

Making Dreams Come True — Parental and Community Involvement in the Rural African American Schools in Burke County, Georgia Between 1930 and 1955

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I have a deeply felt sense that important values were conveyed to me in my colored childhood...As a child I was not only protected but also nourished, encouraged, taught, and loved by people who, with no land, little money, and few resources, displayed the strength of a love which knew no measure. I have come to believe that this love is the true value, the legitimate measure of a people's worth (Taulbert, 1989, p. 6).

Dreams are personal desires and wishes based on one's background of information. To dream is to look toward the future with expectations of achieving a goal – a goal set through fond hopes and vague notions of reality. The aspirations of dreams may exceed any real expectations, but these aspirations remain in the sub-conscious with hopes that the dream may come true in some way.

Dreams for children are based on the immediate surroundings and circumstances associated through the limited knowledge base that we find in young minds. As children mature, their dreams becomes less fantasy but remain illusionary to meet the needs of anticipation to advancement and prosperity found with expectations. For a child to reach for the stars and dreams, parents must realize these dreams are possible and must be willing to provide the support to make these dreams an actuality.

Dreams for the African American child in rural areas of the South between 1930 and 1955 were often short-lived and were tied to the agrarian culture of the time. Cotton was KING and the African Americans were tied to the farm and its products. Crops, with their plantings, cultivations, and gatherings, were the subsistence for the rural African American family. The entire family, parents and children were dependent on the agrarian calendar and its income for support and existence. Children from an early age were required to share the workload in the fields, and they were considered as much a part of the workforce as were their parents. From sun-up to sundown, parents and children worked the red clay furrows of Burke County, Georgia, to find a meager means of livelihood. As sharecroppers or as manual laborers, African Americans were dependent on the

landowners (who were white in more cases) for their standard of living. These landowners had African American families tied to the land. Following the Great Depression and the fall of King Cotton caused by the boll weevil, education for African American children was not a realizable dream for most children.

In the Black Belt of the South, with its African American population varying, but always over 50 percent, the rural areas were where the African American children were found. The small urban centers could provide a living for only a minority of African American parents as household workers or as laborers in the urban businesses. The plantation system of the Old South had left large farms with the African American family many miles from any urban settlements where schools were available. Most counties had only one African American high school in the county seat and public transportation to that school was not an option – something of that magnitude had not even been a dream during the 1930s.

Burke County, Georgia, was in the Black Belt and was the county with the largest usable landmass of any county east of the Mississippi River, about the size of the state of New Hampshire. The African American population varied between 75 percent in the 1930s to 68 percent in the mid-century with the agrarian base being the background for the large rural populations that were shown to be 80 percent even into the 1950s. Because most African Americans were tied to the farmlands and most had minimal or no education, education only seemed an inaccessible dream for most African American children. These children were the labor force and they could not be allowed to be away from the fields during the important times of the agrarian calendar. For a child to attend school would be a hardship for the parent who depended on the labor for the crops. The child would not only face a hardship of work before and after school but would have, in many instances, the walk of miles to go to the available school.

The large landmass of Burke County only exaggerated factors found in all areas of the rural South during the first half of the 20th Century. No transportation of African American children to large urban areas forced the opening of many small one- and two-room rural schools with the majority having fifty to sixty children in an area that would comfortably hold between twenty to thirty students. Burke County had 128 rural one- and two-room schools with elementary grades for African American children; most were overcrowded because of the great numbers of children whose parents were tied to the farm and were found in the remote rural areas. Georgia had an easily forgiven and loosely written attendance law that was poorly enforced because of the needs for the children to work in the fields and because there was not sufficient room in the classrooms if all of the children attended school regularly.

One- and two-room schools were placed in areas surrounding the farms in buildings that were already in place. Abandoned cabins were used in some areas while churches were used in others. If the church was the location, the teacher had to make a school out of the building on Monday morning, but return it to a church on Friday afternoon. All school-related items were packed away for the weekend only to be gathered and replaced for school during the week. Because of the lack of equipment found in most of these rural schools, this task did not require a great deal of time nor did it take a great amount of energy; school was held at the sympathetic understanding of the church members. Other schools were held in benevolence society halls that were in many cases as dilapidated as the abandoned cabins. School buildings for rural African American children were not owned by the board of education but were places found by parents who had dreams for their children. These buildings were already the center of community activities because farm labor tended to meet for church or for society meetings as their social outlets. What other place would be considered to be used as a school but the center of community activities and social life?

Mrs. Willie Henry Benefield, a teacher in one of the small rural schools in Burke County, remembers being told to run for cover in a ditch if a storm approached rather than stay in the society hall where she taught. The general feeling was that a big wind would blow down the building and the holes in the roof and walls gave little protection from the elements.

Some buildings were at the ends of muddy roads or beaten paths with vines and underbrush so thick that only those with a real desire to learn would walk knee-deep in streams and through red clay to school. Many of the structures required the student to bend over to enter the room with a dirt floor with no windows and only the one door for light. If the door was closed in inclement weather, the building was too dark to hold classes. The environment for learning was not one

where the student would dream for knowledge, but the availability of the site was often the only pre-requisite for its use.

The local board of education might assist with some repairs on these poor buildings, but parents were required to provide the labor and part of the monies needed to do the repairs. In most cases, the board provided the teachers' salaries and only minimal supplies. The remainder of the monetary support for the rural African American schools came from the parents and the community leaders with the foresight to see the need for and education for African American children.

The parental groups who lived in the larger outlying communities with the larger numbers of children were often able to obtain the required 1/3 of the monies needed to match the funds given by the Rosenwald Fund and the 1/3 provided from the county funds from the board of education. The combination of philanthropy, county monies, and the donations found by the parents acquired more advanced and better constructed buildings with the more advanced equipment for learning. But for the small out-of-the-way school that perhaps served only a small handful of farms, these funds were not available; the children sat in cold, bare buildings in all states of disrepair. The parents provided what was available and made repairs as possible, but the dreams in these buildings were based on the pure desire for the upward mobility in society for their children.

Most of the teachers were only a step beyond being a student themselves. Many were students in grades five through eight, depending on the level taught in each school, were students one day and teachers the next. If the leaders in the board of education tested these students and found them above average for their educational level or the students had specific abilities deemed proper for the teacher, the advanced student would become the teacher as schools opened or teachers returned to the agrarian economy where they could receive higher wages. Mrs. Savella Hall was a sixth-grade student in a small rural school in the far outreaches of Burke County when the superintendent of schools set out to find a teacher for a new school opening in that part of the county. She remembered that she was the only student between Waynesboro, the county seat, and her school that could answer an arithmetic problem. The superintendent of schools had stopped at each school he passed trying to find someone to satisfactorily complete the problem. He asked no responses concerning language or reading skills, only arithmetic abilities. When the school opened, Mrs. Hall was its teacher for two years before she herself returned to school to complete the seventh and eighth grades.

Prior to the 1950s, the above-described education was the pattern found in most rural African American schools. The students were taught the knowledge of the person who was the teacher. If that person was especially adept in

arithmetic but not in language skills, the students were given a background in the very basic arithmetic with little or no attention given to language skills. If the material previously learned by the teacher was incorrect, the students in most cases were taught inaccurately. The teacher had few materials, such as books, maps, charts, etc., for teaching students on several levels of ability and grades or for obtaining accurate information to provide the students.

Only menial, worn-out supplies were provided by the local board of education, making parents responsible for the seating, books, heating, repairs, and other necessities for keeping a school in operation. Parents met in these buildings to discuss the needs of the school for their children making them the social centers in the rural areas. These parents discussed ways to supply, to the best of their ability, the needs of their children from the meager income they received as farm laborers and sharecroppers. Most lived on less than a \$1000 per year for the large families, making any donation to the school an even further hardship on the family.

Perhaps the teacher had possession of the only textbook – one that had been discarded by the white schools with missing pages, with food spilled on the book that brought roaches and other varmints to eat what pages were there, or the books were so out-of-date that the information taught was obsolete. Dr. Justine Washington recalls teaching the educators to make textbooks from old magazines just to have some materials for teaching. In some cases families bought textbooks for the eldest child and each subsequent child – for as many years as there were children – used the same textbook. A single classroom might have numerous different books while the teacher was trying to teach each level of students in the schools that often had sixty to eighty children on the rolls in one room. If parents were in favor with the landowners for whom they worked, the children might be lucky enough to be given the hand-me-down books from the white children for the use of African American children in these small overcrowded rural schools.

Supplies were shared between those children who had meager amounts and those who had none. Teachers did not have more than a small blackboard, a book, a bell, and maybe a chart for alphabets. Means of providing study or enhancing materials was an unheard entity. The bare necessities for learning were not available so niceties that aided learning were never found in the small rural African American schools. Teachers, who were already at a disadvantage because of their less than minimal educational background, were now in dire need of any assistance. Those few teachers who had access to newspapers and magazines had an advantage in the classroom. But most teachers and student had no way of obtaining printed materials so parents tried to provide these missing links in the classroom. Through box lunches, cake sales, singing meetings, or whatever

creative method, parents of the children tried to find ways to gather monies to assist their children and the teachers. The local board of education sent sparse supplies as teachers visited the main office once a month to procure their salaries. At all other times, children were responsible for their personal needs as well as such school necessities as fuel for the potty-bellied stove or for the repairs of the building. Parent organizations were strong in trying to meet these needs that allowed the school to become an effective community element. Minimal tuition was often charged to families before allowing the children to attend the public schools.

Teachers were paid less than many farm laborers and in most cases were forced to work as manual laborers during the times that schools were not in session, including afternoons after school. To assure that a school would have a teacher, many African American families opened their homes as places for the teacher to live. These teachers joined their students in walking eight to ten miles to school; they then worked in the fields beside these children in the afternoons as they assisted with the farm chores. Then at night they would begin teaching the parents in basic curriculum matters so the older parental student could run their farms more efficiently. From Sunday night to Friday night, the teachers were constantly teaching someone – providing educational opportunities for the illiterate or the barely literate community members. They taught the 3-Rs as well as the latest farm methods for the men. For the women, new standards in canning, cleaning, personal hygiene, and sewing were taught to improve the health and home environment of the families. Even into the mid-1950s many of the teachers were barely literate themselves, but they willingly gave what information they knew.

Because the educational background of African American teacher was weak and inadequate, the General Education Board – during the first half of the 20th Century – provides monies to be used to hire educated African Americans to assist with curriculum planning and to supervise the teachers in the small one- and two-room rural African American schools. These supervising teachers were called Jeanes Supervisors. Their positions were not easy ones because they were caught in a quandary of being “outsiders” to African Americans – persons brought into the community as refined educators – and not persons who understood the impoverished people in the rural farm environment. For the Jeanes supervisors who had the need to build trust with African American people, the first impressions were important, but the educational level and the urban background of most Jeanes teachers were negatives in building the necessary confidence. To the white leaders of the community, the Jeanes supervisor was the person who had an education and would foster their desires. For African Americans, the Jeanes supervisor was the person invading their culture. The Jeanes

supervisors in most instances were accepted by neither the African American communities because of distrust nor in the white communities because of the prevailing social standards. Robert Cousins, Director of the Georgia Division of Negro Education, wrote to the county superintendent in 1945, "I consider the job that the Jeanes supervising teacher has in Burke county (sic) to be one of the most difficult of any person in the field of education in the state of Georgia" (Burke County Board of Education, Letter dated June 27, 1945).

With the 128 rural African American schools in Burke County that had been opened and with the great landmass of the county, the effectiveness of one person to supervise so many teachers would be questionable. The Jeanes supervising teacher was lucky to visit the schools twice a year – visits that lasted only a few minutes before moving onto the next school. But parents, wishing to gain favor for the school so their children would receive the needed supplies – often provided gifts and monies to be used for white community-wide activities such as the heart fund, cancer society, etc. Money raising techniques became a mainstay for the small rural schools – monies for their own supplies and needs but also to assure favor with the Jeanes supervisor who chose the teachers for the schools and distributed the measly supplies and equipment.

Parental and community involvement and pride – the highly desired elements in education today – were very real and necessary in Burke County, Georgia, between 1930 and 1955. The rural "Black Belt" county was typical of African American education throughout the South following the fall of King Cotton and the end of the Great Depression. This inherent desire for some parents to assure an education as a road to personal advancement required the dedication of parents to the educational process. The parents were required to sacrifice monies – both in the labor force and in the support of the schools. The agrarian system provided the backdrop for the number of needed schools and for the economic base for their maintenance. Parents built schools, built benches, repaired windows and roofs, and provided wood for cooking and heating. Parents worked extra hours in the fields, fed and boarded the teachers for the school, and sacrificed for African American children to be able to attend school. Parents found places for school to be held and assisted with supplies so that teachers could have the bare necessities needed to hold school. Parents were involved in the schools and the curriculum.

The one- and two-room rural African American schools became the social, political, and, in some cases, the religious as well as educational centers for remote rural communities. Centers that parents were willing to sacrifice to support so that African American children had an upward mobility – a dream on which to build. The parents of rural African American children, especially parents who had previously

received some education, had dreams to assure knowledge for their children as a means of upward mobility. They were an integral part of the educational opportunities provided African American children. They had only to look around them to see the power, influence, and increased wealth that came with literacy. Their educational dreams for their children required many sacrifices to assure that their children were in school – sacrifices in farm labor as well as providing economic support for the rural one- and two-room schools on a regular basis. African American parents and community leaders were willing to give so much to assure this education for their children. Education was the dream created by rural African Americans – a dream of betterment for self and race.

Fulcher, E. M. (1999). *Dreams do come true: How rural one- and two-room schools influenced the lives of African Americans in Burke County, Georgia, 1930 – 1955*. Unpublished dissertation, Georgia Southern University.

Taulbert, C. L. (1989). *When we were colored*. New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc.