

Value creating education philosophy and the womanist discourses of African American women educators

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ABSTRACT

The paper documents the initiative of two African American women educators who have utilized these theoretical approaches to solve the educational challenges in their respective communities. Marva Collins and Corla Hawkins decided to build schools in their own communities after realizing that the public schools were not equipped to educate minorities. The story of these two women demonstrates that individuals can address systemic injustices in their communities. Collins and Hawkins were not wealthy. What they possessed was a passion for helping others. Their example can inspire more individuals to take steps using liberating philosophies, such as value-creating education and womanist approaches in education, to transform the state of education in their communities.

Keywords: Achievement Gap, African American, Care, Community Development, Societal Inequalities, Soka Education, Womanist.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have written extensively about the educational challenges in predominantly minority, especially African American, communities in the U.S. (see Witherspoon, 1987; Brittain & Kozlak, 2007). Educational inequities have led to a learning crisis in brown and black communities, which is reflected in an achievement gap between African Americans and Whites. This learning crisis has left many children of color behind (Witherspoon, 1987). The urgent nature of the problem calls for new approaches and strong community participation in the efforts aimed at solving the crisis. This paper introduces two educational theories that can help turn around low performing schools. Those left behind have a bleaker economic future, poorer health outcomes, and unstable family situations (see Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller 2007; Frisvold & Golberstein, 2013). The paper documents the initiative of two African American women educators who have utilized these theoretical approaches to solve the educational challenges in their respective communities. Marva Collins and Corla Hawkins decided to build schools in their own communities after realizing that the public schools were not equipped to educate minorities. The story of these two women demonstrates that individuals can address systemic injustices in their communities. Collins and Hawkins were not wealthy. What they possessed was a passion for helping others. Their example can inspire more individuals to take steps using liberating philosophies, like value-creating education and womanist approaches in education, to transform the state of education in their communities.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section II presents the problem statement. In this section, I highlight the extent of the learning crisis globally before narrowing the conversation to issues that also impact African American communities. Part III introduces the Womanist philosophy and practices that have inspired the work of both Collins and Hawkins. These are student-centered approaches to learning that have resulted in the adoption of a culture of care and social justice as its central focus of praxis. The two philosophies utilize humanistic approaches in education. Section IV tells the story of two women who took action to address the learning crisis in their communities, highlighting how these philosophies have informed their efforts and work. The conclusion, in Section V, discusses how I intend to expand on this initial project.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In a 2013 report called *The Global Learning Crisis*, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) argue

that a significant majority of students currently enrolled in school are not learning (UNESCO, 2013). UNESCO Institute of Statistics estimates that as many as 617 million children find themselves in this situation (UIS, 2017). In other words, 6 out of 10 school children and adolescents worldwide are not achieving the minimum proficiency levels in mathematics and reading (UIS, 2017). About 200 million young people leave school without acquiring the skills they need to excel in society; an estimated 775 million adults – a significant majority of whom are women – lack the most basic reading and writing skills globally (UNESCO, 2013). The World Bank Group (2018) indicates that over 80% of second-grade students in Malawi, India, Uganda, Kenya, and Ghana cannot read a single word of a short text. According to the EFA Global Monitoring Report team (2014), the global learning crisis costs governments about \$128 billion annually.

This problem is a worldwide phenomenon that affects both developed and developing nations. However, within-country analysis of the problem in the U.S., Ghana, and Nepal shows that the situation of the disadvantaged is much worse (Heto, Odari, & Sunu, 2020; World Bank Group, 2018). The crisis affects individuals from low-income backgrounds disproportionately. For instance, many students from a low socioeconomic background in the United States perform at a lower level than most of their peers from good socioeconomic backgrounds. In 1966, the Coleman Committee, which was commissioned by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to study how to equalize the educational opportunities for children from different racial, religious, and national origins in the United States, brought to light the significant disparities in the learning outcomes that exist between students from diverse backgrounds. The Coleman Report (1966) shows that in both math and reading, the average 12th-grade black student placed in the 13th percentile of the score distribution. A similar study was conducted 50 years later, in 2016, reveals that the gap persists, albeit with small improvements (Camera, 2016). The average 12th-grade black student only placed in the 19th and 22nd percentile for math and reading, respectively (Camera, 2016). In 2015, 47% Asian and 32% White 12th-grade students achieved NAEP mathematics proficiency scores compared to only 12% Hispanic and 7% black students (NAEP, 2015a). The percentage of students at or above proficiency levels in English is slightly better than Mathematics but not by much. NAEP (2015b) reveals that 17% Blacks and 25% Hispanics 12th-grade students are at or above proficiency in NAEP reading compared to 46% White and 49% Asian students. The White – Hispanic achievement gap in Civic education among 12th graders have narrowed from where it was

in 1998 compared to 2010, but there have been no significant changes in Geography and Economics.

While not encouraging, the data shows that we are making some progress towards eliminating racial and ethnic achievement gaps. However, Hansen, Mann Levesque, Quintero, and Valant (2018) argue that the lack of significant improvement is due to poverty. In other words, economic inequality can explain a substantial part of the achievement gap and why we have failed to close the deficit over the last five decades. Hansen et al. (2018) support their argument by showing how the achievement gaps can be found by accounting for students' eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, our best proxy for poverty, which has not changed much. There is a racial component in the income-based achievement gap in the United States. These two variables, race and income, are closely correlated in America. However, the work of Hansen et al. (2018) shows that the problems causing these gaps are broader and more intractable. There are many ongoing initiatives within the Black community to find solutions to the persistent learning gap. This paper focuses on two of such efforts. In the next section, I introduce the theory and philosophy that informs the two projects.

THE TWO PHILOSOPHIES

Value-Creating Education

Daisaku Ikeda, a prolific Japanese writer, is the leading scholar in the value-creating education community. However, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, an elementary school teacher and principal, developed the value-creating education pedagogy. He wrote the book, entitled *Soka Kyouikugaku Takei* (trans: The System of Value-Creating Pedagogy), in which he advocates for a new philosophy and approach to teaching and learning. His mentee, Josei Toda, edited and published the book in 1930. Together, Makiguchi and Toda started the value-creating education grassroots movement to offer an alternative to the militarized education system that the Japanese government forced upon its citizens. They initiated the movement to create agentic, and critical thinking individuals to challenge the external authorities that were imposing restrictions on them. (Ikeda, 2015). Makiguchi believed that the purpose of education was to help students learn how to manifest unshakeable happiness in their lives and in the lives of others (Ikeda, 2015, p. 85). He believed students could do so as they gained insight into the affairs of society and a genuine connection with the environment and people's humanity, allowing them to consciously participate in the communal life of their societies (Goulah & Ito, 2012). Based on Ikeda's assertions in dialogues

on Value-Creating education, human education is needed to liberate learners from unconscious living enabling them to connect with others and the world around them. According to Ikeda (2010), Makiguchi believes that a critical understanding of social injustices and how social institutions function, is vital to practicing value-creating teaching.

The lived experience of Daisaku Ikeda demonstrates the transformative and life-affirming impact of the value-creating approach to education. Ikeda transformed his illness and hopelessness as a youth into a purpose-driven life because of Toda's mentoring, one of the pioneers of value-creating education. Ikeda met Toda when he was 19 years old after the Second World War. Like many people in Japan at that time, he was disillusioned by the war and had questions about the purpose of life. The war had interrupted his education, and his life-prospects were bleak. Meeting Toda changed the trajectory of his life. Toda taught him, privately, using value-creating pedagogy. In describing his training, Ikeda stated, "For some ten years, every day before work, Josei Toda would teach me a curriculum of history, literature, philosophy, economics, science and organization theory" (Ikeda, 2010, p. 6). Ikeda's quote reflects on the interdisciplinary education he received from Toda. Out of appreciation for the excellent tutelage he received, he created opportunities for other young people to obtain a similar education. The Soka school system consists of schools from kindergarten to universities spread across three continents and seven countries. The goal of Ikeda is to create a ripple effect to contribute to the happiness and development of others in their local communities. He has received over 300 honorary doctorates and professorships from universities worldwide for his social justice, education, and peace work.

In this section, I offer an overview of the origins and goals of the value-creating education pedagogy. I used the life story of Daisaku Ikeda to illustrate the transformative potential of value-creating education. The next section will review the womanist theory and epistemology as it relates to Makiguchi's value-creation education and Ikeda's concept of humanitarian competition.

Womanist Theory

Womanism is a term coined by Alice Walker, the author of "Womanist Prose," to represent an ontological standpoint. She uses womanism to describe the cultural, historical, and political positionality of African American women, a group that has experienced slavery, segregation, sexism, and classism in the U.S. (Perkins, 1983; Collins, 1991; Higginbotham, 1992). Like value-creating education, the womanist theory is

an embodiment of humanism, which seeks the liberation of all people, not just the oppressed (Collins, 1990). Womanist teachers use systemic injustices as educational tools for liberating their students (Bartolome, 1994). They help students understand how different systems of oppression affect them daily, allowing them to rediscover their agency. Edwards, McArthur, and Russell-Owens (2016) argue that the humanizing work of womanist educators occurs in an environment that builds positive self-awareness, allows people to develop connections outside of research and classrooms, spotlights the voices and lived experiences of marginalized groups, and creates a space for beingness that promotes listening and active engagement.

Not all African American teachers are womanists, and not all womanists, are African American, however. Womanism is a politicized appropriation of some black cultural values. The womanist approach is political because womanist educators consciously take on a maternal role in the educational environment to help students develop the skills they need to excel at navigating the harsh realities of racism, sexism, and other “isms” pervasive in society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2013) calls it an enactment of political clarity because the teachers understand the risk involved in teaching the political, but they engage in this labor of love for the sake of leaving the world better for human beings. Since it is a risky and socially constructed approach to being and teaching, individual educators choose to adopt it or not.

Some educators choose to become womanist educators because they see themselves as both ethically and ethnically responsible for fostering a new generation of humanistic leaders, who would dismantle humanly created systems of oppression while creating the opportunity for those who have been oppressed to become happy. Many successful Black women educators exemplify a Womanist epistemology (Fine, 1991; Beauboeuf -Lafontant, 2013), caring for students in a manner that resembles mothering, sometimes with tough love. In order to accomplish their goals, of helping students attain happiness, some of the guidelines that Womanist educators adopt are:

1. Reject a hidden curriculum about race and ability despite socially constructed expectations of subpar performance among students of color.
2. Believe in and confirm the talent and potential of every student, while expecting academic excellence, is key to critical caring with political clarity and color consciousness.
3. Practicing political clarity and color conscious caring without one’s own community is arguably easier than doing so with students from different cultural or racial backgrounds.

4.

The womanist approach shares the same social justice orientation as value-creating education. They want to liberate learners and nurture them into individuals who will consciously take part in the communal activities of their societies. It is a commitment to help everyone, especially those that are vulnerable, to live fulfilled lives, irrespective of how they define it. In some sense, it is to ensure that all people have the knowledge and wisdom to resist attempts to strip them of their dignity. Womanist teachers see themselves as dynamic agents for social justice because they define themselves as having a sense of connection with and responsibility to the human struggle for freedom and justice. Womanist educators often reconcile themselves to the paradox that “peace is the struggle” -- that is, “life is lived on the edge, and that’s when the best self emerges” (Beauboeuf, 1997, p. 150). Put simply, womanist educators realize that they can become the best version of themselves through dealing with and overcoming the systemic injustices that construct their lived realities. Educators, who care about the happiness of their students, do not avoid difficulties; instead, they embrace it as part of their mission (Toynbee & Ikeda, 2007).

THE TWO APPROACHES IN PRACTICE

In this section, I will tell the story of two women who utilize womanist and value-creating education approaches to improve the quality of education in their community. Chicago educator, Marva Collins, established her school for children in the projects, out of frustration with the public school system. After spending several hours and days searching for a school for her children, Collins learned more about the poor state of education in her community. Her experience introduced her to the life of students of color in public schools. Students living in the projects had to deal with additional social problems, like poverty and neighborhood crimes, that the school system was unable to help the students navigate (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013). “Collins realized through her search that the problem was pervasive, meaning she could not escape it. So she decided to provide an alternative; that is the kind of education she wanted for her children” (Collins, 1991).

According to Collins, she acted on her convictions to create an alternative school for students living in the projects. She reasoned that what they needed was an education that validated their lived experiences that made them feel their lives mattered (Collins, 1991). Their objectives were consistent with womanist and value-creating approaches to education. Driven by her desire to help, Collins started a school, the Daniel Hale Williams Westside Preparatory School, in her house. She devoted her time to educating

her students for the sake of their lifelong happiness. She also spent her free time advocating and working to solve problems that beset urban school systems. In 1979, Westside Preparatory School gained national prominence following a story and interview on the television show *60 Minutes*. Collins, who was considered an unorthodox educator, used her interview to spotlight the educational problems in black communities.

The secret of Collins' success was her desire to contribute to the happiness of her students, and her willingness to connect with them as human beings. As she asserted in her book, describing her teaching methods, "I didn't know anything about educational theory, and I have often thought it worked in my favor" (Collins, 1991, p. 47). Without preconceived ideas, she attended to her students as individuals, talked, listened, and identified their individual needs. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2013) contends that womanist educators understand that "oppression is an interlocking system, providing all people with varying degrees of penalty and privilege" (p. 374). Beauboeuf-Lafontant is referring to how systems of oppression have different impacts on people. As a result, educators working with children from subjugated communities need to have the skills to identify and differentiate their lessons for all students.

THE PRACTICE OF MATERNAL CARING

"In both the lay and academic analyses of Exemplary Teachers committed to social justice, the maternal image is particularly visible in the pedagogy of African American women teachers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2013, p. 374).

Collins viewed her ability to act as a mother to her students as a strength rather than a weakness. Caring for students, like a mother, enabled her to make decisions with a clear sense of purpose, which is to create a structure in which she could educate and shelter her students/children from oppressive systems. Indeed, in the Ten Teaching Commandments that she developed for her own faculty, the first reads, "Thou shalt love the students as you would love your own children" (Collins, 1992, p. 178). The maternal approach to education from a womanist perspective is an empowering tool for both male and female teachers. "Rather than envision mothering primarily in terms of women's individual relationships with men and children ... the African American teachers regarded mothering as a communal responsibility" (Casey, 1990). Casey's introduction to the African idea that it takes a village to raise a child and that children are a gift to the whole community and, therefore, the entire community needs to work together to care for and nurture them. The communal approach to care, other mothering, provides the space for students

and teachers to develop trust-based relationships and contribute to each other's happiness (Watson, 2018).

Similarly, Corla Hawkins, another Chicago teacher, exemplifies the womanist and value-creating approaches to education. Like Collins, Hawkins began her school, *Recovering the Gifted Child Academy*, after seeing many children from low-income backgrounds fail because the public-school system did not provide them the kind of intervention and resources they needed. She embraced her role as an educator and a mother figure in the life of her students, earning her the nickname "Momma Hawk." Her students, mostly middle-school-aged, affectionately called her "Momma Hawk" because she cared about their emotional and psychological well-being in addition to their intellectual well-being (Valente, 1996).

Hawkins' commitment to education emanates from her desire to be an ally of those among us who are vulnerable. She noted, "I felt I could take the dysfunctional family structure these children were used to and replace it with a new family structure that stresses success, personal achievement and self-esteem. God gave me a dream - to take care of children of rejection" (Valente, 1996, p. 375). This quote provides an insight into Hawkins' motivation for starting her school. She described it as a God-given dream, which implies that she sees it as a noble mission that a divine being conferred on her. Taking care of students from difficult family situations gave her the satisfaction that she is fulfilling her life purpose. The quote also offers insight into Hawkins' philosophy of education. It shows that she sees her work as providing a nurturing family for her students. School is an extension of the family, not an isolated institution that produces robotic individuals. This view aligns with Makiguchi's advice to teachers to dethrone themselves and work with students as equal members of the human family (Heffron, 2018).

Womanist educators develop high expectations for their students and work to make students believe in themselves. Hawkins believed in her students and found different ways to communicate that to them. A former student revealed that she helped them see their potential. Foster (1997) explains that, "Having a teacher who believed in him helped him focus on his priorities while avoiding the social problems in his segregated neighborhood" (p. 379). Similarly, Collins expressed her appreciation for her students often, and consciously tried to find something admirable about each student so that she could compliment them (Collins & Tamarkin, 1990). She was convinced that any student, even a slow learner, could become an excellent student in the company of a good teacher since good teachers make students realize their inherent potential and help them develop the tools for polishing and manifesting them (Collins, 1990).

CONCLUSION

Scholars have, for a long time, documented the appalling state of education in black and brown communities in America extensively. As these studies show, the poor state of education, coupled with the precarious financial situations of black and brown people, undermines the ongoing efforts to close the achievement gap. While students, from privileged backgrounds receive better training, and earn better scores on proficiency tests than their black and brown peers, this essay shows that educators are taking action on their own to solve the problem. These individuals are utilizing different approaches and theories. This article discusses two such approaches. The story of the two women discussed in this essay offers proof that individuals can make a difference. Collins and Hawkins were not wealthy. What they had was a passion for helping others. We can learn from them the spirit of service to one's local community. Their example can inspire more individuals to take steps using liberating philosophies, like value-creating education approaches and womanist education to transform the state of education in their communities. However, in order to succeed they will need to develop a critical understanding of the problem(s) and a genuine commitment to social justice. I intend to assess the effectiveness of such efforts. I will study them to understand what motivates the people, how they approach their work, what makes their methods unique and compelling.

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