the Maya by Brent Ashabrunner (Dodd Mead)

Living in Two Worlds by Maxine B. Rosenberg (Lothrop)

1988 *Black Music in America: A History Through Its People* by James Haskins (Harper and Row)

Outstanding Merit Books

Into a Strange Land by Brent Ashabrunner and Melissa Ashabrunner (Dodd Mead)

American Indians Today by Judith Harlan (Lerner)
You May Plow Here by Thorids Simonsen (Simon and Schuster)

1989 **Elementary:** *Walking the Road to Freedom* by Jeri Ferris (Carolrhoda Books, Inc.)

Elementary Outstanding Merit Book

Buffalo Hunt by Russel Freedman (Holiday House)

Secondary: *Marian Anderson* by Charles Patterson (Franklin Watts)

Secondary Outstanding Merit Books

Hispanic Voters by Judith Harlan (Franklin Watts)

Pride Against Prejudice: The Biography of Larry Doby by Joseph Moore (Praeger)

1990 **Elementary:** *In Two Worlds: A Yup'ik Eskimo Family* by Aylette Jenness and Alice Rivers (Houghton Mifflin Co.)

Elementary Outstanding Merit Books

Wilma Martinez by Corrin Codye (Raintree Publishers)

Arctic Explorers by Jeri Ferris (Carolrhoda Books, Inc.)

Secondary: *Paul Robeson* by Rebecca Larsen (Franklin Watts)

Secondary Outstanding Merit Books

New Kids on the Block by Janet Bode (Franklin Watts)

A Long Hard Journey Patricia and Frederick McKissack (Walker and Co.)

1991 **Elementary:** *Shirley Chisolm* by Catherine Scheader (Enslow Publishing)

Elementary Outstanding Merit Books

Teammates by Peter Golenback (Guilliver/Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich)

Hector Live in the U.S. Now by Joan Hewett (Lippincott)

Secondary: *Sorrow's Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston* by Mary Lyons (Scribner's Books for Young Readers/Macmillan Publishing Company)

Secondary Outstanding Merit Books

W.E.B. DuBois by Patricia and Frederick McKissack (Franklin Watts)

Breaking the Chains by William Katz (Atheneum)

1992 **Elementary:** *The Last Princess: The Story of Princess Ka'iolani of Hawai'i* by Fay Stanley, illustrations by Diane Stanley (Macmillan Publishing Company)

Elementary Outstanding Merit Books

Pueblo Storyteller by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith with photographs by Lawrence Migdale (Holiday House)

Carter G. Woodson: The Father of Black History by Patricia and Frederick McKissack, illustrated by Ned O. (Enslow Publishers)

Secondary: *Native American Doctor: The Story of Susan LaFlessche Picotte* by Jeri Ferris (Carolrhoda Books, Inc.)

Secondary Outstanding Merit Books

Now is Your Time: The African-American Struggle for Freedom by Walter Dean Myers (Harper Collins)

Outward Dreams: Black Inventors and Their Inventions by James Haskins (Walker Publishing Group)

1993 Elementary: *Madam C.J. Walker* by Patricia and Frederick McKissack (Enslow Publishers)

Elementary Outstanding Merit Books

How My Family Lives in America by Susan Kuklin (Bradbury Press)

Hoang Anh: A Vietnamese-American Boy by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith (Holiday House)

Secondary: *Mississippi Challenge* by Mildred Pitts Walter (Bradbury Press)

Secondary Outstanding Merit Books

Thurgood Marshall: A Life for Justice by James Haskins (Henry Holt)

The Year They Walked by Beatrice Siegel (Four Winds Press)

1994 Elementary: *Starting Home-The Story of Horace Pippin, Painter* by Mary Lyone (Charles Scribner's Sons)

Elementary Outstanding Merit Books

Celebrating Kwanzaa by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith (Holiday House)

The Great Migration by paintings by Jacob Lawrence, Museum of Modern Art, The Phillips Collection

Secondary: *The March on Washington* by James Haskins (Harper Collins Publishers)

Secondary Outstanding Merit Books

Sequoyah's Gift—A Portrait of the Cherokee Leader by Janet Klausner (Harper Collins Publishers)

Many Thousand Gone—African Americans from Slavery to Freedom by Virginia Hamilton (Alfred A. Knopf)

1995 Elementary: *What I Had Was Singing: The Story of Marian Anderson* by Jeri Ferris (Carolrhoda Books)

Elementary Outstanding Merit Books

Master of Mahogany: Tom Day, Free Black Cabinetmaker by Mary E. Lyone (Charles Scribner's Sons)

Dear Benjamin Banneker by Andrea Davis Pinkney (Gulliver Books, Harcourt, Brace & Co.)

Secondary: *Till Victory is Won: Black Soldiers in the Civil War* by Zak Mettger (Lodestar Books)

Secondary Outstanding Merit Books

Harriet: The Life and World of Harriet Beecher Stowe by Norma Johnston (Four Winds Press, Macmillan)

Battlefields and Burial Grounds: The Indian Struggle to Protect Ancestral Graves in the United States by Roger C. Echo-Hawk and Walker R. Echo-Hawk (Lerner Publications)