Education Policy and Leadership 834:
Interpretative History of African American Education 1950 to Present

Professor Beverly Gordon

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Developing Critical Literacy Interpretation & Analysis among African American High School Students

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I. The Overview

The main objective of this lesson plan is to provide teachers with an example of how to introduce African American high school level students to critical literacy skills; mainly, how to interpret and analyze literature at the high school level. This is a necessary skill required in secondary and collegiate level literature courses. This overview will provide: a brief history of literacy among African Americans; current issues in reading education; and a culturally responsive framework for implementing the suggested lessons.

History of Oppression

The history of literacy in the African American community shows how racism and the oppressive policies of majority white institutions such as slavery, government, and schooling have impeded the progress of African Americans to learn to read (Gadsden & Wagner, 1995; Lewis, 1995; Watkins, 2001; Woodson, 1992). During slavery, slaves could be punished and even killed if it was found that they learned how to read (Douglass & O'Meally, 2003). Watkins (2001) notes that schooling post slavery for blacks was designed to give African Americans the minimum skills needed to keep us situated in the lower class of a increasingly stratified capitalistic system. Furthermore, Apple (1993) points out that an educational system intertwined with a system of capitalism is built in a way that requires the existence of poor people so long as there are rich people. Apple (2006) cites the father of capitalism, Adam Smith, “..that for every rich man there must be five hundred poor ones” (p. 5). A common saying among some African Americans is that “As the richer gets richer, the poorer gets poorer”. Hence, we can see that education in a capitalistic society has been disadvantageous to low-income African Americans.
Learning to read IS a pathway to citizenship; reading carries with it the promise of economic and social advancement for blacks and participation in citizenship (Fisher, 2009). Despite this history of oppression, African Americans mobilized themselves to read. Slaves secretly taught themselves to read through secret organizations, post-slavery African Americans organized within the community to teach literacy through literary societies, Black schools, and both education and literacy was held as necessary to the advancement of African American people (Fisher, 2009; Gadsden & Wagner, 1995). The African American community made a concerted effort at the local level to acquire reading skills as well as pursuing their rights to an equitable education through Brown v. Board, which exposed separate but equal as unjust and inequitable. Overall, reading within the African American community took on a specific meaning of liberation, as exemplified through Black writers (Fisher, 2009). Furthermore, African American writers also had (and continue to have) certain stylistic features and meanings embedded within their texts which has created a Black literary community (Molefi K. Asante, 1987; Smitherman, 1977). This last point is important to note because it has implications for teaching African American literature, which I will address as part of this lesson plan.

Where are we now?

Standardized tests show a significant gap in the reading skills of African American children compared to their White counterparts. Gordon (2003) notes that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2000 showed that 88 percent of African American fourth graders failed to achieve a sufficient level of reading. In 2007, the NAEP showed no gains for low-income students since 2005 and that a significant score gap persists between White and minority 8th grade students in reading (United States. National Assessment Governing, 2006). Some scholars have defined the issue of the achievement of African American students as an
achievement gap (Chubb & Loveless, 2002; Strickland & Alvermann, 2004; Tatum, 2005).
However, Ladson-Billings (2006) recently redefined the issue; it is not that African American
children are failing and that it is an issue of getting them ‘caught up’, but instead an issue with
the institution of education and the broader issue of inequity based on race and class that needs to
be rectified to reduce the education debt.

Current scholarship shows that a major impediment to the achievement of African American
students is the lack of an education that is culturally responsive (Molefi Kete Asante, 1991; Gay,
relevant pedagogy include: high expectations for engagement and achievement, a strong ethic
of care, raising critical consciousness to encourage them to question the oppressive structures of
education and the broader society, an emphasis on local community cultural practices, and an
infusion of a deeper and more accurate depiction of the historical reality of African Americans
that reaches back to cultural beliefs embodied in pre-slavery African society (Molefi Kete
Asante, 1991; Hale, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Murrell, 2002; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003;

These major tenets are necessary components in implementing the outlined activities in this
lesson plan in order to present an effective lesson and are purposefully infused into the suggested
activities. The following activities will include the expectation that students are highly engaged
through interviewing their family and local community members, working with the teacher as
facilitator and their peers, and engaging in dialogue. An emphasis is placed on local community
and cultural practices through the expectation that they will learn about reading practices in their
local community and the broader cultural practices of the African American community.
Finally, the historical component of the suggested activities is infused through the use of historically accurate sources from African descendant scholars.

II. Activities

Activity One:

A suggested introductory activity is an overview of literacy practices in the Black community. The teacher is encouraged to use sources listed in the bibliography and the following for a more comprehensive history:


- The emergence of African American literacy traditions: family and community efforts in the 19th century by Phyllis M Belt-Bryan (2004)

- Forgotten Readers: Recovering the list history of African American literary societies by Elizabeth McHenry and Donald E. Pease (2002)

A second component of this activity is to introduce students briefly to an array of African American literature. This literature can be built upon in a follow up activity through engaging students in an author study. An author study includes learning about the autobiographical background of the author, the cultural and social context in which the author wrote their literature, and the themes and literary styles/features that merge across multiple texts by the author. I have specifically outlined three authors that a teacher might develop an author study around: James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, or Toni Morrison. The goal of the author study is to engage students in analysis of these texts. A teacher is encouraged to have hardback copies of literature, including, but not limited to:
- Blues for Mister Charlie by James Baldwin
- Go tell it on the mountain by James Baldwin
- If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin
- All God’s children need traveling shoes by Maya Angelou
- I know why the caged birds sing by Maya Angelou
- The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison
- Tar Baby by Toni Morrison
- Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison

A teacher may also draw upon multimedia including:

- Great Writers of the 20th Century: James Baldwin (1997), available from BBC worldwide (VHS)
- Oral History Archive of Toni Morrison, which includes interviews about her novels:
  http://www.visionaryproject.org/morrisontoni/
- Biography and interviews with Maya Angelou:
  http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/ang0bio-1

For a more extensive list of African American writers to develop an author study, a teacher may check:

http://www.literaryhistory.com/20thC/AfricanAm.htm
Activity Two:

In this activity students are encouraged to interview members of their family (which can include fictive kinskip) and local community members about reading practices. The main objective of this activity is for students to learn about the reading practices of their family and community. Questions students might initially ask include: What does my family and community read? Why do they read it? How did they come to learn how to read? A teacher should brainstorm with students for a more extensive interview question lists. The brainstorming activity is an important component because it engages students to become involved in the learning process as co-producers of knowledge with the teacher. Brainstorming in this activity makes the knowledge of the students a valuable part of the learning process and draws upon their own experiences and understanding of literacy. A teacher might also need to be prepared to have a range of responses from interviews. If students do not have access to people who read on a regular basis (i.e.—perhaps their parent(s) are illiterate), a teacher may want to arrange an alternative list of volunteers that students can interview from the surrounding local school community.

Activity Three:

A third activity to be completed after the first two activities is to engage students in developing a rubric for gauging the value of a text. The teacher should encourage students to draw upon responses from the interviews and the historical review lesson provided initially by the teacher. This rubric can then become the basis for interpreting and analyzing African American literature. As the students are engaged in reading the literature, the teacher and students should periodically
review the rubric to make changes to it, including expanding or refining it. There are multiple objectives of the rubric activity, which includes creating a culturally responsive rubric, engaging students in ways that allow them to question conventional understandings of what literature is valued, and to develop their ability to critique literature systematically.

III. Bibliography


