

Cinder and Soul: The Biography of a Historically Significant African American School in Dallas, Texas

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Abstract

This paper provides an approach for social studies education that includes investigative research into an old school building that has traditionally served predominantly African American children, along with a narrative inquiry into the experiences of one of that school's former students. We offer a unique approach to experiential global citizenship education, in conjunction with an exemplar of this kind of social studies research. The first half of this paper is a "building biography" of N. W. Harllee School, followed by memories of Dr. Njoki McElroy, who attended Harllee as a young child. In the US, African American life is often misrepresented, devalued, or completely expunged from history books and historical documents. The implication of this novel approach to uncovering the truth about the education of African Americans in the 1930s is that educators around the world can use a similar approach to honor and highlight voices of marginalized people, creating rightful spaces for their stories in our collective history and memory.

Key words: *African American education, N. W. Harllee Elementary, Dr. Njoki McElroy, global citizenship education, Black Dallas history*

Introduction

For years, social studies educators around the world have grappled with finding engaging ways for students to bring history to life, while connecting that history to students' lives and further extending such links to the world. In this paper, we present a novel approach to conduct social studies research in order for students to broaden their understanding of the communities in which they live, as well as the social-historical-political roots linked to their immediate environments and the world at large. This paper is an exemplar of the kind of research we suggest that can be conducted by learners of all ages in any community in the world. The research we present consists of doing historical research of a school building in conjunction with a series of interviews with a community member who holds strong ties to that building in order to support students in developing qualities of global citizens, specifically around areas of social justice. This paper is an

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exemplar of this kind of research, and we share the findings about what would otherwise appear as an ordinary old school building, together with the excavated memories of one of its former students.

In order to replicate a similar research project, teachers could develop an assignment (possibly called “cinder and soul”) in which students can choose to do research on their school, parent’s or grandparent’s homes, a local place of worship, store, market, park, government building, or other place important to them or their community. In addition to conducting historical research on the physical history of the place the student has chosen, this type of research also includes an interview with one or more community members about their connections and remembrances of that place. In this way, the memories of that place hold important lessons in history, civics, economics, politics, and religion through physical spaces they inhabit and in the memories and relationships to those spaces of people in their community. Ideally, this kind of research brings history to life and unlocks a deeper understanding of one’s community and its link to our world.

The exemplar presented here consists of historic research on N. W. Harllee Elementary School in Dallas, Texas, which was the oldest elementary school for African American children in Dallas. We link the findings about the school building with Dr. Njoki McElroy’s narratives based on her early childhood experiences attending this segregated school in the 1930s, in order to elucidate the ways her formative education shaped her life. Through her experiences as a young child marginalized from an early age, we glean a depth of understanding of the value, urgency, and significance of honoring stories of marginalized people the world over.

Conceptual Framework of Global Citizenship Education

This research utilizes the conceptual framework of Global Citizenship Education (GCE). UNESCO (2016) provides a clear and succinct definition of GCE framework, stating that the framework focuses on the

knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required by citizens to lead productive lives, make informed decisions and assume active roles locally and globally in facing and resolving global challenges [and] can be acquired through education for sustainable development (ESD) and global citizenship education (GCED), which includes peace and human rights education as well as intercultural education and education for international understanding.
(p. 49)

This definition provides a road map for educators and scholars to link local communities with international understanding of human rights issues that affect millions of people, specifically around the issue of racism and its impact on students and/or marginalized peoples of the world. Davies (2006) further recognizes the value of precisely this kind of research by stating that “part of the skill of being a global citizen is the capacity for research, and one can at least start the process in a school by encouraging research skills and working out the effect of action” (p. 23). Since elements of social justice, issues of equity, and respect for diversity are foundational principles in a GCE conceptual framework (Ibrahim, 2005), these ideas inform this research. The question arises as to how educators can support students to develop a mindset of global citizenship. In order to foster students to become global citizens, researchers recognize the need to take action within one’s local community as a first step before linking that research to larger issues related to human rights and social justice.

The significance of focusing on one’s locality, which is within the GCE framework, is called “community studies.” Anchoring knowledge within one’s community aligns with John Dewey’s (1897) idea that “education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (p. 22), which provides a foundational notion of grounding students’ education in their lives and communities. A Japanese educator, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), believed, like Dewey, in experiential education that centered on community studies (Bradford & Shields, 2017; Goulah & Gebert, 2009). The social studies research project presented in this paper provides an ideal research project for learners of all ages, since it is grounded in students’ local communities and engages community members to reflect on the significance of a community building or landmark, and thus, provides an experiential component to students’ education.

One other aspect of GCE is to support students in developing empathy, which links to human rights education and the importance of recognizing how the sufferings of others are connected to us. For social studies teachers who seek to go beyond dates in history, how can educators foster empathetic students? Ikeda (2010) suggests an essential element of global citizenship is “the compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one’s immediate surroundings and extends to those suffering in distant places” (p. 112-113). The kind of research in this paper provides an approach for students to develop this kind of “imaginative empathy.”

This research brings together a local school in Dallas, Texas with a community elder who attended that school and sheds light on ways racism affected her life, along with the other African American

children in her community. In this way, GCE as a conceptual framework ties the local community with those around the world who have similarly experienced the negative impacts of hegemonic racism. Both cinder and soul come together in our research. This kind of social studies research is valuable and important today to connect students with their communities and support them to link their experiences to larger global issues.

Method

Research Design

This paper is a qualitative research design called “bricolage,” which Maxwell (2013) describes as an approach to research “which rejects the idea of following a pre-established plan or set of methods in favor of a more spontaneous and improvised use of the resources at hand” (p. 6). We encourage our audience to see the history of African American education in an unexpected way (Wibberley, 2017), by weaving together the story of a building with the story of an individual’s experiences in and connection with that edifice. Once the researchers chose a school to study, they established connections with the school’s principal to arrange a visit and, based on seeking a purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2013), a former student of the school, now an elder in the community, was contacted to be interviewed for this research.

Participants and Procedures

Due to the nature of this research that focuses on both a school building and a former student, the main participant of the study is Dr. Njoki McElroy, who was interviewed for this research. The interview was recorded audibly and visually with the consent of the participant. The principal of the school also provided helpful historical information.

The researchers began with historical research on the school’s founding, along with investigation into other illustrious students who attended the school. After conducting a visit to the school, taking a tour of it, and meeting with the principal, the researchers interviewed the participant who had attended the school as a young child. The participant also joined the researchers for the tour of the school; thus, the interview was conducted in two parts: during the tour of the school and later in the residence of the participant. Notes, pictures, and sporadic video were taken during the tour. The in-home interview was fully recorded, audibly and visually, with the consent of the participant,

and lasted for about an hour. After the interview was completed and transcribed, the researchers conducted an analysis of the data and searched for themes.

Mimicking a key characteristic of a bricolage, the chunks of data--information about the building and the participant--were pieced together in the creation of a more meaningful whole (Wibberley, 2017). The “pieces” of this bricolage are presented in two sections. In the section below, we present the historical research uncovered about the school, N. W. Harllee, and in the section following that, we present data from the interviews with the participant.

N. W. Harllee Elementary School: Findings and Discussion

Erecting a building allows that space to hold memories, and the installation of memories transforms that structure into a place—space that is known and can become a place to which an individual is emotionally bonded (Milligan, 1998; Rich, 2012). As we began our journey of discovery to formulate a building biography of N. W. Harllee School, we began to pay attention not only to the episodic progression of the building and its uses, but also to the people whose experiences and memories give this old edifice a soul. Thus, if one of the oldest elementary schools for African American children in Dallas, Texas could talk, what would it tell us of its struggles, its challenges, the children who attended and their families, and the teachers’ indomitable spirit to lift children up—against all odds?

Of the two definitive books available that recount the history of education in Dallas, Texas – *A Century of Class: Public Education in Dallas 1884-1984* (Rumbley, 1984) and *Education in Dallas: Ninety-two Years of History 1874-1966* (Schiebel, 1966), there is no mention of the elementary school, N. W. Harllee School beyond the names of the principals and scant biographical information about the school’s namesake, Norman W. Harllee. Together, these books on the history of education in Dallas cover over 600 pages, replete with photos, information on curriculum, school leaders, details on many schools, and yet, not a word about a school that played a central role in the education of so many African American children who resided in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas, specifically the areas known as “The Heights,” “Tenth Street,” and “The Bottoms.” The focus and emphasis on the history of education in Dallas was whitewashed and excluded the rich histories of African American schools. This is evidence of the kind of systemic and institutional racism in which the histories of African Americans have been ignored and overlooked. Looking at a brief history of education in Dallas may be helpful.

Segregated Schools

When the Dallas Public Schools were organized on June 16, 1884, historians note that there were four “White” schools and two “Colored” schools, and that all of the schools were numbered, rather than named (Rumbley, 1984; Schiebel, 1966). It is possible that one of those original “Colored” schools became N. W. Harllee, but there is no information to back that up or clarify that point. Rumbley (1984) further states that in 1884, there were six Black teachers for the one hundred and eighty-one Black students and three Black principals (p. 4). Rumbley’s research also revealed “in 1884, the only education for Black children was offered in the basement of St. Paul Methodist Church. There was preaching on Sunday and teaching during the week, and the same man did it all, the Reverend Harris Swann” (p. 16). Scheibel (1966) uncovered two of the principals’ salaries in 1885: the principal of White School No. 3, J. P. Vaughn, earned \$630.00 per year as a principal and J. W. Ray, principal of Colored School No. 1 from 1888-1895 earned \$650.00 per year. It is difficult to imagine that two principals in Dallas, Texas in the late 1800s—one White and one African American—earned similar salaries. Was this a rare moment in Dallas history when ideas about economic equity, parity, and justice prevailed? Possibly, but it is also conceivable that another reason can account for this:

As there were no public schools [for African American children] in Dallas and vicinity at that time [late 1800s], he [J.W. Ray] settled in Dallas and organized private schools at Plano, Jefferson, White Rock and Dallas. The Dallas school was taught at the Boll Street C. M E. Church. (Brewer, 1938, p. 8)

Since the private schools that Ray founded were then incorporated into the Dallas public school system, it is possible that some kind of financial arrangements may have been made for those functioning private schools to become part of the larger public education system. While this is purely speculation and beyond the scope of this paper, this may be a reason why Ray’s salary was on par with the White Dallas principal’s salaries.

The contradictory accounts about the early education of the descendants of enslaved Africans in Dallas shows us the consistent pattern of a lack of accurate historical information about the education of African Americans in Dallas. Different historians present conflicting information: one states that private schools for Blacks existed, founded by J. W. Ray, while another states that the only education for Blacks was in the basement of a church. The current [White] “definitive”

histories of education in Dallas, however, reveal no shortage of documentation on the education of immigrants and early colonial settlers who controlled the educational system in Dallas from its inception. Ironically, Rumbley (1984) indicates that “the first school board report stated that all children of Dallas from the ages of eight years to sixteen years regardless of race and color were invited to come to school” (p. 4). While the term “segregation” is never mentioned, it is evident (Rumbley, 1984; Schiebel, 1966) that Dallas public schools were strictly segregated by race from the very beginning.

The Community & the School’s Namesake

What was the community around N. W. Harllee School like, and what do we know about the people who resided there? According to the booklet *The Tenth Street Historic District: A Historic African American Neighborhood in Dallas, Texas* (1994), the site of the N. W. Harllee School on 8th Street was originally called Hord’s Ridge, named after the Hord Family, who owned enslaved Africans. In that booklet (1994), we learn that after the Civil War, the formerly enslaved Africans learned of their freedom on June 19, 1865 and the freed men and women were deeded 10 acres of land (p. 2). The neighborhood of N. W. Harllee became a thriving Freedmen’s Town that centered around two churches, Harllee School, the cemetery, a bottling plant, pharmacy, barbershops, movie theater, nightclubs, and funeral homes.

In the late 1800s, the community clearly had a school, and according to a Texas-based non-profit organization called buildingcommunityWORKSHOP (2013),

the Ninth Ward Negro School, originally built next to the Oak Cliff Cemetery along Eighth Street in 1893, was also a center of community life. Later rebuilt as N. W. Harllee Elementary in 1928, the school was attended by students from the Heights, the Bottoms, and Tenth Street, furthering their chances of a better life. (p. 12)

This information about the school and community has only recently been uncovered by organizations that are putatively seeking to preserve the rich history of this freedmen’s community. However, due to the neighborhood’s view of and proximity to downtown Dallas, as well as the costly revitalization of the Trinity River area, fears and concerns of impending gentrification have been expressed, even by the principal (Onjaleke Brown, personal communication, March 9, 2018) who shared similar concerns on the day we visited the school.

David Perry, a former resident of the 10th Street neighborhood where Harllee is located, shared in an interview conducted by buildingcommunityWORKSHOP on June 15, 2013 that “we were a community, self-sustaining in every way, as far as family support and neighborhood support, political support; whatever it was, 10th Street provided for its own.” In an interview that aired on the Dallas PBS radio affiliate KERA, another former Harllee student, Margaret Benson (2018), remembers that “the streets were nothing but sand” until she was eight or nine, but Benson further reminisced about how “it was [a] very nice neighborhood and the neighbors all worked together at that time.” Most businesses gradually left the area beginning in the 1940s, as residents began to move out, since their incomes increased and they sought to live in newer home developments in other parts of the city.

Some residents refer to this community as “The Hills” because Oak Cliff is a hilly part of Dallas; others call it “The Bottoms” since it’s so close to the Trinity River; others call it the “Tenth Street” area, while others refer to it as “The Heights.” Right next to the school and clearly visible from Harllee’s playground is the Oak Cliff Cemetery, Dallas’s oldest public cemetery, which is a segregated cemetery. In a magazine article in *Advocate Oak Cliff*, Rachel Stone (2011) writes that the “African American portion of the cemetery, which dates from around 1840, is at the rear, in a low place where water from the rest of the cemetery drains.” It seems that disrespect for African Americans in Dallas has been so deeply entrenched that it impacts the living and the dead. And yet, education was seen in the community around Harllee as a critical pathway to rise above such indignities.

The presence of the cemetery next to the school—clearly visible and separated only by a chain-link fence about four feet tall—seemed to affect all the students. In an interview with Margaret Benson (2018), she reminisces about recess, saying that “we would play...we would sit over close to the graveyard when we wanted to relax or whatever with our friends over there because it was still on the school grounds but you had the graveyard next to it and we weren’t allowed over the fence.” For close to one hundred years, Dallas’ oldest public cemetery has been part of the physical and emotional landscape for children attending N. W. Harllee; almost everyone who has been interviewed or has written about the school mentions the cemetery in the same breath as Harllee. How many other elementary schools have been built directly next to and in clear sight of a cemetery? This, too, is beyond the scope of this research, but worthy of contemplation and further

research to demonstrate the many ways that racism functions in our society--geographically, psychologically, and institutionally.

N. W. Harllee School was built in 1928, and since then, it has undergone six renovations, according to information provided by the Dallas ISD, under the Texas Public Information Act. In 1952, the gym was added; in 1963, building "B" was added; in 1987, the multipurpose "cafetorium" was added; and three other renovations occurred in 2011, 2016, and 2017. The original building was 26,246 square feet, and it is currently a two-story structure with 45, 447 square feet.

For whom was the school named? Norman Washington Harllee was born an enslaved man in 1852 in North Carolina, where he also graduated from Biddle University in Charlotte, North Carolina. According to an article by Bolton (n.d.) on the website, the "Afrotexan" Harllee moved to Texas in 1885 and "served for a number of years as principal of the Grammar School No. 2." While the information by Bolton (n.d.) from the website "Afrotexan" also states he is the "author of 'Harllee's Tree of History,' a new and graphic method of teaching history; also Harllee's 'Simplified Long Division,' a new graphic method of teaching long division; also Harllee's 'Diagram System of Geography,'" an extensive search for any of these works proved to be futile. It is truly unfortunate such works have not been preserved. This pattern, however, of erasing, ignoring, disregarding, and silencing the works of African American educators persists. This research on the N. W. Harllee School seeks to challenge that far-too-long-dominant narrative of a Euro-dominant whitewashed version of history.

Former Principals

One of the first principals of the 1st-7th grade Harllee School was H. B. Pemberton, Jr., who served in that position for almost 30 years, from 1927 to 1953. Pemberton's obituary states he came to Dallas in 1921 and served as a teacher at the old Pacific Avenue School, before becoming principal of N. W. Harllee in 1928. Pemberton's 1934 master's thesis was from the University of Wisconsin and it was entitled "Survey of Instruction in the 5th, 6th, & 7th grades of the N. W. Harllee School." It is important to note Pemberton pursued graduate studies in the state of Wisconsin because Texas universities did not accept African American students. Pemberton sought to engage in the kind of rigorous scientific academic research that had become popular in the 1920s and 1930s, and in his thesis, he writes

no surer foundation for constructive progress in achievement may be had than a systematic survey of instruction. Facts gathered through this source designate not only the place of improvement but will indicate the quality and quantity to meet the particular needs of all concerned. (p. 1)

It is clear from reading Mr. Pemberton's thesis that he desired to improve his own understanding about the most current educational practices by working towards his master's degree in the summer, while also being genuinely concerned about improving the quality of teaching and the level of education for all students at N. W. Harllee. According to a bulletin entitled "The Texas Standard" (1966), both H. B. Pemberton, Jr., as well as his father, H. B. Pemberton, Sr. assumed leadership roles in the Texas State Teachers Association, with the father serving as the 38th president and the son serving as the 54th president. This organization sought to improve education for all African American students, as well as the working conditions of teachers.

Other principals of N. W. Harllee school were E. C. Anderson—from 1953 to 1955; Thomas Tolbert—from 1955-1956; C. L. Dennard from 1956-1957; Harold Lang—from 1957-1971 (Schiebel, 1966). Dr. Delores Seamster was the school's principal before becoming the director of literacy for Dallas ISD. At the time of our interview, Onjaleke Brown served as the school's principal, and according to a 2017 *Dallas Morning News* article, Brown is breathing new life into the school by emphasizing social-emotional learning and focusing on ways to infuse the school with innovative practices. For example, at the time of this research, the Harllee classrooms all had mini trampolines outside their doors for students needing to go outside the room to release some energy and regain their focus. (Since the completion of this research, a new principal has been named, Amber Shields.)

N. W. Harllee has always served mostly African American students, and its rich history in the African American community is significant. According to data provided by the Dallas Independent School District (DISD), N. W. Harllee saw a gradual decline in students from a total of 845 1st-6th graders in 1971 to 200 students in 2011. DISD closed the school in 2013, due to low enrollment. However, in 2015, N. W. Harllee reopened as an early childhood center, and it now serves children in Pre-Kindergarten through 1st grade and plans to add one grade each year.

Research on N. W. Harllee Elementary School reveals a tradition that historically served to unite the students, teachers, and parents. For example, students participated in the Maypole Dance, which has its origins in Europe and celebrates May 1st and spring by having students weave around

a pole holding various brightly colored ribbons, while the girls all wore pastel-colored dresses. Rumbley (1984) provides some insight into how and why this became so popular in DISD schools by referencing the ways that Dallas teachers were influenced by the work of John Dewey, who “said that the teachers should make the most of the holidays” (p. 32). It seems that all Dallas schools held festive pageants towards the end of the school year, and the Maypole Dance was central to the activity for students at N. W. Harllee in the 1930s and 1940s.

Famous Former Students

Several well-known people attended N. W. Harllee, including the blues musician “T-Bone” Walker; singer Erykah Badu; Rafer Johnson, a 1960 Olympic gold medalist and actor; as well as Dr. Njoki McElroy, former professor at Northwestern University and Southern Methodist University (SMU), storyteller, performer, entrepreneur, and author.

Aaron Thibeaux “T-Bone” Walker was born in 1910 in Linden, Texas, just outside of Tyler. His mother sought a better life for herself and her son, so she left his father and they moved to Dallas when T-Bone was two years old. T-Bone attended N. W. Harllee Elementary School for seven years. His mother and stepfather, Marco Washington, were musicians and influenced T-Bone from a young age, as did the family’s friends who were blues musicians, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter (Dance, 2010). Ultimately, T-Bone Walker’s virtuosity was in playing the acoustic guitar, and “Walker thus linked the Texas folk tradition with modern blues as exemplified by the work of B. B. King, who was much influenced by him” (Oliver, 2001). Soulful, electrifying, and powerful blues music, then, came from T. Bone Walker, a former student of N. W. Harllee School.

Another famous musician linked to N. W. Harllee is Erykah Badu, who the former principal, Onjaleke Brown, shared had attended Harllee as a child. Badu’s birth name was “Erica Wright,” and she grew up in South Dallas. While there is scant information about her early education, Badu bloomed while attending Dallas’ Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. As a 2016 *New Yorker* article suggests, Badu is considered the “godmother of soul,” which links another soulful musical genre to N. W. Harllee (Sanneh, 2016).

An Olympic athlete and 1960 decathlon gold medal winner, Rafer Johnson, wrote about his memories of N. W. Harllee in his 1998 autobiography, *The Best I Can Be*. His vivid memory is that the

N. W. Harlee School was a rectangular brown brick building, two stories high, with a scruffy schoolyard spread out behind it. All the students, maybe fifteen to twenty per class, were Black, as were all the teachers. The ten- or fifteen-minute walk from home took us over some open fields, across a small bridge that spanned the Trinity River, and through the cemetery. (p. 16)

Johnson further shares in his writings how his teachers, particularly Miss Bailey, had such a strong impact on him; he clearly credited her influence on him, which he believed was central to his lifelong success as a world-class athlete and actor.

Finally, Dr. Njoki McElroy, author of *1012 Natchez*, playwright, entrepreneur, author, performer, storyteller, and professor, also attended N. W. Harlee Elementary School. McElroy also credits much of her lifelong success on her experiences as a young child at Harlee, and she acknowledges how fortunate she was to have had caring and supportive teachers during those key formative years.

Dr. Njoki McElroy, a Former Student: Findings and Discussion

In order to have a broader and deeper understanding of the history and significance of N. W. Harlee Elementary School, an interview with a former student provided important insights. For this reason, the authors interviewed Dr. Njoki McElroy, (referred to as “Dr. Njoki”), who attended Harlee from 1931 to 1937--when it was thriving as N. W. Harlee School. She returned with us on March 9, 2018. The reunion of cinder and soul was moving.

The Cemetery & Other Memories

When asked if there was something about the physical building that stood out to her and brought back memories, Dr. Njoki mentioned the cemetery that sits just beyond the school playground. In the United States, it is highly unusual for a school to be located directly next to a cemetery that has only a chain-link fence separating it from the school, and for that reason, this quote shines a light on how African American students were treated, when considering this important detail.

I think it was first of all, before we got inside, that cemetery was such a marker that it was a daily -- we interpreted the sorrow through knowing that sadness, sorrow was a part of our lives. So we began to get used to -- we knew about death.... It was unbelievably compelling. At playtime, that was our view, we often played along the fence, and sometimes there were

funerals. It was a somber experience for us, but I think the teachers made sure that our experience in the school made up for a lot of the outside. As Black children, we often encountered sadness outside school so the teachers made sure we had happy pleasant experiences.... (2018)

This quote echoes research uncovered that illustrates the depth of systemic racism because of the psychic toll caused by having children play in a schoolyard next to a cemetery to remind them of death and instill fear, subconsciously showing these children they were not revered enough to have joyful surroundings in their schoolyard.

Dr. Njoki also mentioned a second-floor auditorium that held memories for her. Currently, the second floor houses a computer lab and an unused media center. The stairs to the second floor were blocked for the safety of the smaller children, but Dr. Njoki gazed up nostalgically as we stood in front of the stairs. Later, she made the following comments:

...then inside I think what was remarkable to me was that— we didn't see it— but I remember the auditorium. The auditorium was on that second level and that was closed off, but we used to meet daily in that auditorium. All the classes would meet for certain activities in there, and I remember that I had a nemesis, a girl... and something had happened and I started screaming...I was saying, 'I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!' Something she had done to me and, and that stayed with me throughout my life, because one of the students, the male, he was one of those that remembered every detail, everything that ever happened to us and every time, the rest of his life—he died pretty early—but every time I would come back to Dallas and see him he would say, 'oh I hate you, I hate you!' [laughs] And so the lesson that I learned from that is if you don't want to be reminded of your craziness the rest of your life, [laughs] don't do it. (2018)

While thoughts of the auditorium brought back memories of classmates, and the cemetery reminded her of how early she and her young schoolmates learned the truth of their mortality, Dr. Njoki recalled how her teachers spoke life into their students and inspired them to be their very best.

Exceptional Teachers

Her thoughts traveled back to her teachers several times during the interview. The first time Dr. Njoki mentioned her teachers was when she shared with us contents from her antique autograph

book that her mother had kept in the base of an entryway umbrella holder and storage bench in Dr. Njoki's childhood home.

I found this autograph book from 1937, the year I graduated. And it's worn, but it has all of the teachers listed and the grades they taught.... My teachers, the comments that they made.... My birth name was Hilda and she said, 'Dear Hilda, may success and happiness always attend you wherever you may go and in all you do. Ms. Emory, your teacher and friend.' They insisted that they were our friends....and, another teacher was Vivian Thomas, and she lived on Romine Street, that's in south Dallas, and she wrote, 'Hilda, darling, always remember that I am as interested in your success as your parents are, so always be very careful. Your friend.' These teachers were absolutely exceptional.

During the era Dr. Njoki attended elementary school, students ended their year by bringing a small empty book to school and asking friends and teachers to sign their autograph book. In the quote above, we can glimpse how close the teachers felt towards their students, as if they were friends. Since only African American teachers taught African American children during the many years of segregated schools in the US, Dr. Njoki is conveying the close bonds they shared, which is not generally the norm in the more formal teacher-student relationships in US schools.

Later that afternoon, we accompanied Dr. Njoki back to her home where we enjoyed lunch together. After lunch, we sat in her informal living room. The walls told a story of Dr. Njoki's life beyond that of Harlee—separate, but intricately woven together, as the past has a hand in shaping our present and driving our hope for the future. Pictures of her life and experiences in Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Haiti, the Caribbean, and the French West Indies were mesmerizing. Each picture had a story of how it came to be, but as she sat on her white sofa, bathed in the natural light from the sliding glass doors to the balcony, she returned her attention to Harlee and the teachers who had such an impact on her life:

...A lot of the teachers lived in the community, so that they went to the same churches and, so we would see them other than in the classroom, and my parents were friends with the teachers. They were on the same social level with – attended the same social events, and then the teachers made sure that we related to them. They knew us, as opposed to my husband, who went to a public school in Chicago, and he had a teacher in the 5th grade, and she never learned his name during the whole semester, so that distance between the teacher and student was prevalent in the public schools in Chicago, where N. W. Harlee, there was

not this broad distance between the teacher and the student. There seems to have been- they showed us that they were always there to listen to us, to advise us, and it was a feeling that they were able to impart that we—we felt they were more than just teacher; that they were part of our unit, being close to our parents, and we knew that our behavior had to be such that we didn't want the teacher knowing that our parents would be able to tell them without, you know, a lot of writing letters and- to report our behavior. They could just pick up the phone and call our parents and they would realize that- and we knew that and it affected our behavior. (2018)

When asked if she remembered a particular teacher who may have been her favorite, Dr. Njoki had this to say:

...her name was Viola Dixon, and she had this very sophisticated air about her. The way she moved like-- you know, a wave, and the way she tossed her hands and just her manner was striking, and she had all the mannerisms of a wellborn lady [laughs]. And so, I thought that she was just so fabulous. Always well dressed, and another thing too— those teachers never had to raise their voices. So her voice was always modulated and that was one of the reasons why I thought I could be a concert pianist--because of her.

In the above quote, Dr. Njoki conveys how the teachers were part of the fabric of students' lives and deeply connected to their communities. This, again, is not always the norm in US schools, where teachers live in neighborhoods far away from the schools where they teach. We see in her quote a depth of closeness African American teachers and students experienced because they lived together in racially segregated communities.

The teachers at Harlee set high expectations for their students. College was not a hope, but an expectation. They felt they had an obligation to make sure students not only had a love for learning, but also that the students knew they each had an obligation to represent themselves in a way that honored their parents and their teachers. With the bar being set high, Dr. Njoki and many of her classmates went on to make some great accomplishments because, as Dr. Njoki shared, "...they trained us to be champions" (McElroy, 2018).

Even though the classrooms were physically similar to the classrooms of today—rows of desks facing in one direction, with the teacher's desk at the head of the class—the Harlee teachers made that space one of social and academic support, high expectations, authentic caring, and genuine interest. This gave Harlee students the confidence they needed to work hard and reach their goals,

in spite of living in an oppressive and segregated society. Instilling confidence in their students was a key role of the African American teachers at N. W. Harlee.

On September 17, 2016, a historical marker was unveiled on the front lawn of Harlee. The ceremony not only served to commemorate the remarkable things that happened in the 10th Street Historical District, formerly known as “Freedman’s Town,” but also served as the official ribbon-cutting to celebrate the previous year’s reopening of Harlee as the N. W. Harlee Early Childhood Center. “At the historical marker unveiling ceremony, families that had sent up to seven generations of students to Harlee smiled on proudly” (Davis, 2016). Choosing Harlee as the site for the marker is evidence of the respect, affection, and appreciation that the community has had for Harlee for over ninety years.

Conclusions and Implications

It is no easy task to conduct historical research on schools for descendants of enslaved African people who have sought to ensure their children receive a quality education. The pervasive patterns of Euro-dominant male historians have created a narrative that minimizes, hides, or eliminates the True history of people of color, making it difficult to find the stories that report the authentic biography of people cast aside. We are left with puzzling fragments to piece together. Therefore, a pragmatic disquisition regarding the life of the building that bears the name of N. W. Harlee would not have been complete without including the narrative account given by an individual whose being was greatly impacted by the existence of the building and its teachers. As such, this building biography revealed the cinder and soul of a structure that has provided schoolchildren with space, shelter, and sanctuary for over 90 years, while also providing an exemplar of social studies research educators around the world can find helpful.

A research project, such as this one, that brings together cinder and soul, can support students in developing a mindset of global citizenship through community studies. Social studies students can develop critical thinking that links their communities with issues of social justice, and this kind of research on a community site, along with interviews of elders’ remembrances of that site, can contribute to students’ developing transformational knowledge and “imaginative empathy” (Ikeda, 2010, p. 112). Finally, this paper provides important research and data on a school building and the experiences of Dr. Njoki McElroy, who attended that school during a time of severe oppression

of African Americans in the US. This kind of data and research is essential before such historical information is erased from our books and memories.

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