

## **Being Black in U.S. Urban Schools: No Assumptions**

**LaVada Taylor Brandon**

**Mary J. Didelot**

Purdue University Calumet

### Abstract

To be an African-American student attending a school dominated by working class, urban, minority learners means failure. Working class African-American students are not experiencing education, they are colliding with education. These collisions will continue as long as they are facilitated by the assumptive dominant theories regarding African- American students' educational experiences. One strategy to constructively disrupt these assumptive theoretical notions buried within current theory is to look to a working class, urban African-American student's qualitative longitudinal formation of identity as she progresses from student to teacher within the learning process as categorized by Bateson (1972). The understanding gleaned from this autobiographic self can explain the complexity of identity formation for this population, and refute assumptive theory.

### Introduction

What does it mean to be an African-American student situated in schools dominated by working class, urban minority learners? It means failure. The foundation for the response is solidly grounded in the statistics: In the U.S., 50% of all African-American children in urban public schools drop out (Lomotey, 1990). In California's Oakland Unified School District alone, 53% of the African-American population accounted for 80% of the school system's suspensions, 71% of those suspended were classified as students with special needs, and a D+ was the overall grade point average for all African-American student (Perry, 1998). In New York City, one representative study indicated that of the urban working class minority adolescents in a targeted high school during a six -year period, 87% of 1,436 of adolescents enrolled in the ninth grade during one academic year had been suspended or expelled (cited in Kozol, 1995). Only 20% of those adolescents received a diploma (cited in Kozol, 1995). In an attempt to explain the school experiences of students of color in urban situations, Kahlenberg (2001/2002) noted "peers in low-income schools are less likely to do homework, more likely to watch television, and more likely to cut class, and less likely to graduate" (p. 15). Working class, urban African-American adolescents are not experiencing education, they are colliding with education.

The collisions will continue as long as they are facilitated by the assumptive dominant theories regarding African-American students' educational experiences. Unfortunately for the future of the citizenry of this nation, the assumptions of what it

means to be a working class, urban Black student permeate current thought (Swanson, 1991; Lippman, 1996). These assumptions in meaning have failed. They have failed education, and they have pathetically failed working class, urban Black students. The theories have ignored identity development. The theories have given no attention to the core reason for the creation of the educational system: the growth of self-knowledge.

One strategy to constructively disrupt these assumptive theoretical notions buried within current theory is to look to a working class, urban African-American student's single subject qualitative longitudinal formation of identity as she progresses from student to teacher within the learning process as categorized by Bateson (1972). Through this voice, the experience of education's role in the development of identity can be examined. The understanding gleaned from this autobiographic self, according to the posturing of Taubman (1993), can explain the complexity of identity formation because "the emergent self, through a relationship to other subjects, develops a sense of a core self, then a subjective self, and finally a verbal self" (p. 295). This voice can also refute assumptive theory.

Bateson (1972) explains the learning process in terms of the following levels:

- 🕒 Zero Learning: there is no awareness of right or wrong for the learner;
- 🕒 Learning I: right or wrong alternatives are now possible for the learner;
- 🕒 Learning II: conflict arises for the learner as a lesson learned is applied to a different context;
- 🕒 Learning III: the resulting tension from the Learning II conflict creates double binds that cause the learner to gravitate to an understanding that rights and wrongs are derivatives of a context within a context influenced by time, values, and/or culture; and
- 🕒 Learning IV: an unattainable level that the evolution of human ontogeny will never reach.

To illustrate Bateson's (1972) theory, the experiences of a female child who migrates from the lessons learned within the culture of the home to the obscured cultural lessons learned in the world abroad.

#### Bateson (1972) Illustrated

Using this example, at the level of Zero Learning, the child is like a newborn baby who is unaware of the differences between right and wrong. The child's being in Zero Learning is short lived. Soon, the child cries. That cry is the beginning of her move from Zero Learning to Learning I. Learning I is an enculturation process where the child learns the rules of the game of life enforced in her immediate environmental surroundings. The child grasps an understanding of behavior and response. She learns that when she cries out, her mother will respond. The mother will change her soiled clothes, provide nourishment for her hungry belly, and/or hold her tenderly. By the time she becomes a toddler, she is rewarded with a smile, a hug, or a candy treat if she behaves correctly. If, by some strange mishap, her behavior is incorrect, the mother will

give a worried look that will alert the child of the wrong. The child would much rather feel her mother's smile than her worry. This signifies the plateau for Learning I: learning to discriminate between right and wrong.

In Learning II, however, the child learns that the world will not respond affectionately like mother to her cries. The rules in this context are different. Thus, learning the rules must become her first task, so she can play the game correctly and feel a facsimile of her mother's affection in this unknown, strange world. Unlike her mother's house, the rules in this world consistently shift and change. The unseen influencers of time, cultures, and/or values force the child into double bind choices such as "Do not do this, or you will be punished" or "Do this, or you will be punished." The child is caught in an emotionally complicated web. She is confused and frustrated. She is terrified of losing her mother's love. It is not the punishment she fears, but rather the possibility of abandonment. The child is in a state of complicated contradictions: She learns that right may be wrong and wrong may very well be right. The child learns that rules are social, cultural, and arbitrary.

The tension that results pushes the child to the next level, Learning III. As the child uses all her efforts to adapt to a new understanding, she is faced with choices. She learns to maybe perhaps laugh off the contradictions. The child can, though, learn to navigate her new cultural terrain by will fully understanding that the self, or the identifiable you, is merely a mutational signifier within the context of a context. The child learns to redefine herself for her own purposes. The child will "literally rise to a new level of existence, and then look down and recall, perhaps fondly, [her] past consciousness, fraught with what [she] thought was an irresolvable contradiction" (Berman, 1981, p. 231). Because the child now knows that which is real is merely, as Hegel stated, "the outward manifestation of an idea" (cited in Marx, 1956, p.8), she can now relish in her ability to reexamine the credibility of real facts embedded within Learning I and Learning II while dismantling ossified truths of self and others. Again, Learning IV is unattainable.

Bateson's (1972) analysis of learning levels, then, provides a theoretical framework to tease out what it means to be a working class Black in the U.S. urban schools. Thus, this conceptual framework generates another dimension for disrupting and understanding rhetoric that seeks to either glorify or demonize a race and class of working class, urban Black students. The formation of identity from student to teacher for Respondent A from a personal interview will be structured as follows:

- ⌚ Learning I: *School Days' Influence of Mama's Love*: explores how a mother's love enabled the child to understand good and bad, reward and punishment, and the importance of schooling in a racially de-segregated (re-segregating practices in allegedly desegregated schools) space;
- ⌚ Learning II: *Sankofa Snared by Double Binds*: illuminates the paradox between the importance of schooling learned by many African American learners and the education they receive in most urban schools;

- ⌚ Learning III: *Being Present*: discusses how being a working class, urban Black student within the context of the U.S. forges space and place for transcending reified notions of knowing and identity signification; and
- ⌚ Level IV: the unattainable level will not be discussed.

### Learning I: *School Days' Influence of Mama's Love*

Respondent A begins her Batesonian journey with her first formal educational experience:

In 1976, I enrolled in a Nashville elementary school as a first grader. Nineteen seventy-six was a very eventful year. In addition to being our country's two hundredth birthday, 1976 marked the beginning of forced busing in my neighborhood schools. Forced busing meant that early each morning Black elementary school children would rise to board buses that would carry them to their newly racially desegregated white school while white high school students would board buses destined for the Black side of town.

The purpose of the busing mandate was to achieve racial balance in our southern community public schools. Racial balance meant that the student body population had to be at least 70% white and 30% Black.

I cannot recall the actual percentage of Black children who were bused to my elementary school in 1976. But, I can recall there were only three Black students in my first grade classroom, and I was one of them. We had a Black teacher, Mrs. Enuf [pseudonym] whom I will never forget. Forever etched in my memory is how evil she was toward her African-American students. As a schoolgirl, I remember thinking that Mrs. Enuf was mean to us because she did not like Black people. In my eyes, Mrs. Enuf's ill treatment towards us reflected white supremacist logic. Consequently, my Black classmates and I referred to Mrs. Enuf as an Oreo, black on the outside, but white on the inside.

In class, Mrs. Enuf would constantly paddle her Black students on our hands and humiliate us before the class by sending us to the corner. Her actions toward my white classmates were totally different. These white students never seemed to do anything wrong and always ended their day with a candy treat.

I realized early that the white kid's way of responding and interacting with our teacher must have been the right way. Although I was clearly aware that there was nothing I could do to make Mrs. Enuf like me, I learned early that if I could read and do my class assignments then I would avoid some humiliation and, perhaps on occasion, receive some candy. I believe the possibility of the candy treat more than the avoidance of humiliation enticed my desire to do what was necessary to receive some of the pleasure afforded the white children. In spite of Mrs. Enuf's hateful ways, the sharing of candy was a signification of personal

gratification. Although it was clear that she did not like me, at least, with the exchange of candy, my taste buds would be satisfied.

In this educational environment, Respondent A reached Bateson's (1972) Learning I very quickly. The Respondent learned to respond appropriately to the teacher to not only avoid punishment from time to time, but to receive a reward. The Respondent learned to move to the norm, even though this was not her normal behavior. Bateson (1972) described this learning: "an entity gives at Time 2 a different response from what it gave in Time 1" (p. 287). Many inducements and coercions are used to compel individual movement toward the norm (Foucault, 1977; Ransom, 1977). This manipulation is usually not achieved through blatant brut force, but far more subtly, through benefits. The result of this manipulation in response becomes even more obvious as Respondent A continued her story:

And, for me, it was the smell of lemon drops and Jolly Ranchers that prompted me to be an A+ reader. But here was one slight problem: I was dyslexic. I could not see or form words from left to right. In my world, words came to me from right to left. One would have thought my teacher would have noticed my deficiency and seen to it that I received help, but Mrs. Enuf did not. Instead, she ridiculed and punished me for my inability to read.

Wanting desperately to obtain my candy treat, I devised a plan. In our reading sessions, Mrs. Enuf would read aloud to us from our readers and, subsequently, each of us would be responsible for reading in our reading group a sentence that she had read. Usually, the person sitting next to her would read the first sentence. Although I could not read, I could count, thanks to *Sesame Street*. I would count the number of persons between her and myself and then count the number of sentences to determine which sentence was my responsibility to read. I had a keen memory, so, when it was my turn to read, I would simply repeat back to her what she had said.

Schooling went pretty well for me for a while. I was moved up from the lowest reading group to the highest one. Every week I received my candy treat. Yes, things were going pretty good until one day Mama decided that she wanted me to read a book she had purchased for me. The title of the book was *Harold and His Purple Crayon*.

Initially, my rote reading was going smoothly. My mother, like my teacher, would read to me first and then I would repeat to her what she had said. Never once did my memory let me down, until Mama started to skip around, pointing to words she expected me to know. Oh my God! I was caught red-handed: not by my teacher, but by my *Mama*.

Because I knew Mama loved me dearly and I loved her, there was nothing in this world I wanted to do to disappoint her. When she figured out that I had been

cheating and, most importantly, lying to her about my ability to read, she was bitterly upset and disappointed. I was devastated. For the price of a Jolly Rancher, I had forfeited Mama's love.

The next morning, Mama took off from work so that she could pay Mrs. Enuf a visit. Mama wanted to know why I had not learned to read. I knew that I was in deep trouble for faking. And, judging by the cleft that was nicely etched in Mama's chin, a telltale sign that she was enraged, Mrs. Enuf was in pretty deep trouble too. My mother stormed into Mrs. Enuf's classroom demanding answers. Mrs. Enuf was shocked by my mother's presence. Stuttering, she informed my mother that she was unaware of my inability to read and suggested that I be retained in the first grade. Even more infuriated by this suggestion, my mother replied, "No." My mother then stormed out of Mrs. Enuf's class, taking me with her. That evening, Mama began to teach me how to read. You see, to Mama, reading was the beginning of everything. In her opinion, if I could read, then I could dream. If I could dream, then I could achieve anything I could imagine. As I reflect on these events, I now realize that my mother's desire for me to read came from our family's history as descendants of enslaved and non-literate African-Americans.

Mindful of this history, Mama often would tell me stories about how Mother Dear, my great grandmother, had no education and how Mama Annie, my grandmother, only obtained a fourth grade education. She would tell me that due to the way things were back then-Mother Dear born into slavery and Mama Annie only one generation removed from slavery-education was not something easily acquired by Black folks.

Initially, Respondent A's rote reading became the phenomenon "in which an item in the behavior of the organism becomes a stimulus for another item of behavior" (Bateson, 1972, p. 228). Then, as her Mama began skipping around the page, the confusion caused by the lack of context markers caused "disruption, extinction, [and] inhibition of 'completed' learning follow[ing] a change of reinforcement" (Bateson, 1972, p. 288). As Respondent A grows from this critical moment, she painfully realizes that her desire for her Mama's love was far greater than her desire for Mrs. Enuf's candy. Bateson (1972) would recognize this as a classic example of his "context of instrumental reward and instrumental avoidance (p. 279).

Respondent A's Mama's attitude also demonstrated how descendants of enslaved and non-literate African-Americans were, after the Emancipation, consumed with the desire for school (Davis, 1983). Schooling, or book learning, was important because

It was desire prompted by curiosity born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer

than the highway of Emancipation and low, steep, and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life (Dubois, 1903, p.6).

The attributes of education were not just a part of the conversation of enslaved and freed black folks; former slave holders also proclaimed that "learning [would] spoil the best nigger in the world" (Davis, 1983, p.100). Consequently, because slavery was replaced with sharecroppers and tenant farmers, and the Emancipation Proclamation with black codes, generations of freed Blacks were denied an education (Franklin and Moss, 1994). Many Southern Blacks knew that

There were scattered opportunities for both free Blacks and slaves to become literate prior to the 1830's throughout the nation. However, education for Blacks was viewed as dangerous after the fiery Appeal of David Walker of 1829 and [the] 1830 slave revolt of Nat Turner-both literate men. After the 1830's, all the Southern states instituted laws prohibiting the education of Blacks. (Perkins, 1981, p.16)

It was at this Learning I level where Respondent A learned her most important lesson: If a person can read, then he or she can receive a good education. Taking this one step further, if an individual can receive a good education, then he or she can be anything and do anything, because "knowledge unfits a child to be a slave" (Dubois, 1992, p.698). Respondent A continued her personal learning journey.

Consequently, out of 13 siblings, my Mama was the first person in our family to attend college. She is very proud of her education. As for me, because I was desperately in need of Mama's love, I learned to read quickly. Today, I am an avid reader.

In 1991, I began teaching at an urban school in New Orleans, LA. All of my pupils were seventh grade African-American learners. None of them could read above a third grade level. Several of them could not read at all. In this highly impoverished school, our educational resources were very scanty. The books I was assigned to teach with were more than 25 years old. I was only 21, so these old books meant I was teaching from books older than me! We had ragged desks and bookshelves and a mutilated chalkboard with only a few pieces of chalk. My teacher's desk was just as dilapidated as the rest of the classroom ruins. These horrible conditions were made even more complicated by students who were in the seventh grade and either could not read, were reading much below grade level, or were uninterested in learning American history.

My teaching assignment was to teach my students seventh grade American Studies. In spite of our horrible conditions, I was firmly committed to teaching my students. A little Black girl, from a Nashville elementary school, living inside

of me kept telling me it was not their fault that they could not read. Because of her voice and the love I began to develop for these children, I began to see these students as my children, birthed to me through the lineage of our race.

In an effort to give to them what my mother had given to me, the gift of reading, I began to spend additional time tutoring students. Because of my experience with them, I decided something had to be done to motivate black children in urban public schools. How and why was it possible for 12, 15, 17 year-olds persons to be in the seventh grade and not be able to read?

Perhaps in some way, they reminded me of myself. If it had not been for the influence of my Mama's love, I too may have been an adult and unable to read. I devised a new plan. I decided to go to graduate school and pursue a Master's degree in Educational Administration and supervision of Instruction and then a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. With a Doctorate of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction, I could facilitate the designing of curriculum to the betterment, and not the detriment, of Black children in urban school systems. My dream was that they too could have the opportunity to read, dream, and achieve anything.

When Respondent A began teaching in the poor urban school setting, the context markers from her elementary learning experiences came from the shadows and started influencing her commitment to teaching African-American children. Bateson (1972) maintains that within these context markers "human life and probably that of many other organisms, there occurs signals whose major function is to classify contexts" (p. 289). The context markers serve as cues for behavior. For Respondent A, the context markers were poor urban Black children who could not read. As the students became Respondent A's perceived children, a lineage developed. Because of this lineage,

As one rises, all must rise, and as one falls, all must fall. Having our feet on the rock of freedom, we must drag our brethren from the slimy depths of slavery, ignorance and ruin. Every one of us should be ashamed to consider himself free, while his brother is a slave. (Perkins, 1981, p. 5)

### Learning II: *Sankofa Snared by Double Binds*

Continuing to share her memories, Respondent A remembered the beginning of her professional education and career goals.

In July of 1996, I arrived on Louisiana State University's campus. My academic mission was to discover a method that would help eradicate the mis-education of urban African-American children. I became convinced, more than ever; that the reason why my urbanized babies had been allocated limited opportunities for

academic success was because they were poor. Never once did I think that the reason they were poor was because they were Black.

Realizing I was a key participant in the continuation of educational disparities marked my first encounter with double binds. But, it was certainly not to be my last. After reading Michelle Fine's book, *Framing Dropouts*, I came across a student's quote that haunted me for weeks. Initially, Fine's words resonated with my experiences as a teacher in an urban setting. However, after reading an interview excerpt by a student named Ronald, I became very disturbed.

Through his comment, Ronald expressed an awareness that having a high school diploma does not necessarily mean upscale economic conditions. His words shattered the promise of my "if-then" thinking: If you get an education, then you can dream and be anything you want to be. In spite of this student's very insightful words and my experience with Michael Apple and Paulo Freire, I continued seeking answers trying to understand what could be done to motivate students to want to learn. Without giving any consideration to the urbanized cultural context from which this student spoke, I kept searching.

My desire to know took me to a place I never knew existed-especially in 1996, 42 years after the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision. Through my continued studies, I learned that historically racism also played a huge role in the oppression of Black children and the education they were destined to receive. Reading *Understanding Curriculum as a Racial Text*, edited by curriculum theorists Louis Castnell and William Pinar, aided in my understanding of this craziness.

Based on what I had learned about classism and racism, I now came to understand that, because of their race, most urban Black children were destined to fail in U.S. public schools. I was made aware through the readings of Michael Apple, K. B. M. Donaldson, Paulo Freire, and Maxine Greene that it was by mainstream intent, for the purpose of maintaining the status quo, these children, more often than not, found themselves illiterate and mis-educated. Worse still, because their bodies bore the color black making them targets of covert racism and classism, those who gained literacy were not guaranteed a college education or gainful employment.

Although I felt that the theories on the influence of racism in education were valid, my own life seemed to contradict my new-found hypothesis: Being Black equated with being poor and non-literate. If being Black is the beginning of the slippery slope to poverty and illiteracy, then why was I not raised poor and illiterate?

As I thought about the theories of Louis Castnell and William Pinar, Michelle Fine, and Toni Morrison, I realized that the reason why I was not raised poor or illiterate was because my parent, like other newly, Black middle class parents of

the 1970's, readily gave legitimacy to America's schooling and forced me to comply. Requiring that I make good grades by finding the right answers to questions posed by my teachers or their accompanying ditto sheets, my parents, influenced by a hidden curriculum, prepared me to likewise enter the world of the middle-class.

Cameroon McCarthy's work also helped me to better understand inherent breeches in being Black. As a consequence of reading McCarthy's chapter, I became more mindful of my own nonsynchronous identities and the presence of double binds inherent in the representation of my race, sex, and class. These are classifications influenced by what I term societal persuasions. Through societal persuasion, Black carries signification that is often contrary to the beliefs of those who are marked with the skin of blackness. Here, I am reminded of David Sibley's *Geographies of Exclusion* and Cornel West's *Keeping Faith Philosophy and Race in the United States*. Both authors talk about the construction of race and its connection with filth and dirt in the imagination of white supremacist ideology.

Through I was pleased with all the intellectual stimulation I received as I grappled with this new and very different knowledge, my attempt to practice any one of them placed me consistently in a double bind. While at home visiting with family and friends, I would attempt to share with them my new-found theory that race is a social construction and that we should try not to focus so much on Black or white, but on various modes of systematic institutionalized oppression like classism that makes racism possible. They would frown and remind me not to forget that I was Black, as if articulating anything including white people was a betrayal of racial solidarity. Or, when I discussed with a particular aspiring white academic how mis-education was not only a characteristic inherent in urban school settings, but was made possible through banking techniques which affected all children, both Black and white, she reminded me that there were scientific explanations showing that Black children learned differently than white children. It seemed no matter what I said or whom I was talking to, all conversations would lead back to race. And yet this identity...race...was a walking bundle of contradictions causing me to remain caught in a double bind.

One of the first concepts recognized by Respondent A as a double bind snare as identified by Bateson's (1972) Learning II is the hidden curriculum. Jackson describes the hidden curriculum as the "norms and values that are implicitly, but effectively, taught in schools and that are not usually talked about in teachers' statements of ends and goals" (cited in Apple, 1990, p. 84). Through a hidden curriculum, teachers were students' "first boss." Banking techniques (Freire, 1971), where information was deposited into students' like the empiricists' empty vessels, taught learners not to question the creators of knowledge but to succumb to the will of knowing, or fail. In essence, this prepared students to assume their economic position in the *status quo*.

The hidden curriculum continues to perpetuate the social class hierarchy (Anyon, 1983). Particularly, in citing the influence of social class on schools segregated by wealth, Anyon (1983) found that in working class and lower class schools, students were prepared to occupy lower rungs of the U.S. socioeconomic ladder with lessons that mandated that they follow steps. Middle class learners were prepared to assume bureaucratic positions with curricula that required them to get the right answer. Affluent learners were prepared for intellectual and professional positions with pedagogical practices that necessitated engagement in independence and creativity. Further, executive elite schools prepared their students to assume positions of governance with lessons that required them to analyze and plan. This double bind of classism and race is still alive, well, and thriving in urban school curriculum.

The respondent also found her thoughts of Bateson's (1972) double bind phenomenon reflected in the work of Fine (1991). In this ethnographic study, Fine (1991) looked to dropping out in a different light. Instead of using the perspective of cultural deprivation, or the "blaming the victim" tactic used by many neo-conservatives, she highlighted the influence of high student-teacher ratios, low expectations of teachers and administrators, and community inequities as essential factors involved in pushing urban African-American and Latino students out of schools.

One particular case that personally brought Bateson's (1972) double bind to the forefront for Respondent A was the case of Ronald cited in Fine's (1991) work. Ronald recalled, "Every time I get on the subway I see this drunk and I think, 'not me.' But then I think, 'Bet he has a high school degree!'" (cited in Fine, 1991, p. 13). It should be unsettling to all educators that a high school student initial reaction to an alcoholic homeless person is that this hopeless individual holds a diploma.

As disturbing to Respondent A is the strategy employed in the U.S. after the Emancipation Proclamation to resolve the "Negro" education problem through the creation of a cheap, semi-skilled industrial work force. Watkins (2001) wrote:

Resolving the "Negro question" meant Blacks could not be totally frozen out of social participation. They would have to be politically socialized, given hope, and given at least minimal access to survival. A compradore or middle class, as advocated by Booker T. Washington, of Black entrepreneur, clergy, clerks, and teachers was indispensable to the new formula. The Black American population would have their preachers, morticians, insurance agents, postal employees, and beauticians in the segregated society. Simultaneously, capitalist labor economics required an abundance of semi-feudal share-cropper labor alongside cheap semiskilled and skilled industrial labor. American industrialism would be built on the backs of Black labor (p. 21-22).

Further substantiating Bateson's (1972) double bind snag for Respondent A, bastardized notions of blackness explicated through scientific and psychosexual means

gave credence and justification for Black's predestined role in America's capitalistic society (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001). This process was made possible through curricula that prepared students to be either working poor or middle class. In this process, neither blatant racism nor classism was permitted. Rather the rules justifying continual class and racial inequity were allowed through the covert means of curricula. For example, schooled with lessons that teach young people to mechanistically follow steps (Anyon, 1980), in America's "chocolate cities" (West, 1993b), shifting demands from a low skilled, minimum education, manufacturing based economy to a highly skilled, more educated service based economy severely limited the job opportunities of many urban dwellers (Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Kozol, 1991; West, 1993). Consequently, as young black urban workers attempted to find jobs, they were denied not because of the color of their skin, but because of a lack of education and limited job skills (Bell, 1992).

Another perspective which profoundly effected Respondent A's perception of Bateson's (1972) double bind was Africanism (Morrison, 1990). "European Americans are what they displace onto others, and their self representation requires repression of the 'other'. [Thus] the very complexion of one's skin, the nature of one's blood, and one's view of the world are all experienced racially" (Casnell and Pinar, 1993, p. 13). This is the phenomenon of Africanism. American Africanism is made possible

through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette. American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom (Morrison, 1990, p. 7).

Through all of these aforementioned spaces and pockets of the double bind, Ronald's perception of the homeless drunk with the high school diploma (Fine, 1991) becomes even more important and worthy of the attention of professional educators.

For Respondent A, the interplay of race, sex, and class played an integral role in her experiences in her journey through Bateson's Learning II. These three factors are all influential in the marking of social difference and the casting of outsiders (McCarthy, 1991). The complexities of identification are based in the theory that as one identity carries one signification, another identity housed in the same body may carry a contradicting social signification (McCarthy, 1991). For example, being Black, heterosexual, working class, and female, Respondent A has several identities. Each segment of this identity listing simultaneously holds power and powerless positionalities for both the view and the viewed (Gates, 1988).

Because of the interplay of varied nonsynchronous identities, static understanding of race, class, and gender oppression are unable to persist (McCarthy, 1991). As explanation of this phenomenon, the following statement clarifies,

I agree with those who argue that one's positionality as woman or person of color, for example, provides a unique perspective on oppression and domination, but I prefer to trouble the categories of oppressed and oppressor to reflect their complexity. No longer does this dualistic [oppressed/oppressor] capture the shifting power relations and subject positions in which we all participate (Kohli, 1998, p.513).

For example, speaking specifically about education disparities of African-American students, McCarthy explains how, after the Civil Rights Movements, a rising black middle class sought a "quality education [which] readily granted legitimacy to the existing relations of cultural selection, competition and so forth" (McCarthy, 1991, p. 89). However, Black middle class expectations of high academic attainment and social mobility were threatened by the migration of a poor Black population. Teachers began to respond negatively to the influx of the Black underclass, and consequently the school system and the standards of education in Black suburban schools declined (McCarthy, 1991). Middle class Black parents began taking their children out of public school settings and blaming the presence of poor Black children for lowering academic standards. Specifically,

To put the matter directly, black PMC [professional middle class] parents lost confidence in the public school because they perceived teachers as having failed to control the 'corrupting' influence of low income students, whom these parents blamed along with their teachers for declining educational standard. Thus, education...resulting class antagonism undermined racial solidarity among black residents and weakened their collective ability to negotiate with the white administered school system or challenge the racial basis of the poor quality education that the public schools were offering to their children (McCarthy, 1991, pp. 90-91).

Through avenues of race, sex, class, and gender, caste societies are created. Racism, classism, and sexism are all "isms" manipulated through means of divide-and-rule for the purpose of maintaining the *status quo*: a division between the "haves" and the "have knots". Through the construction of race, class, and gender, justifications are given for one to ostracize its "other" even when its other shares many of the same identity significations. This desire to remove oneself from an other is prompted by the desire to be more like the "haves." In the U.S., this would consist of the elite, owning class: white, Anglo-Saxon, male Protestants. They are the orators of the mainstream culture. In this vein, it is desire that aids in the manipulation of continual racist, classicist, and sexist ideology (Ransom, 1997; Smitherman, 1975).

There are also influences that aid in the perpetuation of racist ideology. One critique, borrowed from Marxist thought, asserts that due to economic structural conditions, societies are more apt to perpetuate racist ideology when there are too few jobs available to sustain the people in that system (West, 1993b). However, this critique crumbles when we look at how the number of documented racial hate crimes increased despite former periods of economic growth and low unemployment. Crimes during this period, for example, include the dragging of a Black man to his death in Jasper, TX, the sodomizing of a Black man by white New York City police officers, and the random shooting of racial others by Benjamin Smith in Illinois and Indiana. Another influence of racism can be gleaned from the biblical construction of race (West, 1993a). In the *Book of Genesis*, Ham's loss of favor with God makes Ham and all of his descendants destined to the lower rungs of a caste society. Lastly, scientific rationale is used to justify bodily ugliness, cultural deficiency, and intellectual inferiority (Outlaw, 1996; West, 1993a). This rationale was prompted through the ordering, comparing, and measuring of visible physical characteristics of human body parts with the Greco-Roman standards of beauty.

Looking at the explanations given for racism, striking similarities appear for the rational rendered for this "ism" as well as others: classism, sexism, and homophobia. Prior to the enslavement of Africans, white women, through biblical, biological, and psychosexual explanations were also economically exploited, deemed sexually inferior, and socially ostracized (hooks, 1981; Davis, 1983). Additionally, race was preceded by class in setting a determinable marker for an exploitable, detestable other (Stoler, 1997). It is understandable how Respondent A, as a Black, heterosexual, Christian, working class woman, was snagged in Bateson's (1972) double bind.

### Learning III: *Being Present*

Although Respondent A's journey of self-discovery is just beginning, she draws to the end of her shared introspection.

In all of the situations where I found myself faced with a double bind, habitual action seemed to be the impetus of my confusion. As I went from one learning experience to the next, the knowledge I acquired from the previous experience became my absolute truth for the next experience.

My inability to accept dynamic notions of race, class, and environment led me into many double binds. Thus, while trying to free myself from the tangles of these webs, I became fixated on my dilemmas. With my attention focused on the contradictions, recognizing possibilities inherent in the intersection of the contradiction seemed impossible. For example, wanting desperately for my students to read and dream and be anything that they wanted to be in their future, I ignored the structural conditions and the context that deferred the possibilities of those dreams. Had I been mindful of their environment, I would have approached teaching them social studies in a way that would have helped them, as Paulo Freire inferred, to better understand their impoverished conditions in hopes of them creating a new and different reality. Instead, I spoon fed the Declaration of

Independence to them and attempted to force them to read materials that were seemingly irrelevant in their lives. When they refused, I blamed them or their disinterest and their school system for their inability to read. Never once did I examine my role in their discontent with schooling. Instead, the lessons from my past determined the gauge for their future.

Respondent A, in Bateson's Learning III level, at first found herself becoming accustomed to a pattern of absolute truths. She developed habits. However, "to become accustomed to anything is a terrible thing" (Bateson, 1987, p. 304). The problem with "knowing" is that when "knowing" is seen as an absolute, it very easily transforms into a wrong solution with a shift in cultural perspectives (Bateson, 1982). Another perspective of this knowing can be found in C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*. The senior devil informs his nephew that the way to corrupt a human being is to "keep him always thinking of the past and the future. Never let him live in the present. The past and the future are in time. The present is timeless and eternal" (cited in Bateson, 1987, p. 106).

Being present is a level of understanding that is acquired in what Bateson (1972) identifies as Learning III. In Learning III, one becomes mindful that the contradictions and binds formed in Learning II are influenced by environment, culture, and values. This awareness enables the learner to be free from signification bondage. The learner comes to realize that as Hegel posited, the real is a manifestation of an idea, and thus claims oneself anew. According to Bateson (1972):

any freedom from the bondage of habit must also denote a profound redefinition of the self. If I stop at the level of Learning II, 'I' am the aggregate of those characteristics, which I call my 'character'. 'I' am my habits of acting in context and shaping and perceiving the contexts in which I act. Selfhood is a product or aggregate of Learning II. To the degree that [one] achieves Learning II, and learns to perceive and act in terms of the context of contexts, his 'self' will take on a sort of irrelevance. The concept of 'self' will no longer function as a nodal argument in the punctuation of experience (p. 304).

Thus, Learning III is a phase where one embraces ruptured meanings of identity, just as Respondent A described, because an essentialized self has no room to exist in a world of disrupted significations. Hence, the self transcends the framing of its name, i.e., to be this or that. This includes all the social stigmas and possibilities that may come as a result of those frames. Through looking at the possibilities and the stigmas, the self begins to realize that identities are constructions of time, space, and place (Anderson and Gale, 1992; Barnes and Duncan, 1992). At this point, a unitary self disappears and gives itself the right to re-annunciate self anew and move within the spaces of contradictions. For, "without contraries, [there] is no progression" (Bateson, 1987, p. 303).

Because of the contradictions, space is provided for redefinition. The self is able to define itself for the fulfillment of its own purposes: who it is and what it can and cannot do. The self takes on fluidity like being water. The “be” is without labels or imposed definitions. Respondent A experienced this when she began examining her role in her students’ discontent with education. Her definitive unitary self ceased to exist. Thus, “you” transcend double binds because the “you ” is an identity in movement. Respondent A grew to “be” in the world navigating the flow of experience. She began to move in present time. Present time is the period where she moved naturally, not held down by the baggage of past character. Bateson’s (1972) Learning III is the process of always being in the present. In Learning III, the self is moved from a sense of consciousness to a world of untraveled terrain where the self and its knowing are configurations in the flux of experience.

### Conclusion

Bateson’s (1972) analysis of learning levels is extremely helpful in teasing out what it really means, with no assumptions, to be a working class, poor, Black student in the United States. Through Bateson’s analysis, educators are able to recognize and critique illegitimate authorities and arbitrary uses of power (West, 1993), while still maintaining that time is dynamic (Berman, 1981), and “being” as well as “knowing” are opportunities for change. The understanding gleaned from this narrative voice does refute assumptive theories, and speaks loudly to the strength, courage, and wisdom that can be generated by each and every poor urban Black in the formation of their identities, in spite of the theories. Unfortunately, this narrative voice also validates that within schools, the assumptive theories are still thriving. “In school systems...there are few models for structuring the educational environment so that it becomes a climate facilitative of personal and interpersonal growth rather than of damaged personal self-esteem and destructive interpersonal relationships” (Helms, 2003, p. 44). It is with immediacy that educators need to reflect upon this social ill, and act responsibly with a sensitivity to the identity formation of all poor learners of color.

### References

- Anderson, J. D. (1988). *History of black education in the south. 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Anyon, G. (1983). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, 162 (1), 67-92.
- Apple, M. (1990). *Ideology and curriculum*. New York: Routledge.
- Barnes, T., & Duncan, J. (Eds.). (1992). *Writing worlds: Discourse texts and metaphor in the representation of landscapes*. London: Routledge.
- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Chandler.
- Bateson, G. (1987). *Angels fear: Towards an epistemology of the sacred*. New York: MacMillan.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Berman, M. (1981). *Reenchantment of the world*. New York: Cornell University.
- Castnell, L., & Pinar, W. (1993). *Understanding curriculum as a racial text*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Davis, A. (1983). *Women, race, and class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Donaldson, K. B. M. (1996). *Through students' eyes: Combating racism in United States schools*. Westport, CT: Prager.
- Dubois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of black folks*. New York: Bantam.
- Fine, M. (1991). Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school. New York: SUNY Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punishment*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.) New York: Vintage Books.
- Franklin, J. H., & Moss, A. A. (1994). *From slavery to freedom: A history of African Americans*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Herder & Herder.
- Greene, M. (1988). *The dialect of freedom*. New York: Columbia University.
- Helms, J. E. (2003). Racial identity in the social environment. In P. B. Pedersen & J. C. Carey (Eds.), *Multicultural counseling in schools*, pp. 44-57.

- hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. Boston, MA: South End.
- Jhally, S., & Lewis, J. (1992). *Enlightened racism: The Cosby Show audience and the myth of the American dream*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Kahlenberg, R. D. (Dec. 2001/Jan. 2002). Beyond brown: The new wave of desegregation litigations. *Educational Leadership*, 13-19.
- Kohli, W. (1998). Critical education and embodied subjects: Making the post-structural turn. *Education Theory*, 48, 511-519.
- Kozol, J. (1993). *Savage inequalities: Children in American schools*. New York: First Harper Perennial.
- Lippman, H. (1996). *Urban schools: The challenge of location and poverty*. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics.
- Lomotey, K. (Ed.). (1990). *Going to school: The African American experience*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- McCarthy, C. (1991). *Race and curriculum*. Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.
- Marx, K. (1956). *Karl Marx: Selected writings in sociology & social philosophy*. (T. B. Bottomore, Trans.). London: McGraw-Hill.
- Morrison, T. (1990). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Perkins, L. (1981). *Black women and the philosophy of Race Up-Lift 1890-1900*. Cambridge, MA: Radcliffe College.
- Perry, T. (1998). I' on know why they be trippin. In T. Perry and L. Delpit (Eds.), *The real Ebonics debate: Power, language, and the education of African American children*, pp. 128-140. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Ransom, J. (1997). *Foucault's discipline*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sibley, D. (1995). *Geographies of exclusion*. New York: Routledge.
- Smitherman, G. (1975). Linguistic diversity in the classroom. In R. Lafayette (Ed.), *The culture revolution in foreign language teaching*. Chicago, IL: National Textbook Co.
- Stoler, A. L. (1997). *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonel order of things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Swanson, M. S. (1991). *At-risk students in elementary education. Effective schools for disadvantaged learners*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Press.

Taubman, P. (1993). Separate identities, separate lives: Diversity in the curriculum. In L. Castnell & W. Pinar (Eds.), *Understanding curriculum as racial text*. New York: State of New York Press.

Watkins, W. H. (2001). *The white architects of Black education: Ideology and power in America, 1865-1954*. New York: Teachers College Press.

West, C. (1993a). *Keeping faith: Philosophy and race in America*. New York: Routledge.

West, C. (1993b). *Race matters*. New York: Vintage.