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Book Review

Sarah Hobson

Literacy Teachers for Social Justice Research Group, St. Louis, MO

sarahhobson@hotmail.com

Ginwright, Shawn A. *Black in School: Afrocentric Reform, Urban Youth, and the Promise of Hip-Hop Culture*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004. 136pp. ISBN 080774431X, \$22.95.

Achieving equal education for black and white students is no easy task. From slavery through Plessy vs. Ferguson in 1896 and the Jim Crow laws of reconstruction, segregation has been built into the American social fabric. It was not until Brown vs. the Board of Education in 1954 that the Supreme Court recognized what African Americans had known all along: separate but equal had prolonged inequality. Racial apartheid and violence had never afforded African Americans the chance to fund schools adequately, much less to catch up with the education in long-established white schools. Similarly, 1980s multiculturalism and school desegregation proved unsuccessful in combating systemic educational inequalities. Thus, many predominantly black urban schools continue to deteriorate within their communities.

Into this historical context has stepped Dr. Shawn Ginwright, resident of East Oakland since 1994, director of after-school programs for West Oakland youth, currently Associate Professor of Black Studies at San Francisco State University. With *Black in School*, he insists we critique the influence of Black Power and Black Nationalism on Afrocentric ideology, the locus of early multiculturalism. According to Ginwright, Black Power sought to unite black masses around an African world view to create one racial identity. Black Nationalism rejected integration in pursuit of controlling societal institutions. Both movements invested in counteracting white supremacy through black solidarity and sovereignty. Thus, racial unity took precedence over acknowledging economic struggles and differences within the African American population.

Ginwright focuses on one Afrocentric reform effort at McClymonds High School in West Oakland, California, to emphasize that unless schools address the complexities of student identities, democracy will remain at risk. He explores the economic, cultural, and political history of Oakland. The 1848 Gold Rush and subsequent waves of prosperity enabled Oakland sufficient economic stability to sustain the growth of a suburban black middle class. However, the foothold of working-class blacks in West Oakland gradually eroded under the legislation of white power brokers. Unemployment, drugs, and violence came to plague both the community and the school population.

A 1985 comprehensive study of Oakland Unified School District confirmed that Oakland schools were among the worst in the country. When McClymonds was threatened with closing, Oakland's BUFFER, the Black United Front for Education

Reform, came to the rescue. Together with the principal, they determined that unequal district funding had left students without basic materials and safe facilities, without access to courses recognized by four-year colleges, and without adult support. Their objectives enumerated, they enlisted African American scholars, educators, and lawyers in an effort to garner professional expertise and community-wide support.

Unfortunately, Ginwright argues, these middle class consultants convinced BUFFER's original members to shift their focus toward Afrocentric reform. They supported inculcating "African-centered cultural precepts" to strengthen blacks' ethnic identity and academic success (p. 82). With Egypt as the origin of civilization, teachers were to root curricula "in the cultural image and interests of people of African ancestry" (p. 82).

The experiment did not work. Despite thousands of dollars spent between 1992 and 1996, students saw very little relevance in studying an African program that did not address their immediate economic and social needs or validate their hip-hop culture. Many in the community felt like Mr. C., who said they'd been given a Band-Aid for their deep gash and then told "Okay, I gave you a Band-Aid, why didn't you stop the bleeding?" (p. 96).

Ginwright makes a compelling case for why the middle-class version of Afrocentric reforms did not work. Drawing from Youth United for Change and other successful multigenerational organizations, Ginwright insists schools create political space for inner-city minorities by empowering them to employ critical literacy in transforming institutional inequalities. Through youth-adult partnerships built on his guiding principles, Ginwright believes a community can organize to promote systemic change (p. 124). For example, seventy youth from Books Not Bars convinced the California Board of Corrections to reallocate prison funding to schools. If the reforms at McClymonds High School had included and affirmed student voices, Ginwright concludes, the district never would have sacrificed thousands of dollars over many years on non-transformative curricula. Like Ginwright, other researchers such as Okihiro (in Parker, 2003), suggest that minorities who pursue justice "preserve and advance the principles and ideals of democracy" (p. 22).

Unfortunately, although Ginwright mentions a social studies class he teaches in which students compare hip-hop political lyrics to political views in textbooks, most of his examples come from outside the classroom. Thus, he leaves educators to grapple with how they will implement his criteria for critical literacy in designing socially just classrooms. One wonders why, after going to such lengths to profile West Oakland's racial, political, and class relations, Ginwright does not make a case for what BUFFER could have done at McClymonds. Surely he knows that history and English curricula can link the African world struggle to students' everyday struggles for political, economic, and social liberation. Would he not agree that students could have gained empowerment from the study of Oakland's historically black community and its collective assault on white supremacy? Could not students reinvent hip-hop as an ethical vehicle for the development of their own political ideas? Is he not committed to affording students of every ethnicity the opportunity to envision themselves as a new generation of social transformers?

Ginwright challenges the middle-class notion, black and white, that urban students just need to work harder for success. He demonstrates that students can become

critically literate and empowered when schools and communities agree on enlisting students to determine their needs. Despite his omissions, he calls for educators to do the hard work of helping students uncover the real systemic truths behind urban poverty. A book for serious educational transformers, *Black in School* encourages a deeper conversation about practical applications for the next advance of democracy in schools and ultimately in society.

References

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