

This is a pre-print (working paper) version of an article shared for personal, non-commercial use. No part of this document may be reproduced, distributed, or used for commercial purposes without permission from the copyright holder. This version may differ from the final published version in formatting or content. Please cite and share only the published version: Burey, J. (2024). Cultivating critical consciousness in Black education: Issues of misrepresentation and systemic resistance. Journal of Negro Education, 93(2), 161–174, available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/417/article/973527>

Cultivating Critical Consciousness in Black Education: Issues of Misrepresentation and Systemic Resistance

Abstract

This paper begins by problematizing the common practice of representing Blackness in the curriculum without cultivating critical consciousness in the learner. The work argues that the pedantic focus on "positive" versus "negative" representations misses the mark: both deficit portrayals and sanitized celebrations can harm students when divorced from critical contexts. The work then reveals how ideological and economic forces have undermined the cultivation of critical consciousness in Black education throughout history. The paper concludes with recommendations for situating Black representations in critical contexts. Ultimately, the work encourages a shift from a top-down focus on curricular representation to the development of critical consciousness in the learner, encouraging students' critical analysis and motivation to transform oppressive sociopolitical structures.

Keywords: Critical Consciousness, Black Education, Curriculum, Representation, Systemic Racism

Introduction

There is the famous philosophical question of the tree that falls in the woods. If a tree falls in the woods but nobody is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Making decisions on how to represent Blackness in curriculum materials reminds me of that question. Basing these decisions on the representations themselves, without concern for cultivating critical consciousness is a bit like the tree falling in the woods without making a sound. When we do this, we run the risk of students missing out on any benefits that could be gleaned from diverse representations in the curriculum. The powerful sound of representation will not reverberate for long inside the mind of the student who is not encouraged to think critically. We need to go beyond our current concern for the pedantic elements within representations and shift our focus to how these representations serve to cultivate critical consciousness in our students.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in a critical theoretical framework centered on Freire's (1970) concept of *critical consciousness*—the ability to critically analyze one's social, political, and economic reality and to take action to transform it. This framework informs the paper's central argument that curriculum representations of Blackness must transcend the false binary of "positive" versus "negative" to instead prioritize cultivating critical consciousness.

Stuart Hall's (2007) *encoding/decoding* model is invoked to help understand how representations in curricula are interpreted by students, emphasizing that the meaning in a representation resides in its potential to invoke critical engagement rather than in its assumed palatability. This model, coupled with psychological research (e.g., Fryberg & Stephens, 2010; Levin et al., 1998; Major et al., 1998; Salter & Adams, 2016), establishes that without critical

consciousness, both "negative" and "positive" representations can have harmful effects, reinforcing deficit thinking, system justification, and colorblind ideologies.

The analysis is further informed by the view of the school as being reproductive of dominant economic and ideological structures (Garvey, 1923; Kliebard, 2004; Symcox, 2002; Watkins, 2001; Woodson, 1933). These perspectives establish the economic and ideological resistance to cultivating critical consciousness in Black education. As Watkins (2001) explains, educational institutions conform to the economic base, prioritizing the production of minimally skilled workers over developing critical thinkers who might challenge existing power structures.

Finally, the work incorporates successful models of subversive Black education to inform how we can cultivate critical consciousness in Black students today. These include historical models from 1860-1925 documented by Anderson (1988), Givens' (2021) history of "fugitive pedagogy," the 1964 Freedom Schools, as well as contemporary approaches (e.g., Curtis, 2024; Farinde-Wu et al., 2021; Tingle, 2021).

The Current Trivialization of Critical Consciousness in Black Education

Critical consciousness is the ability to critically analyze one's social, political, and economic reality and to take action to transform it (Freire, 1970). Contemporary scholarship has expanded this concept, with Diemer and Rapa (2016) identifying three key components: critical reflection about perceived inequities, political efficacy (belief in one's ability to effect change), and critical action (behaviors aimed at challenging oppressive systems). The development of critical consciousness is particularly crucial in educational settings, where students' understanding of systemic inequities can transform their learning and inspire their social engagement (Marchand et al., 2024).

In education, critical consciousness shares important theoretical underpinnings with critical race theory (CRT). These frameworks offer complementary lenses for understanding and challenging systemic oppression and have successfully been used in the struggle for social justice (Bell, 2016, p. 16). The central tenet of CRT, *the permanence of racism*—which states that racism is omnipresent in society (Bell, 1992)—complements critical consciousness by providing a sociological understanding of the persistent structures that necessitate critical awareness. Applying CRT to education enables educators to work toward redressing racial inequity in the classroom (Dixson & Anderson, 2018), which parallels the goals of critical consciousness in cultivating agency for social transformation.

Especially relevant to cultivating critical consciousness in Black education is DuBois' (1903) concept of "*double consciousness*," which describes how Black people experience a sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others. While double consciousness articulates the psychological burden of navigating a society that views Blackness through a racist lens, critical consciousness provides the tools to recognize, analyze, and challenge this system. DuBois' vision of education for Black students, where they should become "co-worker[s] in the kingdom of culture," aligns with Freire's (1970) belief that education should empower the oppressed to transform their reality.

Despite the importance of critical consciousness, it is too often treated as trivial in Black education. When problematizing educational practices in "Black education" throughout this paper, I am referring to the school contexts in which Black children in America are predominantly educated— under-resourced urban public schools, whose educational practices are developed by mostly "*White architects*" (Watkins, 2001). Within this system, Black students receive dramatically different learning opportunities based on their social status (Darling-

Hammond, 1998) and race (Singham, 2003) and are more likely to receive a substandard education (Blanchett, 2006).

That such systemic inequality shapes the education of so many Black students makes the cultivation of critical consciousness imperative. But a story from my colleague illustrates how its importance is still too often trivialized. She tells the story of her school district's implementation of a new elementary curriculum that included a unit about the Negro Leagues. However, after pushback within the district for using the term, "Negro," school leaders began talks to do away with the entire unit, only a month after the curriculum was adopted. This type of occurrence is consonant with other developments in American schools, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Huckleberry Finn* being banned due to their inclusion of the N-word (Loewen, 1999).

Schools in America are largely unconcerned with cultivating critical consciousness (Watts et al., 2011) and are often more concerned with potential fallout from frivolous things like the mere existence of the N-word in texts. If they were concerned about cultivating critical consciousness, they would have been willing to include the units on Negro Leagues, *TKAM*, and *Huck Finn*, because they would understand that it's about the context with which the word is used that means the most for student learning.

This type of thinking demonstrates what Banks (1989) refers to as the contributions approach: curricula concerned only with including perfunctory representations of diverse historical figures, without concern for cultivating critical consciousness in the learner. Because this contributions approach is so trivial, schools figure they can afford to forgo inclusion of important stories. It creates a situation in which the price of the fallout from including the N-word is greater than the benefit gained from their unnuanced treatment of Black history.

Cultivating critical consciousness in our students is imperative. It's not about including

perfunctory representations of diverse groups; it's about the context surrounding these representations. Something gets lost when decisions about what types of Black representations to use are governed only by potentially controversial words, therein.

We know from Hall (2007) that representation is nothing without the interpreter. Hall's (2007) encoding/decoding model speaks to how decoders (e.g., learners) glean context from encodings (e.g., Black representations). The side of encoding has to do with the representation, itself, which is, for example, the unit on the Negro Leagues. But that encoding does not exist independently from the decoders — the students — who would have had the chance to learn about that history.

The point is that the meaning of a story about the Negro Leagues goes far beyond what is encompassed by the terms, therein. In fact, when implemented correctly, many representations can cultivate critical consciousness in decoders, to use Hall's (2007) term. But if we are concerned only about the encoding — the representation itself — and wholly unconcerned about the decoding — the critical consciousness instilled in the learner — we will be willing to throw out curricular materials with risky topics or terms like my colleague's school district. So, rather than concerning ourselves with “good” and “bad” representations (a false binary, in itself), we have to understand that the importance of the representation depends entirely on how we put it to use.

Critical Goals of Education

We think about the term “*carrerre*,” meaning “to run,” which is used in the Curriculum and Instruction discourse (Pinar, 1975) to refer to how curriculum materials are taught and where they are leading the students in the course of their learning. It makes us think of a course as exactly that: a journey being run by students, led by teachers who facilitate the endeavor using

curriculum materials. In this dynamic interplay, what the student learns is less about the materials

themselves, and more about how these materials are used to educate.

Some admirable goals of education lead us to the ultimate importance of cultivating critical consciousness in the learner, above and beyond the curriculum materials themselves. Noam Chomsky often cited his colleague, Victor Weisskopf, when he was asked about the goals of education: “It doesn't matter what we cover. It matters what you discover.” Weisskopf speaks here to the idea that the appetite for discovery and development in the learner does not come merely from the curriculum materials, but where those materials lead the learner. Representation, itself, only matters insofar as it encourages and shapes critical thinking of the learner. Education is not simply about giving answers in a top-down fashion with facts written in the ink of fluid prejudice, as Twain says. It's about making people think critically.

If we are to speak in Hall's (2007) terms, it's about the encoding, or portrayal, of the representation being done in such a way that asks questions of the learner, rather than looking to feed them answers. When we ask questions of the learner, force them to build on those questions, and to discover on their own through critical thinking, we come close to what it really means to learn. Woodson (1933) is useful here: “The mere imparting of information is not education. Above all things, the effort must result in making one think and do for oneself.”

If we mistakenly place the burden on the representation, alone, to give answers, we run into thorny territory. Even if the representation is based on seemingly objective grounds, there is no way to ensure that it was created in an unbiased fashion. This is where we get into Eurocentric histories that have long plagued Black education (e.g., Jenkins, 2009; McKinley, 2007; Thomas & Dyches, 2019), the earliest critics of which being Garvey (1923) and Woodson

(1933). They pointed out the tendentious nature of the educational materials used to teach Black students, which a century ago (and still to this day in some cases) foster little more in Black students than an ideology of inferiority.

The Importance of Cultivating Critical Consciousness in Black Education

Having problematized the trivialization of critical consciousness in Black education and established the encouragement of students' critical facilities as a worthy aim of education, we can now examine why critical consciousness deserves prominence. Thinking back to Freire's (1970) definition: the ability to critically analyze your social, political, and economic reality and to take action to transform it. Why is such a thing an admirable goal of education? Sleeter (2011) has discussed how simply infusing representation of racially and ethnically diverse people into curricula hardly ameliorates students' attitudes, because racial attitudes are acquired actively, rather than passively. Curricula must go above and beyond Black representation to add the critical context and encourage the learner to think. Such curricula have a stronger positive impact than curricula that merely portray diverse groups but lack critical perspectives about systemic racism (Sleeter, 2011).

People and institutions are averse to the notion that systemic racism needs to be brought up when we are thinking about something as "benign" as history. But, yes, even history books, from which we assume to be learning simple historic facts need to be conveyed with critical contexts. So often, Black history is seen as starting with enslavement. How many of us learned about the contributions of Africans in the thousands of years before this? It's not that we don't tell this history because we don't know it, but because it has been intentionally ignored, a phenomenon grounded in the Eurocentric tradition. This makes it even more incumbent on schools to tell it and to be critical about the role of U.S. education in marginalizing it.

Eurocentric materials like these that present uncritical histories are problematic because they show marginalized people in inferior contexts (Lucy et al., 2020) but hardly take care to be critical about the systems of oppression that produced these situations (Jenkins, 2009). Such materials engender prejudice (Sleeter, 2011): We see each day the end results of an unjust history — like Black people over- represented in contexts of poverty — but because of our miseducation, we don't have a critical eye on the systems that created these situations. Instead, as cognitive misers, always looking for heuristics and processing shortcuts (Kahneman, 2011), we grow up only to make the misinformed conclusion that personal agency is the main reason why group members find themselves downtrodden. This is how education that does not cultivate critical consciousness fails people.

Another example of what can happen when we fail to use representations of Blackness to establish critical consciousness happened recently with the story of Rosa Parks. News reports have shown how curricula, in response to American divisive concepts laws, have watered down the story of Rosa Parks so much so that racism is not even mentioned as the reason for her arrest (Mervosh, 2023). This type of representation does nothing to foster a critical understanding of the historical systems of oppression that cause marginalized groups to be represented that way.

A final reason we should strive for cultivating critical consciousness comes from the data we have on how representations, alone, can hardly be “good” or “bad.” There are benefits and drawbacks to all forms of representation. But if we are to entertain the “good versus bad” representations binary for a moment, we can see the trappings of simply seeking to present students with sanitized “good” representations of Blackness.

We think about “negative” representations of Blackness, where we are representing Black people in contexts of inferiority and oppression in the curriculum. These, without question,

can be harmful, but most harmful only in cases when we fail to establish critical consciousness. We can point to Florida's recent African American Social Studies standards that said “slaves earned skills they could use for their benefit.” Here, we have not only an oppressive representation, but one in which critical language is stripped out, similar to the misrepresentation of Rosa Parks’ activism (Mervosh, 2023). This the type of thing that creates in students disengagement (Major et al., 1998; Osborne, 1997; von Hippel, et al., 2005), lack of motivation (Graham, 1994), deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010), low self-esteem (Cohen & Garcia, 2005), lack of inspiration (Henfield & Washington, 2012), decreased career aspirations (Murphy et al., 2007), and an impression that success is not meant for members of their racial group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). With representations that are “negative” on the surface, we can create positive outcomes only if we focus on cultivating critical consciousness. King (2014) recommends not to do away with representing Blackness in contexts of inferiority or oppression, but to pair these representations with agentic resistance struggles. Here, we see it is not about the representation, itself, but, instead, what critical content it is contextualized with.

In the same way that “negative” representations can have their benefits if we use them to instill critical consciousness, sanitized positive representations that portray Black luminaries in contexts only of achievement and competence can result in pitfalls too when we fail to use them to cultivate critical consciousness. Frivolous approaches to Black representations that are uncritical of systemic racism have even become the norm in some classroom settings, with Black representations only appearing ephemeral in units focusing on “celebrations” (Grinage, 2024). Literature challenging the incessant use of “positive” representations (e.g., Fryberg & Stephens, 2010; Jones, 2016) speaks largely to system justification effects in learners who are taught to celebrate Black heroes through a frivolous contributions approach (Banks, 1989). Students end

up asking "how bad can things really be if there are so many successful people from marginalized groups?" Other issues with simply focusing on including positive representations without cultivating critical consciousness have to do with students feeling like the represented role models are unrelatable exceptions (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), the perpetuation of meritocracy myths (Levin et al., 1998) and colorblind ideologies (Salter & Adams, 2016) that deemphasize impacts of systemic racism.

Systemic Resistance to Cultivating Critical Consciousness in Black Education

Educational materials suit the interest of those who establish the system of education (Garvey, 1923). Those who establish the system of education are part of a power structure whose dominant ideology informs its resistance to cultivating critical consciousness in Black students. By inspiring the thought that it is "un-American" to be critical, hegemony is upheld. In its current state, far from encouraging Black students to question existing societal structures, U.S. education keeps Black students compliant, acquiescent, and docile.

The tradition at the core of Black education by White Architects (Watkins, 2001) has long been to teach students a finished product meant to be consumed, as opposed to stimulating an intellectual process in which students are encouraged to engage actively and to think critically (McCarthy, 1994). Ruling out any possibility of critical consciousness, the job of students is to absorb received truths (Symcox, 2002). If you can train students into obedience and civility, it will keep them from challenging the status quo.

Ideological Resistance

Ideological resistance to cultivating critical consciousness in Black education has a storied tradition in the United States. In the 1970s, progressive theorists clashed with conservative assimilationists. Nixon himself complained that the progressive education struggle

put forth values that were fundamentally "un-American" (Symcox, 2002). Citizenship education and activism toward pluralist viewpoints in the curriculum were not to be seen as part of the long-standing American tradition of dissent, but rather as a threat to the silent majority: straight, White, middle-class families making up the "real" America (Ontiveros, 2010).

In the 1980s, the educational establishment, as represented by the National Council for the Social Studies and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, clung to a skills-oriented curriculum with a canon of facts to be committed to memory (Symcox, 2002). The vice president of the NCSS went so far as to dismiss history as "factology." Later in that decade, culture wars continued with popular cultural theorists arguing that new pluralistic curricula undermined the traditional sense of a "unified culture" (Symcox, 2002). For example, Bloom's (1987) treatise against multicultural perspectives, *The Closing of the American Mind*, lamented the 1960s revolutionaries who "chipped away at the canon of liberal education by forcing schools to drop the classics for feel-good, politically correct texts" (Symcox, 2002).

Assimilationists in this tradition contended that any curriculum that promoted critical consciousness among Black students would undermine American patriotism and would shift students' thinking towards an "un-American" way, such that they would not be able to participate in mainstream U.S. society (Dickeman, 1987). There is an adamantness to preserve mainstream society because any curriculum that would encourage critical consciousness would legitimize the quest for significant social change which could challenge the status quo (Sizemore, 1973) — something privileged Americans in the dominant class have never been willing to put at stake.

Today, the culture wars continue on the critical consciousness battlefield. Donald Trump's sweeping executive orders and threats to withhold federal funding from schools have aimed to prevent students from learning about systemic racism and, instead, adopt "patriotic"

education (Goldstein, 2025). Executive orders have instructed schools to "depict the American founding as unifying, inspiring and ennobling" while emphasizing how America "has admirably grown closer to its noble principles throughout its history" (Goldstein, 2025).

Modern-day proponents of purportedly "neutral" or "objective" approaches to curriculum argue that education should remain apolitical and present historical facts without ideology. Ironically, they themselves are driven by a deeply rooted ideology which is problematic on a couple fronts. First, they fall prey to the fallacy that education can ever be free from ideology in the first place. Most contemptible though is their desire for a curriculum for Black students with an ideology that doesn't make White students feel bad. Although there is some evidence that White students sometimes bear the cost of feeling uncomfortable while learning about systemic racism (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012), the benefits they gain are legion: White students who engage critically with systemic racism develop more sophisticated historical understandings (Martell & Stevens, 2017), enhanced civic engagement (Gillespie et al., 2025), greater empathy (Brock-Petroschius, et al., 2023), less negative racial attitudes (Okoye-Johnson, 2011) and yes—even critical consciousness development (Coffey, 2023).

African American studies curricula, in particular, have been under attack in recent years and have been shown to cater markedly to political agendas and ideological biases (Burey et al., 2024). The draconian influence wielded by today's political ideologies is best evidenced in Florida, which passed the *Stop W.O.K.E.* (Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees) Act in 2022, effectively silencing all discussions about race and racism in public schools and colleges. In the spring of 2021, the College Board began to pilot a framework for their AP African American Studies course. However, upon releasing the first version, they faced significant pushback from Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, the Florida Department of Education, and state officials, who

claimed that the curriculum was "historically inaccurate," "indoctrination," "lacked educational value," and violated state laws. The Florida Education Commissioner, Manny Diaz, announced that the state would not allow schools to adopt the course until the College Board removed "problematic" topics like "Intersectionality," "Queer Studies," "The Movement for Black Lives," "Black Feminist Literary Thought," and "The Reparations Movement." The College Board subsequently released a revised version with those topics removed, and suppressed voices of several scholars critical of systemic racism in the United States.

Rather than the College Board following through with their pilot research that found students desired to be provided with an unflinching, truthful look at Black history, "both the good and the bad," the College Board yielded to Florida's political pressure by simply silencing terms the state deemed divisive. Though the College Board has since amended their framework once again, bringing back some of these "divisive" concepts, the pedantic altering of terms, authors, and required sources speaks to the desire to cater to ideological biases instead of focusing on cultivating critical consciousness. Rather than worrying about mere terms and author names, the College Board could have kept these terms in the curriculum from the beginning, and simply encouraged critical consciousness among students as they learned about them.

Economic Resistance

Ideological and economic motives often run in unison to suppress critical consciousness in Black education. In the case of the College Board, yielding to ideological pressure from Florida had economic merit. Since the College Board earns about half of its revenue from AP instruction, widespread adoption of any new curriculum they create is important to them. It is not difficult to see why they would feel the need to adhere to the political ideologies of the country's third most populous state.

There is, in fact, a deep economic resistance to cultivating critical consciousness in Black education. Chomsky (as cited in Corson, 1980) speaks to how those in power are not necessarily interested in educating students for critical thought but rather for technically skilled labor, no matter whether these students learn to question the broader societal and economic systems in which they operate. It is important to have a disciplined, obedient workforce, not workers who can do things for themselves and think for themselves, because when they get to that point, it may not be long before they wonder why they need bosses in the first place (Chomsky, 2013). This approach to education helps maintain the status quo by preventing the emergence of critical thinking and a politically active citizenry that could create substantive changes to the system.

From the very beginning, much of public education was concerned with trying to teach independent people to become workers within an industrial machine (Chomsky, 2013). Theorists have explained how the predominating economic system greatly shapes the institutions within it: ideas that do not conform to the dominant system simply don't get financial support (Watkins, 2001). Institutions must, as an ultimate goal, conform to the economic base (Watkins, 2001). Schools produce minimally skilled workers for labor, and educational institutions educate them for compliance (Liston, 1988).

Althusser (1970), along similar lines, sees school as an *Ideological State Apparatus*, in which dominant ideologies are transmitted, and existing class relations are maintained. Although schools represent themselves as neutral, focused only on teaching irrefutable facts and cultivating universal skills, they are only reproducing existing power structures that prevent the development of critical consciousness that could challenge such structures.

It is remarkable just how much education in this country serves an economic function and is reproductive of capitalist ideals. Education, for example, promotes individualism by

encouraging students to focus on their own personal achievements and goals rather than on the collective interests and needs of society. The educational system also encourages vicious competition between individual students for grades, awards, and credentials, as opposed to cultivating spaces where cooperation and collaboration are rewarded.

Resulting from this competition is a hierarchy of winners and losers, determined almost exclusively by standardized testing. Since at least the instantiation of No Child Left Behind, high-stakes standardized testing has become increasingly tied to school funding and teacher evaluations (Au, 2016). The incessant focus on standardized testing runs directly counter to cultivating critical consciousness in Black education. When teachers' very jobs and salaries within those jobs depend on how well the students test, they have no choice but to fall in line and to do what the system requires of them (Chomsky, 2013). They must teach for testing rather than teach for critical consciousness.

What of the student who approaches a teacher during the break before a major exam, asking if she could use the time to dive deeper into a subject she became deeply interested in during the course? Unfortunately, it doesn't matter if the student were to use the exam break to begin an eventual prize-worthy book on her topic of interest. Her teacher would instead be compelled to tell the student not to pursue such an endeavor because the future of both student and teacher rests heavily on the student using the time to study toward passing the exam. Standardized testing, then, can be seen as yet another device that undermines the cultivation of critical consciousness in Black education.

When Black students are all-too-often found "not to have the ability to succeed" in the system, as judged by these "objective" metrics, they are tracked into programs that encourage even less critical consciousness than their typical academic track would have otherwise allowed

for. These types of drill-and-practice programs of study are more commonly administered to Black students (Darling-Hammond, 1998), with Black students referred at relatively higher rates for special education placement (Diamond, 2006) and under-enrolled into honors (Frye & Vogt, 2010), gifted education (Frasier & Passow, 1994), and advanced placement (Henfield et al., 2008) classes.

The Social Efficiency Tradition in Black Education

Academic tracking by aptitude and ability, beginning with the use of IQ tests to predict students' future societal roles, has its roots in the social efficiency tradition in Black education, a tradition tightly woven to, and reproductive of, the dominant capitalist ideology. The social efficiency tradition arose from early admiration of the scientific management techniques that put American business and industry on top of the world (Symcox, 2002). This philosophy sought a curriculum that would prepare students for later participation in an industrial society where specialization and mass production were the rule (Symcox, 2002). What had to be created was a Black workforce with the expertise demanded by the capitalist mode of production. Far from attempting to cultivate critical consciousness in Black students, education grounded in the social efficiency tradition has long been more concerned with equipping Black students with the skills necessary for contributing to the labor market.

Early on, it was the potential for an occupational payoff that made the social efficiency philosophy most appealing in Black education (Kliebard, 2004). One early advocate for the value in Black students' practical training was Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the founder and first principal of Hampton Institute. Armstrong lauded the value of menial labor for Black students, which he saw as their salvation from poverty and degradation (Kliebard, 2003). It was through manual training that Black students would move from ignorance to responsibility.

A pivotal figure in nourishing the roots of social efficiency in Black education was Thomas Jesse Jones, the director of the department of research for the Hampton Institute. Jones created a form of social education that was meant to provide Black students with the skills that would bring them to the level of the White middle class (Kliebard, 2003). From these early days, the dominant ideology was that Black students were in an earlier stage of development than the White race (Kliebard, 2003). By designing a program of study that would introduce the more “advanced” White social practices to the less advanced Black race, their “progress toward a state of civilization” could be accelerated (Jones, 1908).

The Hampton model of Black education has dramatically influenced over a century of Black schooling since then (Watkins, 2001), and present-day American resistance to cultivating critical consciousness in Black education has vestiges of the early ideas of Armstrong, Jones, and others. Education for Black students in America has, from the beginning, been about molding the Black populace into the dominant ideological and economic order, no matter that this order was rooted in apartheid, economic exploitation, and inequality (Watkins, 2001).

Discussion: Where Do We Go From Here?

DuBois (1903) wrote that the striving of the Negro must be toward being a “co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius." America has scarcely been concerned with giving Black students a role as co-workers in the kingdom of culture, a role which requires training to think critically about how to shape the culture of the kingdom in which they reside.

Historical Models of Critical Consciousness Development in Black Education

Despite the systemic resistance to cultivating critical consciousness in many of our Black students, Black education in America when “by us, for us” has demonstrated a rich historical

tradition of resisting dominant ideologies that have sought to render Black students compliant rather than critical.

African Americans have used education as a form of resistance since their very first days on the continent. Black men from Douglass to Washington to X found their liberation (and liberated others) through their literacy. Anderson (1988) has thoroughly documented how Black people created subversive self-funded institutions and teacher training programs in the face of monumental opposition from 1860-1935. Givens' later (2021) work on "*fugitive pedagogy*" documents how teachers like Carter G. Woodson and Anna Julia Cooper created subversive educational practices that challenged White supremacist curricula, even while working within oppressive educational structures. These educators developed an underground system where they could teach Black students to critique systems of racial oppression while maintaining the appearance of compliance with mainstream educational mandates.

Later, during the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, Civil Rights organizations such as SNCC, CORE and the NAACP began to think about ways to register Black voters in the South and to challenge racial segregation. Out of this spawned the Freedom Schools. Here, the instructors engaged in role playing activities to simulate some of the real-life issues students could face and encouraged students to be skeptical and to challenge and question information that was provided to them—questions that fostered critical reflection on societal inequities and on their own political efficacy.

Contemporary Models of Critical Consciousness Development in Black Education

We can also look to contemporary models for developing critical consciousness in Black students to chart the future of Black education in America. Early on, Lewis and Lee (2009) demonstrated the impact of incorporating critical consciousness into introductory psychology

courses at an HBCU. Their approach provided students with tools for reflection and for taking action against social problems, above and beyond basic psychological knowledge. The topic of ethnic identity development was taught to emphasize the critical reflection component of critical consciousness and students' assignments were geared toward reflecting on their sociopolitical context and proposing actions to improve it.

In a similar context, Tingle (2021) examined critical consciousness and civic engagement within the HBCU core curriculum, unpacking how faculty incorporated pedagogical frameworks that fostered critical consciousness and civic engagement. Findings indicated that curriculum development could be supported by senior administrators' guidance on how to educate for social change.

Around the same time, Farinde-Wu et al. (2021) documented how Black female youth in a structured two-year tutoring and mentoring program developed heightened awareness of gendered and racialized school policies. Their findings captured the perspectives of these youth, who cultivated their sociopolitical development through what they deemed "woke pedagogical experiences."

Recently, Curtis (2024) developed "Black Girl Politics," a critical literacy collaborative designed to explore Black girls' theorizing about sociopolitical ideas and social change. Participants showed growth in analytical skills and civic engagement compared to peers in traditional educational settings. This work highlighted how educational opportunities and curricular interventions for nurturing Black girls' political consciousness prepared them to be informed, active members of society.

Most recently, Zion et al. (2025) has described "Transformative Student Voice", which creates sustained opportunities for students to inquire about the root causes of problems in their

schools and take action to address them by working with adults to develop and implement better policies. This approach centers youth-adult partnerships and elevates students' experiences in identifying issues, researching root causes, and implementing solutions.

Recommendations for Cultivating Critical Consciousness in Black Education

We can use these contemporary models to inform recommendations for cultivating critical consciousness in Black education. Carter (2008) recommends urban schools to be counterhegemonic in their practices. They must be intentional about reminding students that being Black includes achieving at high levels, without forgetting to discuss the structural obstacles to Black students' school successes. This type of guidance is reflective of the Resilience Allyship framework (Anderson, 2019), which acknowledges cultural strengths while at the same time addressing oppressive systems.

Campbell (2016) extends these recommendations, proposing four strategies to provoke critical consciousness: grounding courses in social justice, providing opportunities for allyship among students, facilitating structured dialogues about race, and providing service-learning opportunities as an extension of course responsibilities. Campbell (2016) specifically advocates for required African American Studies courses as a vehicle for critical consciousness development. This recommendation is especially relevant for the fundamental question taken up by the present work: How are we to represent Blackness in the curriculum in a way that promotes critical consciousness?

We should represent Blackness in contexts critical of systemic racism. Situating Black textual representation in the critical context means encouraging students to analyze not only the surface elements of the representation but also the broader systemic structures of power and oppression influencing it. Using a critical epistemological perspective, students develop skills to

navigate and challenge oppressive narratives, becoming more critically conscious individuals (Freire, 1970). Representation in the critical context goes beyond presenting Blackness in any particular light; it creates a representation frame that allows students to question the historical systems of oppression that influence the representation. Students are then better equipped to engage with and critically evaluate any form of Black representation they encounter in texts.

We can think of examples for representing Blackness in critical contexts across various subject areas to facilitate critical consciousness development among Black students:

In urban studies for example, an uncritical approach might present current homeownership rate differences and property value disparities using benign language that avoids attributing causality to discriminatory systems, whereas a critical context would contextualize these disparities in things like redlining, restrictive covenants, and discriminatory GI Bill implementation.

In education courses, an uncritical approach would describe "achievement gaps" and disparities in graduation rates across demographic groups, and claim that integration after *Brown* ameliorated educational inequality, whereas a critical context would link educational disparities to systemic factors like property tax-based school funding, tracking systems, disciplinary practices influenced by implicit biases, and examine the resistance to *Brown*, with Whites choosing to close public schools rather than integrate.

In criminal justice education, uncritical materials would present incarceration statistics and prison demographic breakdowns without historical context, whereas a critical context would examine how Black Codes, convict leasing, and targeted policies like the War on Drugs have produced disparities, despite similar offense rates across racial groups.

In economics, an uncritical approach would display unemployment rate differences and wage gap statistics without connecting to historical barriers, whereas the critical context would explain how historical exclusion from federal employment, exclusion from labor unions, and ongoing hiring discrimination has shaped these realities.

Situating Black representations in critical contexts—contexts critical of systemic racism—invokes external attributions for challenges. This is crucial considering the psychological findings on negative self-attributions (Fryberg et al., 2008) that can arise when systemic factors are not cited as a key reason for a group’s hardships. Without critical contexts, misrepresentation becomes miseducation, leaving Black students ill-equipped to engage productively with any Black representations—whether “positive” or “negative.”

Conclusion

Any successful form of social education for Black students in America has awakened their critical consciousness. As Freire (1970) said, such an awakening “leads to the expression of social discontents because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation.” Schools should not be afraid of the potential social discontents that may arise if they include the N-word in their curriculum. Most of all, governments should not be afraid of the social discontents that may arise if they adopt curricula that cultivate critical consciousness in their students. If they do fear such discontents, the burden is on them to ameliorate the oppressive situation in the first place, so that these discontents are no longer, in fact, real components of the oppressive situation.

I am grateful for the graduate course, "Critical Examination of Curriculum in Context," taught by Dr. Nina Asher at the University of Minnesota, who created a stimulating learning environment that inspired the idea for this work.

References

- Althusser, L. (1970). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation). *La Pensée*, 151, 3-38.
- Anderson, J. (1988). *The education of blacks in the south, 1860-1935*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Anderson, L. A. (2019). Rethinking resilience theory in African American families: Fostering positive adaptations and transformative social justice. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 11(3), 385-397.
- Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*, 30(1), 39-62.
- Banks, J. A. (1989). Approaches to multicultural curricular reform. In J.A. Banks & C. A. M. Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (pp. 229–250). Allyn & Bacon.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Bell, L. A. (2016). Theoretical foundations for social justice education. In M. Adams & L. A. Bell (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (pp. 3-26). Routledge.
- Blanchett, W. J. (2006). Disproportionate representation of African American students in special education: Acknowledging the role of white privilege and racism. *Educational Researcher*, 35(6), 24-28.
- Bloom, A. (1987). *The Closing of the American mind*. Simon and Schuster.
- Boatright-Horowitz, S. L., Marraccini, M., & Harps-Logan, Y. (2012). Teaching antiracism: College students' emotional and cognitive reactions to learning about white privilege. *Journal of Black Studies*, 43(8), 893-911.

- Brock-Petroschius, K., Garcia-Perez, J., Gross, M., & Abrams, L. (2023). Colorblind attitudes, empathy, and shame: Preparing White students for anti-racist social work practice. *Journal of Social Work Education, 59*(2), 346-360.
- Burey, J., Stagnaro, K., Allen, L., Kendeou, P. (2024, April 11-14). *Changes to the AP African American Studies Curriculum: A Natural Language Processing Investigation* [Poster presentation]. 2024 American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA, United States.
- Campbell, B. (2016). Utilizing an African American Studies course to garner critical consciousness among students: Considerations for improving campus climate. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies, 9*(8), October 2016.
- Carter, D. J. (2008). Cultivating a critical race consciousness for African American school success. *Educational foundations, 22*, 11-28.
- Chomsky, N. (2013, June 1). *Noam Chomsky on Democracy and Education in the 21st Century and Beyond* [Interview with Daniel Falcone]. Truthout. Retrieved from <https://chomsky.info/20130601/>
- Coffey, K. (2023). *The effect of ethnic studies on White student populations* [Master's thesis]. Dominican University of California.
- Cohen, G. L., & Garcia, J. (2005). "I am us": Negative stereotypes as collective threats. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 89*(4), 566-582.
- Corson, D. J. (1980). Chomsky on education. *Australian Journal of Education, 24*(2), 164-185.
- Curtis. (2024). Black girl politics: Curricular interventions for nurturing Black girls' political consciousness. *Journal of African American Women and Girls in Education, 4*(1), 7-30.

- Darling-Hammond, L. (1998). Unequal opportunity: Race and education. *Brookings Review*, 16(2), 28-32.
- Diamond, J. B. (2006). Still separate and unequal: Examining race, opportunity, and school achievement in "integrated" suburbs. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 75, 495-508.
- Dickeman, M. (1973). Teaching cultural pluralism. In J.A. Banks (Ed.), *Teaching Ethnic Studies: Concepts and Strategies* (Forty-Third Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies, pp. 5-25). Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.
- Diemer, M. A., & Rapa, L. J. (2016). Unraveling the complexity of critical consciousness, political efficacy, and political action among marginalized adolescents. *Child Development*, 87(1), 221-238.
- Dixson, A. D., & Anderson, C. (2018). Where are we? Critical race theory in education 20 years later. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93(1), 121-131.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1403194>
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of Black folk*. A.C. McClurg & Co.
- Farinde-Wu, A., Young, J. L., & Texeira, S. (2021). Waking up woke: Exploring Black female youth critical consciousness and sociopolitical development. *Teachers College Record*, 123, 130304.
- Frasier, M. M., & Passow, A. H. (1994). *Towards a New Paradigm for Identifying Talent Potential*. Research Monograph 94112.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Oyserman, D., & Stone, J. M. (2008). Of warrior chiefs and Indian princesses: The psychological consequences of American Indian mascots. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 30(3), 208-218.

- Fryberg, S. A., & Stephens, N. M. (2010). When the world is colorblind, American Indians are invisible: A diversity science approach. *Psychological Inquiry, 21*, 115-119.
- Frye, B. J., & Vogt, H. A. (2010). The causes of underrepresentation of African American children in gifted programs and the need to address the problem through more culturally responsive teaching practices in teacher education programs. *Black History Bulletin, 73*(1), 11-17.
- Garvey, M. (1923). *Philosophy and opinions of Marcus Garvey: Africa for the Africans*. The Majority Press.
- Gillespie, S., Morency, M. M., Fajemirokun, E., & Ferguson, G. M. (2025). Promoting identity development, multicultural attitudes, and civic engagement through ethnic studies: Evidence from a natural experiment. *Child Development, 96*, 966-979.
- Givens, J. R. (2021). *Fugitive pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching*. Harvard University Press.
- Goldstein, D. (2025, January 30). With sweeping executive orders, Trump tests local control of schools. *The New York Times*.
- Graham, S. (1994). Motivation in African Americans. *Review of Educational Research, 64*(1), 55-117.
- Grinage, J. (2024) Feeling anti-racism: how neoliberal multiculturalism and racialized emotions impede equity in the aftermath of George Floyd. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 27*(3), 276-292.
- Hall, S. (2007). Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. In *CCCS selected working papers* (pp. 402-414). Routledge.

- Henfield, M. S., Moore, J., & Wood, C. (2008). Inside and outside gifted education programming: Hidden challenges for African American students. *Exceptional Children, 74*, 433-450.
- Henfield, M. S., & Washington, A. R. (2012). "I want to do the right thing but what is it?": White teachers' experiences with African American students. *The Journal of Negro Education, 81*(2), 148-161.
- Jenkins, R. (2009). Rethinking the social studies curriculum for African American students. In A. Pitre, E. Pitre, R. Ray, & T. Hilton-Pitre (Eds.), *Educating African American students: Foundations, curriculum, and experiences* (pp. 49-64). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Jones, J. M. (2016). The colorblind racial approach: Does race really matter? In H. A. Neville, M. E. Gallardo, & D. W. Sue (Eds.), *The myth of racial color blindness: Manifestations, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 39-52). American Psychological Association.
- Jones, T. J. (1908). *Social studies in the Hampton curriculum*. Hampton, VA: Hampton Institute.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Macmillan.
- King, L. J. (2014). When lions write history: Black history textbooks, African-American educators, & the alternative Black curriculum in social studies education, 1890-1940. *Multicultural Education, 22*(1), 2-11.
- Kliebard, H. M. (2004). *The struggle for the American curriculum, 1893-1958* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Levin, S., Sidanius, J., Rabinowitz, J. L., & Federico, C. (1998). Ethnic identity, legitimizing ideologies, and social status: A matter of ideological asymmetry. *Political Psychology, 19*, 373-404.

- Lewis, M. K., & Lee, A. K. (2009). Critical consciousness in introductory psychology: A historically Black university context. *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences, 1*(1), 50-60.
- Liston, D. P. (1988). Capitalist schools: Explanation and ethics in radical studies of schooling.
- Lockwood, P., & Kunda, Z. (1997). Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 91-103.
- Loewen, J. W. (1999). *Lies across America: What our historic sites get wrong*. The New Press.
- Lucy, L., Demszky, D., Bromley, P., & Jurafsky, D. (2020). Content analysis of textbooks via natural language processing: Findings on gender, race, and ethnicity in Texas US history textbooks. *AERA Open, 6*(3).
- Major, B., Spencer, S., Schmader, T., Wolfe, C., & Crocker, J. (1998). Coping with negative stereotypes about intellectual performance: The role of psychological disengagement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 24*(1), 34-50.
- Marchand, A. D., Settles, I. H., Kumari, S., Rowley, S. J., & Diemer, M. A. (2024). Exploring Black parents' critical consciousness in relation to their engagement with their children's schools. *Journal of Social Issues, 80*, 423-452.
- Martell, C. C., & Stevens, K. M. (2017). Equity- and tolerance-oriented teachers: Approaches to teaching race in the social studies classroom. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 45*(4), 489-516.
- McCarthy, C. (1994). Multicultural discourses and curriculum reform: A critical perspective. *Educational Theory, 44*(1), 81-98.
- McKinley, E. (2007). Postcolonialism, Indigenous students, and science education. In S. K. Abell & N. G. Lederman (Eds.), *Handbook of research on science education* (pp. 199-226). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Mervosh, S. (2023, March 16). Florida scoured math textbooks for 'prohibited topics.' Next up: Social studies. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/16/us/florida-textbooks-african-american-history.html>
- Murphy, M. C., Steele, C. M., & Gross, J. J. (2007). Signaling threat: How situational cues affect women in math, science, and engineering settings. *Psychological Science, 18*(10), 879-885.
- Okoye-Johnson, O. (2011). Does multicultural education improve students' racial attitudes? Implications for closing the achievement gap. *Journal of Black Studies, 42*(8), 1252-1274.
- Ontiveros, R. (2010). No Golden Age: Television news and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. *American Quarterly, 62*(4), 897-923.
- Osborne, J. W. (1997). Race and academic disidentification. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*(4), 728-735.
- Pinar, W. F. (1975). *The method of "Currere."* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C., April 1975.
- Salter, P. S., & Adams, G. (2016). On the intentionality of cultural products: Representations of Black history as psychological affordances. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*, 1166.
- Singham, M. (2003). The achievement gap: Myths and reality. *Phi Delta Kappan, 84*, 586-591.
- Sizemore, B.A. (1973). Shattering the melting pot myth. In J.A. Banks (Ed.), *Teaching ethnic studies: Concepts and strategies* (pp. 73-101). Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2011). *The academic and social value of ethnic studies: A research review*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.

- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African-Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 797-811.
- Symcox, L. (2002). *Whose history?: The struggle for national standards in American classrooms*. Teachers College Press.
- Thomas, D., & Dyches, J. (2019). The hidden curriculum of reading intervention: A critical content analysis of Fountas & Pinnell's leveled literacy intervention. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51(5), 601-618.
- Tingle, N. H. (2021). *Doin' it for the culture: An exploration of critical consciousness and civic engagement within HBCU core curriculum* [Doctoral dissertation]. Auburn University.
- Valencia, R. R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. Routledge.
- Von Hippel, W., Von Hippel, C., Conway, L., Preacher, K. J., Schooler, J. W., & Radvansky, G. A. (2005). Coping with stereotype threat: Denial as an impression management strategy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89(1), 22-35.
- Watkins, W. W. (2001). *The White architects of Black education: Ideology and power in America, 1865-1954*. Teachers College Press.
- Watts, R. J., Diemer, M. A., & Voight, A. M. (2011). Critical consciousness: Current status and future directions. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2011(134), 43-57.
- Woodson, C. G. (1933). *The miseducation of the Negro*. Associated Publishers.
- Zion, S., Rozycki, W. A., & Brownlee, J. D. (2025). The Work That Remains: Student Voice, Resistance and the Promise of Brown. *Urban Education*, 00420859251329277.