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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 dreadlocks 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 dissonance.

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 ...
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**


**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 Ashabranner (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 Ashabranner (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 Ashabranner (Dodd, Mead and Company)

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

1987 HappyMay I Walk by Arlene Hirschfelder (Charles Scribner's Sons)

Children of the Maya by Brent Ashabranner (Dodd Mead)

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


Into a Strange Land by Brent Ashabranner and Melissa Ashabranner (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.)

Elephant Outstanding Merit Book

Buffalo Hunt by Russel Freedman (Holiday House)

Secondary: MarianAnderson by Charles Patterson (Franklin Watts)

Secondary Outstanding Merit Books

Hispanic Voters by Judith Harlan (Franklin Watts)

Pride Against Prejudice: The Biography of Labrador 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 (Guiliver/Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich)

Hector Lives 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)


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 LaFlesche 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


*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 Beatric Stegel (Four Winds Press)

1994  **Elementary:** *Starting Home-The Story of Horace Pippin, Painter* by Mary Lyon (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 (Harcourt, Brace & Co.)

Secondary Outstanding Merit Books

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. Lyon (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)