The Continuing Legacy of Freedom Schools as Sites of Possibility for Equity and Social Justice for Black Students

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Abstract

Rarely do we see in mainstream discourse around the so-called achievement gap counternarratives that speak to building the intellectual identities of achievement and success for Black students with positive cultural identity and social action as the foundation. Building upon their predecessors from the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools offer such a counternarrative model. In this article, we demonstrate how Freedom Schools are designed to interrupt the at large social framework of education where Black children are positioned as inferior and incapable. We limit our analysis to focus on teacher development as pertinent to obtaining equity and justice for Black youth in American public schools.

This spring the nation observed the 60th anniversary of the historic Brown v Board of Education decision which was purported to transform the pursuit of educational equity in the United States. With this important milestone has been a chorus of conversations about the plight of equity in education for underserved populations at a time when the nation’s schools continue to see unparalleled ethnic and racial diversity (Banks, 2012). What is painfully clear in the celebration of the Brown milestone is that despite a plethora of school reform efforts, standards based education movements, legislative interventions (NCLB and Race to the Top), increased testing, the new Common Core State Standards, and an unprecedented surge in charter schools across the country, African American students continue to underachieve in comparison to their counterparts from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (NCES, 2013).

The current state of educational affairs have led many to question what the real benefits of the Brown decision were, namely for African American students (Bell, 2004). The achievement disparities between African American students and their White, Asian, and Latino counterparts have been well documented over the past two decades (Howard, 2010; Milner, 2010). Some contend that issues around performance disparities are due to a combination of various structural and cultural factors. The structural arguments center on chronic poverty in various communities, underfunded schools, low teacher quality, and social policies which reinforce racial inequities (Anyon, 2005; Carter & Weiner, 2013; Gorski, 2013; Spring, 2006). Those attributing disparate academic outcomes to cultural factors point to crime ridden communities, lack of parental involvement, students’ behaviors and choices as being the culprip
for poor schooling experiences. Despite these calls for societal transformation and resource redistribution, educational practitioners and researchers alike continue to seek meaningful, day-to-day interventions that may reverse the academic underperformance of African American students in U.S. schools (Donnor & Dixson, 2013; Milner, 2012).

Contemporary rhetoric around Black student academic achievement suggests that Black students are in crisis, particularly Black males. This crisis is often framed around Black students' underachievement in schools as compared to their White counterparts. Thus, Black students are positioned from deficit perspectives as problematic and lacking while White students are revered as the normative standard despite the fact that they are not achieving at high levels either. However, rarely do we see in mainstream discourse around the so-called achievement gap counternarratives that speak to building the intellectual identities of achievement and success for Black students with positive cultural identity and social action as the foundation. Building upon their predecessors from the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer, the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools offer such a counternarrative model. In this article, we demonstrate how Freedom Schools are designed to interrupt the at large social framework of education where Black children are positioned as inferior and incapable. We limit our analysis to focus on teacher development as pertinent to obtaining equity and justice for Black youth in American public schools.

**Educational State of Affairs for African American Students**

A voluminous number of statistics explain the severity and persistence of academic underachievement and social challenges of African American students in PreK–12 schools. In many states across the country, the numbers are mind-numbing; consider the fact that a majority of African American students in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades do not reach grade level proficiency in reading, mathematics, history, and science (NCES, 2013), fewer than ten percent of African American students were at or above grade level in these same subject matter areas, and only single digits were at advanced levels. Equally as disturbing is the underrepresentation of Black students in Gifted and Talented Education programs, where among the four largest ethnic groups in the US they are least represented (Ford, 2011).

Coinciding with the 60 year anniversary of Brown is an insightful yet disturbing report that was released by the U.S. Departments of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, which demonstrates the depths and breadth at which educational equity continues to elude a disproportionate number of Black students. What the report reveals is that the damage done to African American students happens early, often and becomes increasingly disturbing the longer they remain in school. Consider the fact that Black preschoolers are 18 percent of children enrolled in preschool programs in public schools, yet they make up approximately 48 percent of children suspended more than once (Office of Civil Rights, 2014). This trend continues once they enter schools as Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students. African American students make up approximately 26% of students nationwide identified as educable mentally retarded, 34% of students diagnosed with serious emotional disorders, and 33% of students identified as trainable mentally retarded, or developmentally delayed (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Skiba, et. al, 2008). Black males in particular receive more than two out of three suspensions in schools, and Black girls are suspended at higher rates than girls of any other race or ethnicity and have higher rates than most boys (Ayon, 2005; Evans-Winters, 2005; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Lane, 2014). Other distressing takeaways from the report are:

- Black students are 12% of the students retained in grade 9, which is 3 times the rate of White students, and 6 times the rate of Asian American students.
- Black students represent 16 percent of student enrollment but make up 27 percent of students referred to law enforcement and 31 percent of school-related arrests.
- Where college access is concerned disparities exist as well. African American students are 16% of the student population, yet only are 9% of the students enrolled in AP courses, and 4% of the students who have a qualifying score
- Black students are most likely to be in classrooms with teachers who are either new to the profession, underqualified, or teaching out of subject courses, frequently resulting in high teacher turnover.

The challenges that many Black males encounter in
schools continue to be a point of chronic concern when considering that the dropout rate for them is among the highest of any subgroup in the country. During the 2009-2010 academic year, 48% of African American males did not receive diplomas with their classmates after four years of high school (Schott Foundation, 2012). In fact, dropout rates for Black males were as high as 60% in some of America's major urban cities, and in states such as Illinois, New York, and Wisconsin there was a graduation gap of at least 50 percent between Black males and their White male counterparts. Without sufficient educational opportunities, and prerequisite skill sets necessary for economic mobility in an increasingly compressed labor market, Black males are among the first to be squeezed out of viable job opportunities, thus increasing the likelihood of their participation in illegal activity, and subsequent involvement in the penal system. The U.S. Department of Justice (2009) reports that Black men are incarcerated at 6.6 times the rate of White men, with almost one in twenty Black men spending some time in jail or prison at some point in their life. Approximately 37 percent of all male inmates in 2008 were Black males, despite the fact that they only make up seven percent of the nation's population (Alexander, 2010). A growing chorus has called from educational scholars and practitioners to address the severe under performance of Black males (Harper, 2014; Howard, 2014; Toldson, 2008). Another statistic that has not received the attention that it deserves is that African American girls and young women have become the fastest growing population of incarcerated young people in the country. Not only are Black women eight times more likely than white women to go to prison in the first place—despite the fact that white women are arrested more often overall—they're also given longer sentences and suffer extreme abuses at the hands of prison authorities (Solinger, 2010)

Examining disproportionate academic outcomes, special education and dropout rates, and incarceration numbers for Black males should be taken with a note of caution. On the surface, these numbers can easily convey that there is something “wrong” with Black students due to their inability to adapt and thrive academically and behaviorally in schools. It is this thinking that only reinforces the problematic nature of Black student potential. We contend that a more critical analysis of Black students’ outcomes in schools should be placed on historical arrangements, Jim Crow laws, years of unequal funding, and other structural conditions in schools and the wider society which produce such alarming numbers. Moreover, there is a need to identify viable schooling responses that are disrupting this trend. Needless to say, not all Black children are under performing. Therefore, it is vital to identify best practices, useful programs, and innovative policies that are making Black students’ success the norm and not the exception. The purpose of this article is to shine the spotlight on one such program—Freedom Schools, a place where Black exceptionality is normalized and has a long track record of replicating this standard of excellence.

**Freedom Schools Reinvented**

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), organized by university students, conceptualized several projects to take place in the summer of 1964 known as The Mississippi Freedom Summer Project (later known as Freedom Summer) to assist African American communities in Mississippi with community planning and voter registration. The long term goal of Freedom Summer was to transform the power structure of Mississippi. Freedom Summer produced an important milestone of the Civil Rights Movement—Freedom Schools. While the Mississippi Freedom Schools were inspired by other movement educational programs (i.e. the Highlander Folk School established by Myles Horton and the Citizenship Schools developed by Septima Clark), the creation of a system aimed at youth activists rather than adult activists set them apart.

Efforts to devise an alternative to Mississippi’s poor education for Black students began in 1963 with Charlie Cobb, an aspiring writer, Howard University student and SNCC member. The 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools were the brainchild of Cobb. He proposed that the Summer Project “do something to address the impoverished nature of the education typically offered Black students in Mississippi” (Payne, 1997, p. 4). He realized that for Black folks, schools in Mississippi served as institutions of oppression. “Cobb outlined his premise that Mississippi schools were inadequate, that black students in them received an education in every way inferior to that available elsewhere, and that, in consequence, they were victims of a pervasive ‘social paralysis’” (Rothschild, 1982, p. 402). Cobb hoped that Freedom Schools would “both provide a true education for a few and demonstrate to blacks throughout Mississippi that just such schools could be created” (Perlstein, 1990, p. 303). He also believed that a change in power structure and a real democracy would have to begin with the young people. Freedom Schools were also
needed to transform young people into active, critical participants of their society (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1999). Freedom Schools were seen as a political organizing tool, and "the schools would become what SNCC called a 'parallel institution' and would produce students able to work for social change" (Rothschild, 1982, p. 403). Therefore, the Freedom Schools served multiple purposes in the movement and were a representation of community organizing, education for liberation, and activist development.

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is a non-profit child advocacy organization that has been advocating for the rights and needs of children especially poor and minority children and those with disabilities for more than 40 years. The CDF Freedom Schools® are modeled after the 1964 Mississippi Freedoms Schools. CDF Freedom Schools are partnerships between the Children's Defense Fund and community organizations, churches, and public and private schools to provide literacy-rich summer programs in communities where opportunities are limited or nonexistent. CDF Freedom Schools serve children in grades K-12 for six to eight weeks and integrate reading, conflict resolution, and social action in an activity-based curriculum that promotes social, cultural, and historical awareness. Since the early 90s, CDF Freedom Schools have been providing a culturally responsive schooling experience for students, parents, communities, and teachers in more than thirty states. In 2013, the program served approximately 11,471 children in 91 cities.

College-aged young adults known as "servant-leader interns" are the teachers in this context. Background experience in teaching is not a pre-requisite for teaching at Freedom Schools. Nor are servant-leaders required to be education majors in college or any other teaching related field. At the national training institute and throughout the Freedom Schools program at their local sites, interns are a part of various training and learning opportunities centered on engaging their students in the Freedom Schools curriculum (Jackson, 2009a, 2009b). The interns come to clearly understand their purpose as teacher-activists and the purpose of using culturally responsive curriculum. In order to understand their purpose, they first learn about the conditions of schooling for the children in which they serve and how more than sixty years after Brown vs. The Board of Education schools remain segregated offering unequal educational opportunities for many children of color and poor children. As practicing teachers in this setting, servant-leader interns are engaged in culturally responsive teaching practice consistent with visions of effective teaching for students of color (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Participation in CDF Freedom Schools has yielded increased achievement on standardized reading tests, positive character development, and an interruption of summer learning loss for students (Philliber Research Associates, 2008; Taylor & Cinisomo, 2012).

Similar to the 1964 Freedom Schools, CDF Freedom Schools serve as a counter-narrative for students, parents, communities, and the servant-leader interns in contrast to the continued inadequacies of public education for children of color, particularly African American children and poor children. For example, the books in the curriculum particularly provide African American children with positive cultural messages (Jackson & Boutte, 2009) that are largely absent in typical classroom literature. Moreover, analyzing the ways in which the servant-leader interns are prepared and supported to teach children who have been traditionally marginalized (i.e. children of color and poor children) in schools is very important and fundamental to twenty-first century education reform and the improvement of education and experiences in schools for Black youth.

The Importance of Culturally Relevant/Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy have been well theorized and documented for more than two decades (Boutte & Hill, 2006; Gay, 2000; Howard, 2010; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This theory suggests that the cultural mismatch between school and home experienced by many students of color and low-income students is a factor in their academic achievement. Ladson-Billings (1994) describes culturally relevant teaching as:

A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right. (pp. 17-18)

Culturally relevant teaching also entails the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). As a central principle of culturally relevant teaching, developing sociopolitical consciousness is equally as important as developing students academically and nurturing their cultural com-
petence. When examining the practices and pedagogy of effective teachers of African American students, research has shown that such teachers possess political consciousness and pedagogy (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Dixson, 2003; Gay, 2000; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994). These teachers have a sense of responsibility and commitment to justice and the fight against oppression and they work to develop such responsibility and commitment with their students. Gay (2000) asserts that the transformative agenda of culturally responsive pedagogy is twofold:

One direction deals with confronting and transcending the cultural hegemony nested in much of the curriculum content and classroom instruction of traditional education. The other develops social consciousness, intellectual critique, and political and personal efficacy in students so that they can combat prejudices, racism, and other forms of oppression and exploitation. (p. 34)

Culturally relevant/responsive teachers must choose to understand and interrogate the social, political and historical contexts which frame the schooling experiences of children of color, and in turn, teach their students to do the same.

Despite the fact that over two decades of research have demonstrated that culturally responsive practices improve achievement for students of color, such practices are still relatively few in classrooms (Gay, 2000). Scholars have suggested that teacher preparation programs need to move beyond fragmented and superficial treatment of diversity and increase their commitment to restructuring their programs and faculty composition to reflect the needs of a growing diverse student population (Irvine, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Conceptual and empirical works have examined curriculum revisioning that puts cultural diversity at the center of teacher preparation and propose that culturally responsive principles must frame and guide the program (Irvine, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Freedom Schools have long recognized this need and make culturally responsive pedagogy integral to the program as well as to preparing the servant-leader interns. The Freedom Schools national training institute is designed to provide interns with a set of planned learning opportunities for interns centered on preparing interns to be activists as well as teachers in their community. The Freedom Schools program describes itself as being a culturally relevant literacy based program. Like their predecessors, the CDF Freedom Schools serve as a counter-narrative to the deficit-based, inferior educational experience that too many children of color, particularly African American children, receive in our public schools. Through community involvement, intergenerational leadership, and culturally responsive teaching, CDF Freedom Schools are providing a culturally relevant schooling experience for students, parents, communities, and teachers.

Becoming activists and learning about their role in this national movement for social justice is a top priority of their training. Key components of the training are centered on inducting the interns into a social justice movement by providing them with an understanding of the socio-historical and socio-political contexts of the Freedom Schools movement as well as establishing high expectations of commitment, service and leadership (Jackson, 2011). Teaching is a means of activism in this movement.

**Freedom Schools as a Model for Reconceptualizing Teacher Development**

Research consistently demonstrates that teachers are the most influential factor in successful schooling outcomes. Moreover, Perry, Steele and Hilliard (2003) assert that in order “for school to be a powerful institution for African Americans, it must also function as a cultural, social, and political institution” (p. 99). Though scholars have called for a reconceptualization of teacher preparation that provides new teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to teach in culturally relevant ways (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994), few examples exist of how it has been programmatically implemented and enacted. The literature suggests that in order for teacher education programs to integrate culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy into their programs, they must build their capacity to do so which includes providing opportunities for teacher candidates to develop their sociopolitical consciousness and commitment and skills to act as agents of change. The Freedom Schools national training institute is designed to provide interns with opportunities to cultivate culturally responsive teaching practices (Jackson, 2009a, 2009b). The interns experience a kind of teacher preparation that focuses on developing them as culturally responsive teachers. Many of the college-aged youth serving in Freedom Schools are not education majors. Yet, in one week the servant-leader interns are trained to teach a powerful culturally relevant curriculum designed to promote social, cultural, and historical awareness. Even though
the majority of the interns are African American, their ethnicity alone doesn’t provide for them a culturally responsive pedagogy, and many of them recognize that they did not have this kind of experience in their K-12 schooling. In considering the lessons offered by Freedom Schools for university-based teacher preparation we must ask the following questions of our programs and of our practices as teacher educators. Do our preservice teachers understand their purpose as teachers in the lives of children of color? Do they understand the critical need for children of color to learn through culturally responsive curricula?

What would it mean and how would it look if teacher preparation programs fully committed to culturally responsive teacher preparation? The Freedom School model suggests several strategies for developing sociopolitical consciousness with future teachers at traditional university-based teacher preparation programs. Clearly, history matters. There is an explicit commitment on the part of the national training institute to enlighten the interns about the history of the CDF Freedom Schools, its connection to the Civil Rights Movement, and the role and contribution of youth and children in the movement, so they will know from whence they came and how important it is for them to move ahead in positive, helpful ways. Knowing and understanding this history and its connection to contemporary social and political contexts and issues is key to the development of interns’ sociopolitical consciousness. Traditional, university-based programs should examine the ways in which they make the social and political histories of communities of color part of their programs and part of the practice of teaching. Do future teachers have opportunities to learn such history and how to integrate it as part of their teaching practice?

Research has consistently shown that culturally responsive teachers see themselves as part of the community and they see teaching as giving back to the community (Boutte & Hill, 2006; Dixson, 2003; Foster, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Being a culturally responsive teacher at Freedom Schools means that one is a part of a larger, collective social justice movement. The Freedom Schools program is explicit about the purpose of their work. Teaching is a means of activism in this movement and therefore a political act. When interns commit to serving in Freedom Schools, they commit to being part of a “we” that is concerned with the business of improving the overall life conditions of children. Traditional teacher preparation programs can become part of the “we” by partnering with community-based organizations and structure future teachers’ clinical experiences to include opportunities to be part of social justice movements.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the contemporary educational issues that Black youth across the U.S. face today are not much different than what was occurring in Mississippi in 1964. Thus, the need for a program such as Freedom Schools is just as necessary and significant. In reporting the CDF Freedom Schools story in this article, we limited our analysis to focus on teacher development as pertinent to obtaining equity and justice for Black youth in American public schools, because if the promises of Brown are to be actualized, then African American students have to have access to high quality schooling experiences with culturally competent teachers. The CDF Freedom Schools are continuing the legacy of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools by providing such experiences in communities where youth of color, particularly Black youth, have limited access to such opportunities.

Moreover, it was our goal to expose the research on the CDF Freedom Schools in an effort to demonstrate the program’s impact and encourage scholars to further investigate the Freedom Schools movement. As King (2005) notes, “Research is needed to support and to document the effect of community-oriented education experiences on student learning and engagement” (p. 35). If we do not tell our story about how community groups and organizations are working for educational equity and justice on behalf of youth, then someone else will and the narrative may not be accurate.

References


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