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Carl A. Grant
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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ARTICLE

Revealing Truths in a Troubled Time: A Counter-Narrative on Teaching Urban Students

A Review of Brian D. Schultz's *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 192 pp., \$19.95. ISBN 978-0-8077-4857-2)

Carl A. Grant

University Wisconsin-Madison

Schools are meaningless without a curriculum, but it is more so when it has one that is meaningless (Barnes, et al., 2006).

Recently a student, Sara, approached me and said, "This spring I am graduating. I am sorry I didn't take any of your classes, but I am told that you will not hold that against me; and [you will] be helpful. I am going to Chicago with my boyfriend after graduation. He has a job in the city, so we want to live in the city; therefore, I will need to get a job with the Chicago Public Schools. What do you recommend that I read so that I will become a good teacher?" I gave her my copy of Brian's book--the one he autographed for me--and told her that it would be insightful and illuminating, and said to her, "You can do it, this author did it; hang in there and enjoy." I also said, "It is a rare book, and you may keep it if you promise to read it several times and send me an email to let me know how you are doing." (May 15, 2008)

The definitions of a rare book on the web include these: "When few copies of a book are known to exist, it is called rare"; and/or it may also refer to "Unusual, old books that are considered valuable due to unique qualities." While I am not interested in having an argument with those who provide computer information for the web, it is, nonetheless, necessary to offer another definition of a rare book that I think deserves to be included: "A rare book is one that includes valuable content or narrative not frequently found in other books of the same genre." I make this argument because much of the writing about urban Black life by scholars and popular press reporters for most of the twentieth century portrays African American children and families as pathologically and culturally deficient. It was the *rare* book of the twentieth century, such as those by Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Ralph Ellison and a few others, that depicted African Americans "in terms of living tissue and texture of daily consciousness" (Ellison, 1947, p.12) and did not adhere to the "motive of expediency" that Wright (1993, p. 12) described. Although writing about American novelists, Ralph Ellison's statement in his introduction to *Invisible Man* (1947) has much to offer educators doing work in urban areas. He commented that, "I felt that one of the ever-present challenges facing the American novelist was that of endowing his inarticulate characters, scenes and social processes with eloquence. For it is by such attempts that he fulfills his social responsibility as an American artist" (p. xx). I contend that the rich, textured descriptions of African Americans, found in fiction and nonfiction books, are often included in the syllabus of some high school and college literature classes. However, education texts, by and large, unfortunately lack an informed insight into the varied, distinctive, wealth, and complex pattern of Black life.

Education books such as *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom* are "rare." Writings that trouble prevailing non-critical constructions, that give a true sense of what it is like to teach in an urban school, and that portray African Americans as achievers (other than on athletic fields) are rare. Finding a book where readers can almost feel what it is like to be there as a witness and where the theoretical and methodological approaches to intellectual inquiry are connected to the cultural, political and personal is indeed unusual. Critical race theorists (e.g., Bell, 1987; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) refer to such storytelling as a counter-narrative. Shultz's book attempts to get to the root of the issue behind official education policy statements, curriculum, and accountability mandates. He calls for action against unfair education programs. His book endeavors to

speak truth to power, using the voices of students who are often marginalized because of race, low socioeconomic status, and their lack of white privilege. In addition, this work confronts the teachers in classrooms, the education professors who taught them, as well as administrators of the schools. Shultz maintains that teachers can demonstrate the love of their profession and take a firm stand against the power dynamics that seek to deskill teachers.

Since my days in graduate school in the early 1970s, I have been reading articles and books about urban students. Much of the education literature speaks harshly about these urban students, often describing them with implicitly (if not explicitly) pejorative terms such as: “culturally deficient/deprived,” “disadvantaged,” “underprivileged,” “urban poor,” “culturally different,” the “children of parents who don’t care,” and the product of “factories of failure.” Since the 1980s, the description of urban students has not changed very much. Phrases such as “at-risk,” “Title 1,” “receiver of free and reduced lunch,” “in need of medication in order to control classroom behavior,” and “displays oppositional behavior to mainstream culture—‘cool pose’” are commonly heard among school staff members. These labels have become ubiquitous code words for what Gans (2007) called the “underclass” and are indicative of what he identified in another context as the distortion and misrepresentation of poor, ethnic minorities. For example, terms such as “urban,” “Title I,” and “recipients of free or reduced lunch” are often used as codes for “poor Black kids.” Such terms provide a way to negatively conceptualize and classify ideologically, sort, track and profile urban students.

With rare exception does the education literature include articles and books that do not demean, discredit, or blame the urban student, his/her family, culture, or urban schools. I am not referencing articles, reports and books that address or analyze education policy and practice (e.g., *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*; *The Manufactured Crisis*, Berliner & Biddle, 1995), or publications dealing with issues of educational inequality or cultural recognition (e.g., *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol, 1992; *Affirming Diversity*, Nieto, S. 1992) Nor am I treating books about a hero/heroine that comes into an urban school and saves most of the students from themselves: For example, a student struggling with the decision whether or not to become a gang banger or a teenager who becomes pregnant and the teacher convinces her not to leave school. I am specifically concerned with the type of articles and books that give attention to the urban student as a *whole person*. I am focusing on those books that illustrate the humanity of African American students and describe them as achievers who abhor academic failure.

Rare is an education book that gives insight into the totality of African American students: one that carefully examines their life experiences; one that studies how Blacks confront and deal with life’s challenges; and one that reveals their strengths as well as weaknesses. What are lacking are books that treat African American students’ successes and failures, volumes that rely on an entire body of evidence. No longer tenable or valid are those superficial works based on faulty research and limited variables or incomplete snapshots framed and cropped to fit a predetermined data set in order to make a narrow, often erroneous, theoretical argument or which is transformed into a sensational story line in the popular press. Explicitly and bluntly, what I am arguing is that before education researchers begin to describe African American students, they should first re-read Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1947), Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1947/1993), and James Baldwin’s *The Price of the Ticket* (1985), as well as other volumes usually included on the syllabi of ethnic studies literature courses. These works provide a better understanding of the themes and subjects addressed by the diversity of African American students in their classes. Such a literature review offers more than a superficial view of Black people. These readings expose passion, hurt, joy, suffering, and resiliency within a context that is so often filled with matters of life, death, and urgency. After reading such works, education researchers may become aware that many African American students seek high achievements and that their actions are often aimed at raising ethical and moral

questions about basic human rights and social justice. Readers may discover that Black students seek to affirm their own identity and move beyond the idea of “acting white.” A careful reading of this literature exposes one to an often neglected yet essential side of the African American world, where Black people constantly pushed one another to develop a critical analysis of their predicament, achieve self-actualization, pursue knowledge, and persist in trying to secure a more positive disposition that would enable them to acquire a decent life for themselves, their families, and community.

Let me personalize my statement a bit more. From my first reading in the 1950s, I have always struggled with *Native Son*. Although I understand (or think I do) that Bigger Thomas is a character study that shows what a racist society can make one become, and although Thomas’ deed is morally wrong, I also believe that the narrative and events portrayed in the novel, albeit morally wrong and inexcusable, were possible within the life space of African American males. Bigger Thomas was never a character I admired, nor was he one of my favorite characters in African American literature. Rather he was a protagonist whose background and history established the foundation for and led up to his evil deed. For me Bigger Thomas, and to a somewhat similar extent Jefferson in Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), are not “invisible, spooks or Hollywood-movie ectoplasm” (Ellison, 1947). They are conscious, articulate and self-assertive. They wanted the thrill that comes with being high achievers, and they wondered as they faced execution if time and conditions would have changed their behavior. They ask, as many African American students do, “Why are they, unlike Brer Rabbit and his other literary cousin, the great heroes of tragedy and comedy, not allowed to snatch the victory of conscious perception from the forces that overwhelm them?” (Ellison, 1947, p. xxi).

In Schultz’s book, the students are committed to legal transformative actions within a racist education system where the fairness of many policies and practices are open to question. Rare are the publications that portray urban students engaging in positive transformative actions, working within the system to change their life circumstances for the good of society.

Moreover, *Spectacular Things* discusses and describes the act of instruction and makes transparent the constructive and positive roles that teachers play (and ought to play) in an urban school, as well as the complex challenges they face. As has been documented elsewhere, the teacher performs several roles, including director of learning; counselor and advisor to students; active professional; liaison between school and community; mediator of culture; and caregiver (Kinney, 1953; Grant, 1977). Furthermore, this book can serve as a text for pre-service and in-service teachers (both White and non-White) because it shows acts that alter pedagogy, and allows both teacher and pupil to become change agents and empower each other. This book provides numerous possibilities for discussions about the teaching profession and process and the development of teacher education. Professors and teacher-candidates may find Schultz’s book useful for its discussions of the curriculum, classroom management, history, power, class privilege, professional conduct, social and moral responsibility. It may also be a useful guide to encourage prospective teacher-candidates to explore the inner landscapes of their lives as well as to question whether or not they have the commitment and courage to teach (Palmer, 1998).

Much of what is made available to teacher-candidates portrays urban students as economically, educationally, and politically needy, and not as people with internal resources and agency. The college classroom discourse about African American students, for example, is still too much laden with missionary zeal, neoliberal understanding and custodial rhetoric. Educators should ask, “What are we teaching future teachers about urban ethnic minority students when we assign articles and books that, at best, present only negative fragments and overly ascribed labels about urban youths without contextualizing and mooring such work onto a broader framework of contemporary America?” Do we educators realize that we are implicitly and explicitly doing a great injustice? Just as in much of the literary work listed above, do we understand that urban African American students always have to fight

oppression and privilege imbedded within issues of race, class, and gender?

Schultz attempts to answer two enduring questions in teacher education for White students who make up the vast majority of the teaching corps entering teacher education programs: First, can Euro-Americans successfully teach students of color? Second, will students of color reject the “acting white” mantra of “oppositional collective identity” (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986)? These are significant questions for all teachers, and they are matters that continue to evoke discussions. The question regarding White teachers instructing students of color is a legitimate one that requires no hesitation with the response. This question has a long and contentious history in the African American community. In 1933, Carter G. Woodson, in his classic book, *The Mis-education of the Negro*, responded to this question, which was often at the center of discussions on education in the Black community. The following statement by Woodson confronts the question asked by White teachers regarding teaching Black children:

“To be frank we must concede that there is no particular body of fact that Negro teachers can impart to children of their own race that may not be just as easily presented by persons of another race if they have the same attitude as Negro teachers; but in most cases tradition, race, hate, segregation, and terrorism make such a thing impossible” (p. 28).

Between Woodson’s statement about knowledge and disposition and Schultz’s positive disposition toward his students and his actions against policy and practices that foster inequalities for his students, teacher-candidates may use these questions and actions as a rubric to interrogate their own inner landscape. Once such an interrogation is under way, they may wish to look anew at Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) “acting white” thesis and ask, are the students in Room 405 presenting an “oppositional collective identity,” or are they acting more consistently with the thoughts and thinking that comes out of their history and culture? This history includes slaves risking death or mutilation to learn to read; Fredrick Douglas’ wiliness in tricking his White friends to give him the meaning of words in order to learn to read; Malcolm X’s declaration at a speech at the Founding Rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity on June 28, 1964, that “Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today”; and Barack Obama becoming editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.

Now, let me return to my definition of a rare book--“A rare book is one that includes valuable content or narrative not frequently found in other books of the same genre”--and ask, why are there not more books that seek to illuminate the embodiment of urban students? Here I wish to stimulate conversation and an exchange of ideas. My thinking –until I hear better – is that this rarity in publications exists because few education scholars are interested in investing the research time and doing the homework necessary to conduct education research that will illuminate and report on the whole Black student. The education literature contains publications about African American students regarding, for example, racial desegregation (e.g., Dickens, 2005; Ogbu, 1994; Orfield & Wald, 2000; Tatum, 1997); community (e.g., Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990; Roosa, Jones, Tein, & Crew, 2003; Prelow, Danoff-Burg, Swenson & Pulgiano, 2004); stigmatization (e.g., Swanson, Cunningham & Spencer, 2005; Taylor, et al, 2005); self-esteem and resiliency (e.g., Reis, Colbert & Hebert, 2005; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Lockett & Harrel, 2003); achievement (Coleman, 1966; Laar, 2000; Gutman, 2000); and so on. Let me quickly add that this is significant research, and I am not criticizing it. However, research that provides a more complete and contextualized picture of African American students and other students of color is in great need.

In conclusion, Schultz’s book is indeed a rare book. It tells a poignant story of why and how African American students became committed to high achievement. The book documents the humanity of the students in Room 405, their struggles and failures, and highlights an important and often silenced story

within education books on urban school. In addition, the book answers fundamental questions other than the ones discussed above. It says, “Yes, urban students are excellent conceptualizers and designers of curriculum, higher achievers in math computation, written and oral literacy, local and national history, and sophisticated in their understanding of life and living in urban, oppressed Chicago.” It also makes a strong argument to the educational research community that this is an example of sound qualitative research that meets the expectations of a profession increasingly demanding accountability and research evidence. And finally, it addresses a way in which teaching and schools can truly leave no child behind, for the students’ academic achievement level exceeded state and local standards and their school attendance was excellence.

Confucius centuries ago stated that “the processes of teaching and learning stimulate one another.” In other words, through education, a person becomes dissatisfied with their own knowledge, and even more so through teaching others when they come to realize the inadequacy of that knowledge. Becoming dissatisfied with one’s own knowledge is motivating for self-improvement. Such was the case with Brian Schultz and the students in Room 405, who were dissatisfied with their conditions and the school knowledge they were receiving. They were angry about how they were being ignored and oppressed. They therefore took action to improve themselves and society by calling attention to the city of Chicago and the state of Illinois’s absence of moral responsibility and social obligation. This book is a counter-narrative that speaks truth to power, and is poignantly and correctly captured in a statement by one of the students: “You wouldn’t let your kids come to a school that is falling apart. . .” The students in Room 405 know you would not; and the readers of *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom* know it, too.

Finally, on Monday, June 23, as I was putting the finishing touches on this manuscript, I received a call from Sara. She told me that she had read Schultz’s book and found it eye-opening as well as challenging. She said she had taken a summer job teaching urban students in one of the city’s summer programs. We chatted about the significance of this opportunity and how fortunate she was to get a job so soon. I then returned the conversation back to Schultz’s book and asked her, “What will you take from Schultz’s book to apply to your teaching on Monday?” Sara replied, “I knew you were going to ask me that; that’s why I debated about calling you. However, I would feel ‘chicken’ if I didn’t call. I really don’t know yet what I will take. However, I promise to call you next week and let you know. But, for sure I am going to take something.”

I was not disappointed in Sara’s statement; indeed, I felt optimistic and a sense of hope about Sara’s future teaching in Chicago. Why? Because I think Sara has begun a journey, her own journey across the race, power, and privilege divisions where her consciousness toward African American students’ life experiences, their resiliency in response to life challenges, their strengths and weakness, and the oppression they face daily are becoming increasingly awakened.

As we concluded our conversation, I asked Sara for her address and told her to be on the lookout for a package from me. On Tuesday, I will send her *Native Son*, *Invisible Man* and *The Temple of My Familiar*; along with an article from the *New York Times* that states: “Test scores in grades three through eight improved across the state, with particularly sizeable gains in urban areas” (Medina, 2008). *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way* gives Sara a different way to envision teaching and to assist students in their affirmation of life and to appreciate, accept and affirm the beauty of social diversity, of *life*, in Chicago. But, anyone starting on the journey she is undertaking needs professional supports, collegiality and excellent resources.

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