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It was never meant for us: Towards a black feminist construct of citizenship in social studies

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focused on how two women African American teachers understand the purpose of teaching social studies and citizenship. The multiple identities as African American women and teachers along with their knowledge of African American history impacted the way notions of citizenship were understood and taught to students. The teachers drew on tenets of Black Feminist thought to make sense of construct of citizenship. Instead of conveying traditional notions of citizenship that include personal responsibility, patriotism, and membership to the nation state, they rejected these constructs of citizenship and understood their role as social studies teachers to instill notions of community membership and agency as aspects of citizenship. African American teacher's alternative notions of citizenship may provide a framework by which reconceptualized multiple views of American citizenship may be presented.

Introduction

W.E.B. DuBois (1903/1994) began his profound book, In the Souls of Black Folks with a discussion about the "unasked question" between DuBois and "the other world" (p. 14). The question that he felt White America wanted to ask him was, "how does it feel to be a problem?" (p. 15). He stated that African Americans[1] are born wearing a veil with the gift of a second sight in society, a "double consciousness", where he described as "-a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (DuBois, 1903/1994, p. 18). DuBois stated that this "two-ness" is at constant conflict with each other: the dilemma of being both American and Black.

A number of Black Feminist activists and scholars have added to this framework to include the experiences of African American women. In her writings on Black women educator Anna Julia Cooper (1892/1988) often wrote on the "double enslavement of Black women by being confronted by both a woman question and a race problem" (p. 13). In 1904 the first president of the National Association of Colored Women Mary Church Terrell acknowledged that Black women were not only handicapped on account of their sex, but also baffled and mocked because of their race (King, 1988, p. 294). For African American women, they are often plagued by what Frances Beale referred to as "double jeopardy" of the dual discriminations of racism and sexism (King, 1988). Their identities as African American and women intersect and cause a different experience with sexism and racism than White women and Black men.

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[1] I use "African American" and "Black" interchangeably throughout the paper.

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Although African Americans lived this dual existence of oppression, it was African American women teachers who, in the past, were charged with teaching African American students how to be citizens of the United States. It has been argued that African Americans continue to live as second-class citizens (Mills, 1997) on account of the policing of Black bodies (Vargas & James, 2013), prison-industrial complex (Alexander, 2010), and continued housing segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993). For these reasons it is important to learn how teachers understand the notion of citizenship and in what way these constructs of citizenship are taught to the future generation of American citizens? In this paper I attempt to examine how the intersections of race and gender complicate the notion of citizenship for African American women social studies teachers and in turn, impacts how they understand and incorporate citizenship education into their classrooms.

Citizenship

The construct of citizenship in the United States has evolved over the course of history. According to Turner (1993) the evolution of citizenship is influenced on a number of structural and cultural preconditions in a society (such as immigration, growing diversity, global economy, etc.) Although citizenship is a relatively modern concept its fundamental principles were first influenced by western political theorists and philosophers that dates back to Ancient Greece. There are numerous typologies of citizenship, from British sociologist T.H. Marshall (1950/1998) tracing the expansion of citizenship to political, social, and civil citizenship to Kymlicka and Norman (1994) stating that citizenship in the modern day viewed as a legal status or as a desirable activity. But modern discourse currently describes citizenship in the American democracy as a "bounded membership" to the nation state (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Kymlicka, 1995). In this sense, the way that citizenship is theorized or taught to future generations is in relation to the political sphere and participation (such as voting, writing to letters to congressmen, etc).

For the purposes of this paper I employ political theorist Bryan S. Turner's (1993) definition of citizenship as "a set of practices (judicial, political, economic, and cultural) which define a person as a competent member of society, and which as a consequence shapes the flow of resources to persons and social groups" (p. 2). By defining citizenship as a "set of practices", Turner helps us understand citizenship as a social construction that changes throughout history based on social, political, and economic forces in society (Turner, 1993). Moreover, Turner's definition links citizenship with inequality and power structures and the unequal distribution of resources. This characterization of citizenship is more aligned with the experiences of marginalized groups in the United States and their constant exclusion from American citizenship.

Dichotomies of citizenship

Citizenship in the United States is typically constructed as a divided status: you either have it or you do not. The dichotomous construction of citizenship not only racializes and genders citizenship but also defines groups of people as "insiders" and "outsiders" (Mohanty, 2003). Dichotomous thinking and notions of difference is a method used to objectify marginalized groups by defining them in oppositional terms: man/woman, Black/White, citizen/non-citizen (Collins, 2000). Dichotomous relationships tend to normalize one while the other is viewed as the "other" and outside the norm. Wilderson (2010) is useful here in order to understand the Black/White phenomenon. He wrote, "the race of Humanism (White, Asian, South Asian, and Arab) could not have produced itself without the simultaneous production of that walking destruction which became known as the Black" (pp. 20–21). The notion of "Whiteness" could not exist without its antithesis: Blackness: "Trauma of Blackness in its absolute Otherness in relation to Whites. That is, White people make Black people by recognizing only their skin color" (Wilderson, 2010, p. 74). Vargas and James (2013) add to this notion of a dichotomous relationship between Black and White in their discussion of the value of young Black bodies in American society. They argue, "Black children, including the preborn and the deceased, have no vulnerability which the polis or police need to respect" (p. 195). The constant juxtaposition of Black and inhuman has led to subjugation of African Americans and their position as outsiders to the body politic.

Students of American history certainly notice the correlation between race, gender, and the granting of citizenship rights to different groups of Americans (Dietz, 2002). Race and gender were used as obstructions to include and exclude certain groups from belonging to the body politic. Moreover, Crocco (2000) points out that the traditional understanding of citizenship represents a patriarchal perspective that continues to disregard women; "For much of U.S. history, the public domain itself has been gendered male, viewed as out of bounds to women as public actors making a public claim" (p. 52). This dominant discourse of citizenship in the United States tends to represent a western perspective that disregards the experiences of women of color.

Citizenship education

In a democratic society it is imperative to consider what kind of citizen are we preparing (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)? Abowitz & Harnish (2006) state that citizenship in a democracy "confers membership, identity, values, and rights of participation and assumes a body of common political knowledge" (p. 65) whereas, Parker (2003) argues that democratic citizenship involves embracing notions of diversity and unity. He writes, "democratic citizenship education seeks to teach, among other things, that diversity is a social fact, that it is a social good, why this is so, and how diversity and democracy require one another" (p. 1). Westheimer & Kahne (2004) claimed that teachers tend to instill in students three different levels of citizenship: "personally responsible citizen, participatory citizen, and justice-oriented citizen" (p. 240). Justice-oriented