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Black Women Educators' Activism: The Evolution of a Black Feminist Pedagogy

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Abstract

Exploring the historical narrative of activism among black American women offers valuable insights into their significant role in advocating for equal and high-quality educational opportunities within their community. It unveils their cultural and political acumen, attitudes, and dedication, which they extend into the realm of teaching. Their moral philosophies and sense of purpose have been instrumental in the creation of a black feminist pedagogy that has evolved within the frame of black women's resistance to oppression and the ensuing battle for collective survival and institutional change (Collins, 1990).

Keywords: Activism, Black women, African American women, Black Feminist, Pedagogy

Introduction

This paper provides a glimpse into literature that sheds light on the activism of black women in the field of education. The review encapsulates three key aspects: (1) A historical journey into the activism of African American women, (2) An exploration of contemporary issues and studies pertaining to black women activists in the teaching profession, and (3) The development of black feminist pedagogy. Collectively, these elements illustrate the dual dimensions of black women's activism, encompassing the

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fight for group survival and the quest for institutional transformation (Collins, 2000).

Defining Black Women's Activism

Activism is generally interpreted as the doctrine or practice of taking vigorous action or becoming involved to achieve political or other objectives, often through demonstrations or protests (Costello, 1991). Nevertheless, when viewed through the prism of black women educators' experiences and historical legacies, activism assumes a much more profound meaning rooted in their history. Thus, it represents a complex interplay of various forms of oppression faced by black women and their intersecting oppressions. Collins (2000) suggests a model to analyze black women's activism encompassing two aspects: (1) struggles for group survival, and (2) struggles for institutional transformation. This model captures the multifaceted nature of black women's activism in the face of multiple oppressions and dominance structures. Numerous studies on the history of black women teacher activism reflect the significant role these educators played in uplifting their race through promoting education and accomplishment within their schools and communities (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 1999; Hooks, 1994; Giddings, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Historical Overview of African American Women's Activism

Gordon (1995) points out that history abounds with both known and unknown tales of African American women who have devoted their lives to uplift African American people. In various scholarly works by African American women (e.g., Giddings, 1984; Washington, 1987; Lerner, 1973; Carby, 1987), it is evident that these women have waged battles to define themselves and their communities against the cultural hegemonic image and status established by the horrors of slavery, proving to be important contributors to American society.

During slavery, African women organized resistance against legal sexual exploitation. They participated in rebellions, acts of sabotage, escapes, and used birth control methods and self-induced abortions to avoid bringing children into the abhorrent world of slavery (Gordon, 1995, p. 63; Davis, 1983, p. 205; Washington, 1987; Giddings, 1984). In addition, free black women tirelessly supported the anti-slavery movement through fundraising activities, lectures, and writing newspaper articles. They understood the correlation between their feminism and racial progress (Giddings, 1984; Yee, 1995).

Zinn (1980) documents their pivotal involvement in the Civil War, highlighting the significant contributions of black women. This includes renowned figures like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, alongside lesser-

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known individuals such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Susie King Taylor, who made substantial impacts during the war.

Organized Black Women's Activism

Racial oppression catalyzed the emergence of black women's organizations. Notable activists and leaders like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, and Mary Church Terrell were instrumental in setting up the black women's club movement. Their leadership arose from their experiences with societal racism rather than from the masses of working women, thus differentiating them from white club leaders (Davis, 1983).

Prompted by racist attacks on Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the first significant meeting independently organized by African American women took place. When her newspaper offices in Memphis, Tennessee were destroyed, she relocated to New York, where she continued publishing her experiences. This incident inspired prominent women in New York's African American community to organize a rally in her support, which led to the formation of the first women's club exclusively created and led by black women. A few years later, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was established under Mary Church Terrell's leadership, uniting the various black women's clubs that had formed by then (Davis, 1983).

However, the achievements of many black women activists remained undocumented. Collins (2000) affirms, "Without the efforts of countless black women to ensure group survival, struggles to transform U.S. educational, economic, and political institutions could not have been sustained."

Early Struggles for Black Education

The Black Women's Club movement echoed the objectives of black women activists who believed that educating black people was crucial for racial upliftment. Women like Charlotte Forten Grimke (1873-1914), Craft Laney (1854-1933), Frances (Fannie) Jackson Coppin (1837-1913), Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), Charlotte Hawkins Brown (1882-1961), and Mary McCloud Bethune (1875-1955) were primarily dedicated to the education of the black community and actively participated in the club movement and the struggle for suffrage (Gordon, 1995).

However, these women often found themselves marginalized during crucial discussions and debates concerning black education. A significant debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encapsulated this. Although they sought the advancement of the black race through education, Washington favored a gradual path that included industrial education, while DuBois advocated the pursuit of the highest academic levels. Despite this tension, many black women leaders showed their independence by expressing the need

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for both industrial education and the highest possible academic levels (Guiddings, 1984).

Mary McLeod Bethune, an educator and civil rights activist, was a prominent voice in the NACW. She saw the clubwomen as pioneers of social reform (Cash, 2001). Bethune acknowledged the centrality of the civil rights struggle to American democracy and the world. Her efforts helped pave the way to the Civil Rights Era (1954-1964) by motivating African descent people to leverage the political system and participate in freedom-fighting organizations (Smith, 2001).

During the Civil Rights Movement, numerous black women educators strove to continue Bethune's vision of black empowerment and equality by mobilizing working-class blacks at the grassroots level. Septima Poinsette Clark, an activist, organizer, and educator, is a prime example. She taught in Charleston and segregated black schools on the Sea Islands in South Carolina. She also participated in legal campaigns to equalize salaries for black and white teachers. After attending workshops at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, she began to develop adult education programs to achieve "Literacy and Liberation." Clark established "Citizen Schools" to prepare black southerners for voter registration. When Tennessee officials closed the Highlander Folk School in the early 1960s, the Citizenship School program was adopted by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Clark became its director (Rouse, 2001).

The legacy of black women activists such as Septima Poinsette Clark, who utilized their organizational affiliations to fight for educational equality and social justice, lives on. Today's African American women teachers continue to reflect this sense of mission, thereby showing a collective ethical responsibility and personal commitment to the education and uplift of their communities and race (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 1999). Their efforts have been chronicled in recent studies that focus on black women teacher activists.

Modern Examination of Activism by Black Women Educators

The volume of research focusing on present-day black women teacher activism is comparatively sparse. However, the existing studies reveal shared activist objectives and common sources of motivation among those who engage in activism. Kathleen Casey's 1993 study titled, "I answer with my life: Life histories of women teachers working for social change," offers invaluable insight. Casey delved into the oral histories of three groups of activist teachers of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, which included the narratives of four black women activist educators. She discovered that these women's strength emanated from the black community during their childhoods, and they continue to empower others within the same tradition. Despite working in

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environments dominated by white racist priorities, these teachers deploy a nuanced, re-interpretative pedagogy.

Foster (1996) illuminates the tendency of black women activists to reject Eurocentric frameworks, interpretations, and viewpoints when conducting research on African American educators. With her research titled, "Like us but not one of us: Reflections on a life history study of African American teachers," she aimed to glean definitions of a "good teacher" from the standpoint of African Americans. The lack of comprehensive research on black teachers' methods and viewpoints provided the impetus for her study. Utilizing a technique she named "community nomination," Foster permitted the black community to suggest names of educators considered as good teachers. Her findings raised some questions when the researcher and respondents belong to the same cultural and linguistic community.

Beauboeuf-LaFontant (1997) study, titled "Politicized mothering among African American women teachers: A qualitative inquiry," draws from the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy and the history of African American education. She explores the life experiences, beliefs, and methods of six black women teachers. Furthermore, she promotes the concept of renaming "culturally relevant teaching" to "politically relevant teaching" to highlight the political, historical, social, and cultural awareness that black women educators contribute to their vocation. She argues that politically relevant educators exhibit "political clarity" and are aware not only of their students' cultural norms, values, and practices but, significantly, of the political realities and aspirations of people of color.

Dillard (2006) champions the concept of adopting a paradigm that places culture and spirit at its core. She introduces the term "'endarkened' feminist epistemology" to express how understanding reality is shaped by the historical roots of black feminist thought, while recognizing the difference in culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities. She further emphasizes the historical and current contexts of oppression and resistance for African American women. Dillard also underscores the spiritual aspect of African American teachers and researchers' work and posits that recognizing culture and spirit at academia's heart is crucial for those striving for social justice.

In "Let's do this! Black women teachers' politics and pedagogy," Dixson (2003) scrutinizes the political essence of contemporary African American women's pedagogy and its position within the black feminist activist tradition. Her examination of two African American primary school teachers reveals their teaching functions within the black feminist activist tradition. This is indicated by their belief in teaching as a way of life and a public service. It also reflects in their daily political confrontations against racism and their advocacy for quality education for their students. Dixson's

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study underlines not just the teachers' dedication to their students' success but also how far that commitment extends beyond the classroom and the school.

The Role of Black Feminist Pedagogy

Black feminist pedagogy is the product of black women educators. It evolved from their tradition of activism and proposes learning methods influenced by black women's historical experiences with race, gender, class bias, and the outcomes of marginalization and isolation. It encapsulates four key elements of black feminist thought: dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, personal expressiveness centrality, personal accountability ethic, and concrete experience as a criterion of meaning. The focus and objective of black feminist pedagogy aims to increase students' political awareness by introducing an Afrocentric worldview and centering black women's experiences. Its primary assumption is the active involvement in the fight to conquer the multifaceted oppression they face.

The tenets of black feminist pedagogy have been exercised for centuries, empowering black women as they undertook various activist roles in the pursuit of quality education for black people. The connection between black feminist pedagogy and the pedagogies and models discussed is clear. It provides students, teachers, and institutions with a method for promoting equity, multiple visions, and perspectives. This echoes black women's efforts to be recognized as humans and citizens rather than objects and victims. In conclusion, black feminist pedagogy serves as a pedagogical approach aimed at enhancing students' political awareness. It can be seen as a valuable contribution to multicultural education, culturally relevant teaching, and teaching for social justice. This is attributed to its introduction of a non-western (Afrocentric) worldview and its incorporation of gender and patriarchy as central elements in understanding all historical phenomena.

Conclusion

This article provides a succinct historical summary of the activism of African American women, emphasizing the pivotal roles they have played in propelling a remarkable movement towards educational equity for the entire black race. The brief recounting of African American women's activism is significant as it underscores the active roles that black women played in achieving education for black people and attempts to secure a place for black feminist pedagogy in historical literature.

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