Just What Carter G. Woodson Ordered: Culturally Responsive Education and Teaching

Dr. Magnus O. Bassey[1]

Abstract

According to Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education (2015)"social context, interpersonal relationships, and emotional well-being (p. 21)," are essential for student leaning. This means, educational chances of students are enhanced by placing social contexts, interpersonal relationships, and emotional wellbeing at the center of their learning because, "the more teachers know about the cultural backgrounds of students . . . the better they will be able to facilitate learning (p. 21)" In this article, I argue that this concept is not new. Some 84 years ago, Carter G. Woodson stated that Black children were mis-educated in American schools because their education was not drawn from the students' life experiences. With passion, reason and eloquence, Woodson offered a powerful alternative for the education of African American children. He argued that education for African American children should be drawn from their own life experiences and from what their environment requires of them.

Introduction

Culturally responsive teaching, according to Ladson-Billings (2009), "… is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically [because it uses] cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 20). Gay (2010) states that culturally responsive teaching is "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for [students]" (p. 31). Culturally responsive teaching bases its premise on using culture to enhance academic and social achievement of students (Bassey, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2009). This being the case, culturally responsive teachers establishes connection between the curriculum and students' backgrounds; they establish relationships with families and the community, and use culture as pillars on which to build academic programs (Bassey, 2016, 2015, 2010; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995; Shujaa, 1995; Tate, 1995). By all accounts, teachers who use culturally responsive teaching understand that education is not apolitical so they help their students to see themselves as agents of change in the society. Consequently, these teachers prompt, animate and infuse their students with passion and zeal for learning. Besides, they cultivate self-efficacy, pride and sense of equality in the students they teach (Bassey 2016;Gay, 2010; Fairclough, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Lipman, 1995). In a recent study, Ladson-Billings (2009) identified eight successful teachers of African-American students who utilized students' cultures as vehicles for learning. Based on extensive research, it has been shown that culturally responsive teachers pay great attention in making their students learn a great deal; they require those they teach to have cross cultural awareness and sociopolitical consciousness (Bassey, 2016; Gay, 2010; Fairclough, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lipman, 1995). Ladson-Billings (2009) informs us of a teacher in her study who used cultural music to teach poetry to African-American students; another teacher developed an "artist or craftsperson-in-residence" program that brought parents into the classroom for mutual sharing of ideas and knowledge with students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In another case, a teacher allowed the use of students' native languages in class while they were learning the standard language simultaneously, leading her students to become proficient in both languages (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

[1] Professor, Department of Secondary Education and Youth Services, Queens College, The City University of New York, 65-30 Kissena Blvd, Flushing, New York, 11367.

Other studies by different scholars have shown comparable results in many subject areas, in different schools, and in different parts of the United States (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Gehlbach, 2014; Johnson, Nyamekye, Chazan, & Rosenthal, 2013;Gay, 2010; Delpit 1995; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995; Shujaa, 1995; Tate, 1995). In the considered judgment of these researchers, teachers who used culturally responsive teaching were often very excited about their work; they were full of respect for parents and above all were aware that Black students functioned in many worlds - the world of the students' home environment, the world of the school community, and the global world at large. As a result of their understandings of these cultural complexities, these teachers have almost no discipline problems in their classrooms, their students are rarely absent from school and their students have high academic achievement as demonstrated by their high standardized test scores (Bassey, 2016; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Despite, 1995). Because of the high academic performance of students in culturally responsive classes, Gay (2010) concludes that "African-American students perform better in schools where teaching is filtered through their own experiences."

Other studies which underscore the significance of culturally responsive teaching include those conducted by Hammond, 2015; Gehlbach, 2014; Johnson et al., 2013; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Tate, 1995; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995 and Shujaa, 1995. These studies attribute the success of African American students in culturally responsive teaching classrooms to the fact that, "in culturally responsive classrooms all students are valued and their contributions recognized; teachers are responsive to the needs of all children; they care for all children; they begin with common ground but celebrate the unique contributions of every child; they use multiple teaching and learning strategies to engage students in active learning that encourages the development of critical thinking, problem solving and performance skills, and indeed, these teachers are able to adapt instruction to meet the needs of individual students" (Bassey, 2016 p. 2; see also Hammond, 2015; Bassey, 2010, 2015; Athanases, Wahleithner & Bennett, 2012; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995; Shujaa, 1995).

As Bassey (2016, p. 2) points out "empowering teachers make good teaching choices by eliciting, motivating, engaging, supporting, and expanding the intellectual abilities of all students" (see also Hammond, 2015).The appeal of culturally responsive teaching is that it allows students to conceptualize the connection between politics and education by allowing them to participate in a wide array of citizenship and social justice programs through volunteer work, charity work, and civic responsibilities(Bassey 2016, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009).Chilcoat and Ligon(1994, 2000), Perlstein(1990), Adickes (2005),and Levy (2013) tell us about such a curriculum, The Freedom School curriculum, that was to "provide an educational experience for students which [would] make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives, and ultimately, new directions for action" (cited in Chilcoat and Ligon, 2000 p. 4). The Freedom School curriculum was introduced to help Black students understand themselves and to empower them to seek for change. This is how Adickes (2005) describes the Freedom School curriculum:

> This curriculum presented educational alternatives to the students through a sequence of units designed to enable students to understand their own heritage as African Americans; to evaluate the basic conditions of their lives in terms of schools, housing, health care, and job opportunities; to compare those conditions with those of whites in the South; to recognize that the living conditions of blacks and whites in the North had the same disparity; and thus, with the understanding that "escape" to the North was pointless, begin to envision ways to change the conditions where they lived through participation in the nonviolent Freedom Movement. (p. 3)

This curriculum was to open the minds of African American students to identify, scrutinize and address their real problems so that they can, "gain the knowledge and confidence to activate change, and to prepare themselves to contribute creatively and positively in their communities" (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000, p. 2; see also Adickes, pp.2-3). Students grappled with not only theories and practices of democracy but with conditions of domination and exploitation. As such, participants were "acquainted with different points of view to stimulate, challenge, and expand ideas and opinions; to explore possibilities of community and social improvement through collective decision making; and, hopefully, to effect those possibilities" (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000, p. 3). A careful review of the curriculum shows that "students were taught how to channel their frustrations appropriately to initiate change because culturally responsive teaching encourages students' involvement in social change through collective action by drawing attention to grievances in their own communities" (Bassey, 2016, p. 2).

This is to say, culturally responsive teaching legitimizes the relationship between social justice and pedagogy and provides the context for students to discuss social change (Bassey, 2016, 2015, 2010; see also Hammond, 2015; Athanases, Wahleithner & Bennett, 2012; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995; Shujaa,1995). By facilitating democratic activism in the classroom students become active citizens by fulfilling their citizenship obligations in contesting the privileges of the dominant society through different forms of resistance (Bassey, 2016, 2010).

Carter G. Woodson and Mis-Education

The concept and design of culturally responsive education and teaching is not new. Indeed, in 1933, Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) published his work on education. In it, he articulated a concept in clear and unambiguous terms which today is known as culturally responsive teaching. In his seminal work, *The Mis-Education of the Negro,* he warned that Black children were given the wrong type of education due to the fact that their education was not drawn from their own experiences. He forcefully proclaimed that the kind of education provided to Black children in America was mis-educative because "it created a split in the personality of African Americans typified by dual identities resulting in a profound identity crises which made educated African Americans" to "decry any such thing as race consciousness" (Asante, 1990; Woodson, 1993/1933, p. 7). Woodson continued by saying, "The Chief difficulty with the education of the Negro (sic) is that it has been largely imitation resulting in the enslavement of his mind" (p. 134).Underlying his argument was the fact that the kind of education given to Black children in America was antithetical to their humanity. He suggested that Black children should be given the type of education that was determined by the make-up of the people themselves and by what their environment required of them (Bassey 2016). This is to say, African American children should be given the type of education that was not imposed from without. The Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education (2015, p.21) argues that "social context, interpersonal relationships, and emotional-wellbeing" are essential factors in children's education (see also Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Delpit, 1995).This assertion is borne out of the fact that learning style is affected by an individual's environment linked closely to the demands of his or her daily life (Nelson-Barber& Estrin, 1995).The explanation here is that, "learners are a part of families, peer groups, and classrooms that are situated in larger social contexts of schools, neighborhoods, communities, and society. All of these contexts are influenced [and affected] by culture, including shared language, beliefs, values, and behavioral norms" (Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015, p.21). When teachers understand the importance of these interacting contexts they are able to enhance students' learning abilities tremendously. In other words, "the more teachers know about the cultural backgrounds of students and how differences in values, beliefs, language, and behavioral expectations can influence student behavior, including interpersonal dynamics, the better they will be able to facilitate effective teaching-learning interactions in their classrooms" (Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015, p.21). It was perhaps for this reason that Woodson made the declaration that teachers should incorporate African American experiences as well as their distinct social and cultural characteristics into the curriculum. Woodson was worried about knowledge that was not in consort with students' experiences because where there is discord between knowledge and experience, it leads to what Page (2006) describes as a *hiding curriculum.* This type of curriculum makes students "to see knowledge as merely the school's gambit, not as a resource that they and all people depend on in better making their way in a precarious world" (Page 2006, p. 51). Under these circumstances distinct boundaries are erected in knowledge creation preventing, "the fullest possible realization of human potentialities" (see Snelgrove, 2013, p. 210).

Indeed, making experience central to students' learning is important because culture, tradition and economic situations are important in learning. Greene (1978) maintains that as a "result of the ontological rootedness of experience, students' knowledge cannot be separated from their own real live experiences" because "the life of reason develops against a background of perceived realities" (p. 2).And according to her, "to remain in touch with one's original perceptions is to be present to oneself" (p. 2). She goes on to argue that, "A human being lives, as it were, in two orders – one created by his or her relations with the perceptual fields that are given in experience, the other created by his or her relations with a human and social environment" (Greene, 1978, p. 2).

What is Mis-Educative Experience?

Woodson argued that education that does not derive from students' experiences is mis-educative. As a result, he noted that Blacks had "never been educated," but "had merely been informed about other things" (p. 144),

because education given toAfrican Americans did not teach them about themselves and their own circumstances (Bassey, 2009).

As he saw it, education that does not provide individuals with sufficient information about themselves to allow them to function successfully in their own society was mis-educative. The point of emphasis for Woodson here is that it is only by facing real-life problems that creative intelligence develops. The quality of education improves when there is continuity between the school culture and home culture and when teachers reflect and draw on students' cultural strengths. Therefore, Woodson believed that it was fundamental to approach people "closely with life as it was . . . rather [than] with life as they hoped to make it" (Woodson, 1993/1933, p. 11). He understood that experience involves interaction between a person and his or her environment to produce consequences. This is how he made this point:

> When a boy [or girl] comes to school without knowing his [or her] lesson he [or she] should be studied instead of being punished. The boy [or girl] who does well in the beginning of the year and lags behind near the end of the term should not always be censured or ridiculed. As a rule, such children are not responsible for their failures. Their parents and their social status account mainly for these shortcomings. (p. 145)

As Carver and Enfield (2006) have pointed out, factors that affect a student's experience include those which are 'internal' to the student, and those that are 'objective' parts of his/her environment. Certainly, a student's perception of and reaction to objective factors are influenced by the student's attitude, beliefs, habits, prior knowledge, and emotions. Indeed, the way we see things depends on where we stand in the world. In other words, our own perspectives color and shape our realities. Woodson maintained that African Americans were rendered incapable of successfully functioning in their respective societies because of the poor quality of education provided to them since education of the wrong kind was a disadvantage rather than an advantage to individuals (p. xi). To correct the many years of mis-education for Blacks, Woodson recommended an education that was based on the experiences of African Americans and directed according to the dictates of their environment (Bassey, 2009, 2015). This is how he made the point:

> In our schools, and especially in schools of religion, attention should be given to the study of the Negro (sic) as he developed during the ante-bellum period by showing to what extent that culture was determined by ideas which the Negro (sic) brought with him from Africa. (Woodson, 1993/1933, pp.146-147)

Woodson insisted that the school curriculum should emphasize African American realities because this will empower them to learn from each other and assist them to explore "community and social improvement through collective decision making" (Bassey 2016, p. 2; see also Chilcoat&Ligon, 2000, p. 2). According to the leading culturally responsive teaching theorists, activating students' prior knowledge is an important tool in enhancing students' engagement with the lesson as well as in helping them to make sense of new information (Bassey, 2015; Hammond, 2015; Athanases, Wahleithner & Bennett, 2012; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995; Shujaa, 1995). It is also vital to note that when teachers start from what students already know,students have the added advantage of increasing their engagement with the text and with the subject which in turn provides a substructure on which they can connect the topic to their prevailing knowledge and experiences (Bassey, 2015; Gollnick & Chinn, 2012; Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995). "[E]very experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after, " says, John Dewey, (1998/1938 p. 27). Woodson believed a great deal in the centrality of experience as he emphasized that, "Only by careful study of the Negro (sic) himself and the life which he is forced to lead can we arrive at the proper procedure in this [situation]" (p. x).

Educational Reform

As I noted earlier, Woodson believed that mis-education can be corrected by making schooling relevant to the needs of African American students because the school as a democratic social institution should be subject to change (Ellis, 1995). From the very beginning, Woodson called for the kind of education reform that took into account and was responsive to African American needs because as he saw it, economic, social and political reforms can only be initiated through education. His progressive agenda provided for rebuilding society with the help of education by connecting theoretical skills with the exercise of social power and a well-grounded pragmatic educational perspective that would yield African Americans economic, social and political power. However, Woodson believed that a good education should be more than mere rote memorization.

Good education, he thought, should include skills that would challenge students to think critically and help them to ask their own existential questions such as, who am I? But indeed, the defining characteristic of a good education in Woodson's scheme was one that not only helped students to ask existential questions but also compelled them to challenge political, social and economic inequalities in society (Woodson, 1993/1933, p. 138). As he saw it, thinking through and solving problems were mutually reinforcing tendencies in education because, "those who have not learned to do for themselves and have to depend solely on others never obtain any more rights or privileges in the end than they had in the beginning" (pp.186-187). He pointed out that one of the most crucial ways of approaching an educational enterprise was by "producing knowledgeable and engaged citizens who would be able to confront democratic incongruities, contradictions and imperfections," such as racism (Woodson, 1993/1933, pp. 142-143). However, as he argued so brilliantly, critical engagement with history was not enough; the role of education is also to provide an environment which offers students specific opportunities for meeting specific needs (p. 38). Education is to provide individuals who participate in it sufficient knowledge to allow them to function successfully in making a living in society. Woodson however regretted that the type of education that was given to African American students in his time had failed to meet their basic needs as productive citizens in practical terms.

Teaching

Not only was Woodson at the forefront of the advocacy for educational reforms for African American students in his time, he documented exhaustively the kind of school curriculum that was suitable for African Americans and challenged educators to cultivate in their students the habit of problem-solving and active student participation that "emphasized knowledge and experiences that African American students brought to class [so as] to empower students (and teachers) to learn from each other …" (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000, p. 3). However, in the progressive pragmatic tradition, he saw the teacher as a guide and a resource for all student problem-solving endeavors. The teacher was to understand the students' individual traits as well as the surrounding factors influencing their ability to learn. From Woodson's perspective, teachers were to be sympathetic to the demands of their students in the same way that they were to be proficient in their own subject areas. It was a teacher's responsibility to develop critical thinking skills, self-esteem and discipline in their students. Most importantly, teachers were required to study broadly the mental abilities of their students so as to understand the effects of the environment on them (Scally, 1985; Ellis, 1995).

Conclusion

Although Woodson's contributions to history and African American studies are well documented (Scally, 1985; Goggin, 1997; Durden, 1998), his contribution to the development of a guiding philosophy for African American education has not been carefully explored by scholars. In this article, I argue that Woodson believed in the centrality of experience and in the importance of a nurturing and supportive environment for all learners as a way of enhancing the right habits and actions of thought for all students. In his work, *The Mis-Education of the Negro,* he maintained that approaching people's education by utilizing their distinct cultural characteristics was a matter of exercising common sense (p. ix). Indeed, as Hlebowitsh (2006) puts it, "one must learn from one's experience in a fashion that avoids repeating mistakes, and that contributes to one's ability to make more informed decisions in the future" (p. 74).

References

Adickes, S. E. (2005). *The legacy of a freedom school.* New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Asante, M. K. (1990). *Kemet, afrocentricity and knowledge.* Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc.

Athanases, S. Z., Wahleithner, J. M., & Bennett, L. H. (2012). Learning to attend to culturally and linguistically diverse learners through teacher inquiry in teacher education. *Teachers College Record,* Volume 114 Number 7, pp. 1-50. http://www.tcrecord.org ID Number 16470, Date Accessed: 3/14/2014.

Bassey, M. O. (2009). Educating for the real world: An illustration of John Dewey's principles of continuity and interaction. *Educational Studies.* DOI 10.1080/03055690903148480. http://www.informaworld.com

Bassey, M. O. (2010). Education for civic citizenship and social justice: A critical social foundations approach. *Education as Change,* 14(2), 247–257.

Bassey, M. O. (2015). The centrality of experience in Carter G. Woodson's *Themis-education of the Negro, Journal of Philosophy & History of Education.* 65(1), 123-135.

Bassey, M. O. (2016). Culturally responsive teaching: Implications for educational justice. *Education Sciences* 6 (35); doi:10,3390/educsci6040035 www.mdpi.com/journal/education

Carver, R. L., & Enfield, R. P. (2006). John Dewey's philosophy of education is alive and well. *Education and Culture* 22(1), 55-67.

Chilcoat, G. W &Ligon, J. A. (1994). Developing democratic citizens: The Mississippi freedom schools as a model for social studies instruction. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 22 (2), 128-175.

Chilcoat, G. W., &Ligon J. A. (2000). "Great potential curriculumers": Educational projects that informed the curriculum design of the Mississippi freedom schools. Paper presented at the American educational research association annual meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education (2015). *Top 20 principles from psychology for preK-12 teaching and learning.* Retrieved from http:// www.apa.org/ed/schools/cpse/top-twenty-principles.pdf, Date Accessed: 4/22/2015.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom.* New York: The New Press.

Dewey, J. (1998). *Experience and education.* West Lafayette, Indiana: Kappa Delta Pi.

(Original work published in 1938).

Durden, R. F. (1998). *Carter G. Woodson: Father of African-American history.* Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers.

Ellis, C. M. (1995) Carter G. Woodson on education: A philosophical perspective. *MPES Proceedings, ERIC* (pp. 26-32).

Fairclough, A. (2007). *A class of their own: Black teachers in the segregated south.* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Gamoran, A., Nystrand, M., Berends, M., &LePore, P. C. (1995). An organizational analysis of the effects of ability grouping. *American Educational Research Journal,* 32 (4), 687-715.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, & practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Gehlbach, H. (2014). Creating birds of similar feathers: Leveraging similarity to improve teacher-student relationships and academic achievement. SEYS Educational Psychology Lecture Series, Department of Secondary Education and Youth Services, Queens College, The City University of New York, November 19, 2014.

Goggin, J. (1997). *Carter G. Woodson: A life in Black history.* Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.

Gollnick, D. M., & Chinn, P. C. (2012). *Multicultural education in a pluralistic society* (9thed.).Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Greene, M. (1978). *Landscapes of learning.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching & the brain.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin

Hlebowitsh, P. S. (2006). John Dewey and the idea of experimentalism. *Education and Culture,* 22(1), 73- 76.

Johnson, J. A., Musial, D., Hall, G. E., &Gollnick, D. M. (2013). *Foundations of American education: Becoming effective teachers in challenging times* (16thed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Johnson, W., Nyamekye, F., Chazan, D. & Rosenthal, B. (2013). Teaching with speeches: A Black Teacher who uses the mathematics classroom to prepare students for life. *Teachers College Record,* Volume 115 Number 2, pp. 1-26. http://www.tcrecord.org ID Number 16829, Date Accessed: 9/19//2014.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice,* 34(3), 159–165.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (2nded.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Levy, M (2013). A monumental dissent. In Jacqueline Johnson ed. *Findingfreedom: Memorializing the voices of freedom summer.* Miami, OH: Miami University Press.

Lipman, P. (1995). Bringing out the best in them: The contribution of culturally relevant teachers to educational reform. *Theory into Practice,* 34(3), 202–208.

Maiga, H. O. (1995). Bridging classroom, curriculum, and community: The Gao school museum. *Theory into Practice,* 34(3), 209–215.

Nelson-Barber S., & Estrin, E. T (1995). Bridging Native American perspectives to mathematics and science teaching. *Theory into Practice, 34 (3),* 174-185.

Page, R. N. (2006). Curriculum matters. In David T. Hanson (Ed.). *John Dewey and our educational prospect: A critical engagement with Dewey's democracy and education* (pp. 39-65). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Perlstein, D. (1990). Teaching freedom: SNCC and the creation of Mississippi freedom schools. *History of Education Quarterly,* 30(3), 297- 324.

Scally, A. (1985). *Carter G. Woodson: A bio-bibliography* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Shujaa, M. J. (1995). Cultural self meets cultural other in the African American experience: Teachers' responses to a curriculum content reform. *Theory into Practice,* 34(3), 194–201.

Snelgrove, D. (2013). John Dewey and Hannah Arendt on totalitarianism, education, and the problems of democracy. *Journal of Philosophy & History of Education* 63(1), 209-224.

Tate, W. F. (1995). Returning to the root: A culturally relevant approach to mathematics pedagogy. *Theory into Practice,* 34(3), 166–173.

Woodson, C. G. (1993). *The mis-education of the Negro.* Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc. (Original work published in 1933).