

# The Centrality of Experience in Carter G. Woodson's The Mis-Education of the Negro

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## **Introduction**

In 1933, Carter G. Woodson (1875–1950) published reflections on his extensive experiences as an educator spanning over half a century in both hemispheres, teaching students of all backgrounds and colors. In *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, he argues Black children were mis-educated because their education was not drawn from their own life experiences. He maintains that the type of education Black children received was mis-educative because it created a personality split in African Americans typified by dual identities resulting in a profound identity crises which has made educated African Americans “decry any such thing as race consciousness” (1933/1993, p. 7). Woodson goes on to note, “The chief difficulty with the education of the Negro is that it has been largely imitation resulting in the enslavement of his mind” (p. 134). Woodson’s argument here is, the type of education given to Black children was remote from their humanity. On the contrary, he suggests African-American children should be given the type of education not imposed from without, that is, the type of education determined by the make-up of the people themselves and what their environment requires of them. He implies education for African Americans should incorporate African-American experiences as well as their distinct social and cultural characteristics.

In spite of the passion and evidence inherent in his argument, Woodson’s work is never mentioned in the same breath as the other great 20<sup>th</sup> century Social Foundations authors even though his *Mis-Education of the Negro* predates Dewey’s popular *Experience and Education* (1998/1938) in which Dewey talks of mis-educative experiences. Aversion to Woodson’s work by Foundations scholars may be due to scholars thinking they have plentiful other works to reference, therefore their hesitancy to add one more book to a long list, or it may be as Davis (2014) notes recently that in the academy, “while radical views are tolerated, they are often marginalized, or worse, ignored, especially

within professional fields such as education” (p. xl). It is important to point out that radical views, as in this case, may simply be views outside the mainstream or may just be progressive philosophical views. However, unfamiliarity with Woodson’s work, as one anonymous reviewer suggests, may be due to the threat posed to liberal-arts education in an era of accountability. Whatever the case, as I talk about Woodson’s work at seminars, conferences, and workshops I am always amazed by the number of students and Foundations scholars who reliably ask me why they have never heard of Woodson or his work. In this essay, I focus my attention on Woodson’s argument that educators should use students’ prior experiences and frames of reference to make learning more relevant, and on his argument for cultivating a nurturing and supportive learning environment to enable students to develop to their fullest. In embarking upon this journey, it is my hope Woodson’s work will begin to receive more serious attention by Foundations scholars as they begin to see his work’s purpose and relevance to our contemporary educational system.

### **The Centrality of Experience in Woodson’s *The Mis-Education of the Negro***

In his greatest educational work, Woodson notes with dismay the poor quality of education provided Black children owing to a profound lack of connection between Black children’s education and their cultural orientations and experiences. Woodson’s book documents the mistakes made in education, more specifically in the education of Black children. U.S. education, Woodson maintains, does not adequately prepare Black children to function successfully in society. He highlights the most important variables in the learning process: the learner, the values and aims of his or her society, and a knowledge of subject matter.

Through painstaking analyses of historical data, he argues, Black children were not given the right type of education, rather their education subjected them to the will of others and was never determined by the make-up of the people themselves; that is, education did not factor in the distinct social and cultural characteristics of African Americans. In explaining the inadequacies of U.S. Black children’s education he argues that U.S. education is socially constructed to privilege white norms, experiences, and expectations. He comes to this conclusion because of the “neglect of Afro-American History and distortion of facts concerning [Blacks] in most history books, [which] deprived the black child and his [or] her whole race of a heritage, and relegated him [or] her to nothingness and nobodiness” (Wesley & Perry, 1969, pp. 1–2). Woodson is appalled by the lack of social and cultural connection between Black children’s experiences and their education

stating, "It is merely a matter of exercising common sense in approaching people through their environment..." (p. xi). As Woodson sees it, "if education [is to be] of any practical value it should serve to guide us to living, to fit us for the work around us and demanded by the times in which we live" (in Ellis, 1997, p. 26). Indeed, education "should aid us into putting the most into life in the age, country, and into the position we are to fill" (p. 26).

Woodson notes, similarly in the Philippines, teachers were once compelled to use U.S. textbooks and teach students in language outside the students' own realm. Recollecting his observations, he notes, "Every pupil started in the first grade with *Baldwin's Primer* which featured the red apple (a fruit unknown in the Islands), polar bears, and blizzards" (Sally, 1985, p. 7). On the contrary, he envisions a great and true educator for Filipino children should be one who takes great pride in teaching his or her students Filipino music and who does not teach his or her pupils to sing, "Come shake the Apple Tree," when they had never seen such an object, but rather "'Come shake the Lomboy Tree,' something which they had actually done" (Woodson, 1933/1993, p. 153). Woodson's language is deliberate here because he believes a knowledgeable teacher should speak to his or her students about their own native hero, José Rizal, "who gave his life as a martyr for the freedom of his country" (p. 153), instead of George Washington who children knew nothing about and could never appreciate.

In the U.S., Woodson is concerned about a curricular knowledge base far removed from the experiences of Black children because when discontinuity exists between the knowledge base and student experiences, the result is what Page (2006) calls a *hiding curriculum*. According to Page (2006), whenever a *hiding curriculum* exists in schools, students learn "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" (p. 51). In such an instance, knowledge exists only for its own sake and the curriculum is compartmentalized which does not allow for "the fullest possible realization of human potentialities" (in Snelgrove, 2013, p. 210). The centrality of experience is critical to students' success in school because culture, tradition, and economic conditions have very powerful effects on learning. Greene (1978) argues that because of the ontological rootedness of experience, students' knowledge cannot be separated from their own real life experiences. Indeed, as she sees it, "the life of reason develops against a background of perceived realities, that to remain in touch with one's original perceptions is to be present to oneself" (p. 2). She reminds us 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” (p. 2).

Education, according to Woodson, is the means of social continuity of life rooted in experience. It is by facing real-life problems that creative intelligence develops. In other words, “genuine thought begins with a ‘problematic situation,’ a block or hitch in the ongoing stream of experience. In encountering these blocks, consciousness is brought to focus and one is made more acutely aware of the situation” (Ozmon & Craver, 2007, p. 136). Our experiences consist of physical realities and social relationships as well. However, experience must be seen in its connectedness and as “a social instrument for human adaptation within historically changing social and physical environments” (Rigstad, 2007/2008, p. 5). This is to say, one’s geographical location and experiences shape both one’s values and social needs as he or she learns and absorbs new ideas. As a result, every generation must engage in some form of critical and, to some extent, experimental examination leading to social reorganization of their experiences. During this process, traditional practices are revised and some are discarded following what has been learned in the process. Woodson, indeed, believes firmly in and wants his readers to see the organic connection between a child’s experience and his or her education.

### **How to Rectify Mis-Education**

Woodson argues mis-education can be rectified. As a remedy he suggests a bottom-up approach not imposed from without. In other words, education for Black children should be determined by the make-up of the people themselves and should be carried out according to the circumstances their environment requires of them because education dictated by one’s environment allows an individual to think for him or herself. This is to say, children are affected in their learning by internal factors and by their environments guided by the principles of interaction and continuity. This means predispositions that students develop during past experiences affect their future experiences (Carver & Enfield, 2006). The curriculum therefore should emphasize knowledge and experiences African-American students bring to school to empower them to learn from each other and to explore community and social improvement through collective decision making. Research shows activating students’ prior knowledge is an important tool in enhancing students’ engagement with the lesson and in helping them to make sense of new information (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Discussing with students what they already know has the added advantage of increasing their engagement with the text and provides a substructure on which they can connect the topic to their prevailing knowledge and experiences (Gamoran,

Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995). Indeed, Woodson agrees with Dewey (1998/1938), that “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 27). As Dewey (1966/1916) argues, education is “reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (p. 76), so, too, does Woodson. In fact, Woodson has so much faith in the inherent centrality of experience in education he remarks, “Only by careful study of the Negro himself and the life which he is forced to lead can we arrive at the proper procedure in this crisis” (p. x).

### **Mis-Education in Public Schools Today**

African-American parents’ disappointment with U.S. schools continues to the present. Eighty-two years after the publication of *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, statistics show Black children in U.S. schools lag far behind whites in academic performance and are placed in lower academic tracks in disproportionate numbers to white students. They are also far more likely to be suspended and disciplined in schools than their white counterparts. In some urban districts, up to 40% of Black students drop out of schools (Lipman, 1995; see also Gay, 2010 and Ladson-Billings 1995; 2009). According to Ladson-Billings (1995), the reason for such massive failures of Black students in U.S. schools is due to cultural discontinuity between what students experience at home and their experiences in school.

It is hardly necessary to point out U.S. schools and colleges remain substantially culturally and socially out of touch with the needs of African-American students (Dillon, 2011) since there are rarely concrete links made between the curriculum and the social, cultural, and economic environment of African-American learners (Maiga, 1995). In other words, existing curricula in schools are built largely on the thinking, experiences, and desires of white students (Tate, 1995) making these types of learning environments unsuitable for African-American students, according to Woodson’s argument. Apart from the alien contents in all areas of the curriculum, studies also show despite schools’ changing demographics, teachers are drawn predominantly from white European and middle-class backgrounds (Avery & Walker, 1993; Bassey, 1996; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010; Jones & Jones, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009). As Avery and Walker (1993) note, “most [of these] teachers have limited knowledge about cultural and linguistic groups different from their own” (p. 27) (see also Bassey, 1996; Gay, 2010; Jones & Jones, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). As products of their own society, these teachers know very little about Black children’s values and characteristics and have limited knowledge and preparation needed for

working with African-American students (Avery & Walker, 1993; Bassey, 1996; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010; Jones & Jones, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). Consequently, these teachers are often not cognizant of historical forces that work against Black students. The result is often low expectations for African-American students (Athanases, Wahleithner, & Bennett, 2012; Jones & Jones, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009). As Jones and Jones (2002) argue, “Low expectation refers to the beliefs—those of teachers, administrators, parents, students, and policymakers—that African American students cannot achieve at levels equal to or better than their Euro-American peers” (p. 134). Oakes (1987) maintains, the patterns of lower achievement and underrepresentation of Black students in certain academic subjects begin early in the educational process and grow larger the longer students remain in school. Indeed Delpit (1995) argues that academic problems often blamed on Black children in schools are most of all attributable to miscommunication, power imbalance, and inequality. Steele (1992) finds African-American students are devalued more by white teachers than white students and recent studies show some teachers use microaggressions to oppress Black students in schools (Andrews, 2012; Murray, 2013). Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Murray, 2013, p. 61). And Murray (2013) maintains “the educational establishment has adopted microaggression as a tool for responding to student behaviors deemed counter to white, middle-class value system that forms all school processes’ and procedures’ backbone” (p. 62).

### **Empowering Pedagogy: Culturally Responsive Teaching for African-American Students**

According to Tate (1995), “Woodson posit[s] that education built strictly on the thinking, experiences, and desires of [w]hites was inappropriate for African Americans” (p. 166). Just as Woodson argues in the pages of *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, contemporary scholars who examine empowering pedagogy for African-American students have come to the conclusion social context, interpersonal relationships, and emotional-wellbeing are important in student learning (see Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2015; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009) because 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 implication here is that learners as members of families, peer groups, and classrooms located within the larger context of schools, neighborhoods, and communities, are influenced by culture, shared beliefs, values, and norms.

Understanding the influence of these interacting contexts on learners enhances learning effectiveness. This means the “more teachers know about the cultural backgrounds of students and how differences in values, beliefs, language, 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; see also Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). As a remedy for African American underachievement in schools, it has been suggested there should be “concrete links between the curriculum, classroom instruction, and the social, cultural, and economic environment of the learners” (Maiga, 1995, p. 209). This is to say, teachers should make classroom instruction more compatible with the cultural orientations of African-American students in what is often referred to as empowering pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Lipman, 1995; Tate, 1995).

Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as “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). On her part, Ladson-Billings (2009) maintains culturally relevant teaching “is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Indeed, culturally responsive teachers view culture as a set of strengths which can be leveraged effectively to enhance academic and social achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Scholars who have analyzed the work of teachers who practice empowering pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995; Shujaa, 1995; Tate, 1995) conclude such teachers are grounded in pedagogical practices, teaching conceptions, and social relationships that enhance learning experiences by relating the curriculum to students’ backgrounds, establishing connections with families, understanding students’ cultural experiences, establishing connections with local communities, creating shared learning experiences, and recognizing cultural differences as strengths on which to build programs. These teachers understand education is not apolitical, helping students to understand their roles as change agents in society. They inspire, motivate, instill values and knowledge; they nourish racial pride and the need for equality (Delpit, 1995; Fairclough, 2007; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Lipman, 1995). In *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings (2009) tells us the eight teachers she identifies in her study of

successful teachers of African-American students utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning, have strong focus on student learning, are creative, develop cultural competence, and cultivate sociopolitical awareness in their students. In her much acclaimed study, she tells us how one teacher in her research uses rap music as a vehicle for teaching poetry to African-American students leading her students to outperform other schools' students where such an approach was not adopted; another teacher involves parents in her classroom by creating, an "artist or craftsperson-in-residence" program to enable students learn from and share wisdom and knowledge from parents in the community. Parents are often invited to this teacher's classroom to share their cultural knowledge with students. In another instance, a teacher encourages her students to use their home language while learning the standard language resulting in her students' remarkable ability to be fluent in both languages at the end of the school year (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009).

Other studies of culturally responsive teaching (Delpit 1995; Gay, 2010; Gehlbach, 2014; Johnson, Nyamekye, Chazan, & Rosenthal, 2013; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995; Shujaa, 1995; Tate, 1995) record similar academic successes by African-American students in different subject areas. Remarkable qualities possessed by teachers who practice culturally responsive teaching are they are enthusiastic about their work; respectful of parents, and understand Black children's duality of operating in many worlds: that is, the world of their home environment, the world of the school community, and the world of the global community. Other characteristics of empowering teachers are they support culture as an integral part of the school experience, have very few discipline problems in their classrooms, have very high attendance rates, and students score at the highest percentile on standardized tests (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). Accordingly, students in these classes experience academic success, and develop critical competence and critical consciousness. After a careful review of numerous educational studies, Gay (2010) concludes African-American students perform better in schools where teaching is filtered through their own experiences. To be effective, teachers of African-American students must have the courage, confidence, and competence to teach in a culturally responsive manner. Recent scholarship on empowering pedagogy for African American students includes those of Ladson-Billings, 2009, 1995; Gay, 2010; Johnson et al., 2013; Gehlbach, 2014; Hammond, 2015; Delpit, 1995; Tate, 1995; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995; and Shujaa, 1995, to name just a few.

Delpit (1995), in particular, discovers a good number of teachers who use culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms with remarkable success. What all these researchers find is culturally

responsive teaching is good for all children because in culturally responsive classrooms all children are valued and their contributions recognized; teachers are responsive to the needs of all children; they care and value each child; 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 (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Lipman, 1995; Maiga, 1995; Shujaa, 1995). Empowering teachers make good teaching choices by eliciting, motivating, engaging, supporting, and expanding the intellectual abilities of all students (Hammond, 2015).

It is critically important to note culturally responsive teaching cements the connection between social justice and pedagogy, creating the space needed for discussing social change (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Rather than dwell upon or blame their students' lack of resources, these teachers do something about it. In his recent work, an exemplary teacher, Schultz (2007) tells how he co-created with African-American fifth-graders in Chicago a year-long, authentic, transformative and integrated curriculum designed to get a new school building for the students and their community. He maintains, "In their quest to replace their under-funded and marginalized school, the students were 'able to identify root causes of problems' and also ready and willing to implement 'strategies that might bring about substantive changes'" (p. 166). In this case, students in this teacher's fifth-grade class identified the poor condition of their school building as the major problem confronting them. With their problem clearly identified, students began to brainstorm how they would make their problem known to the community. Their suggestions included talking to certain people, making their plight known through publication in newspapers and magazines, and putting pressure on politicians. Those to whom they wanted to talk in the community included law-makers, political leaders, members of the school board, school administrators and staff, and heads of major corporations. To help with publicity, two newspapers were chosen. The students deliberated on ways of putting pressure on members of the community to achieve their goal. Other strategies adopted by the class included, "surveying students, teachers, and staff; petitioning; interviewing people with power in the community; writing letters to the legislature and inviting politicians to the school; holding a press conference; and producing a documentary video" (p. 169). In order to get much-needed publicity for their project, students

wrote letters to the media, to the powers that be, and to political elites in their community. Their story was very quickly picked up by newspapers and the entire community, and the public began to clamor for answers. Indeed, in the process of this exercise students learned cooperative work, how to conduct surveys, how to prepare documentation, and how to take photographs. The assignment also helped students with written assessments, data collection and analyses and with mathematics. In the final analysis, students' hard work was rewarded with a better school building in subsequent years and with numerous public service awards (Schultz, 2007; see also Bassey, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

The central issues which Woodson identifies as responsible for the mis-education of U.S. African-American students are alive and well even today because African-American students are still being disenfranchised by the educational system through the use of "foreign" curriculum and pedagogy (Tate, 1995). However, more recently, scholars have begun to explore teaching strategies that ameliorate mis-education of African-American students by placing students' social context, interpersonal relationships, and emotional wellbeing at the center of learning to correct the inadequacies Woodson criticized some four decades ago.

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