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THE EFFECTS OF TEACHING BLACK LITERATURE TO  
A NINTH-GRADE CLASS IN A NEGRO HIGH SCHOOL  
IN PICAYUNE, MISSISSIPPI.

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Education, theory and practice

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THE EFFECTS OF TEACHING BLACK LITERATURE TO A NINTH-GRADE CLASS IN A  
NEGRO HIGH SCHOOL IN PICAYUNE, MISSISSIPPI

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
The University of Tennessee

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

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by  
Mary Ann Woodyard  
December 1970

December 18, 1970

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Mary Ann Woodyard entitled "The Effects of Teaching Black Literature to a Ninth-Grade Class in a Negro High School in Picayune, Mississippi." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Curriculum and Instruction.

Mark A. Christiansen  
Major Professor

We have read this dissertation  
and recommend its acceptance:

Robert S. Thurman

John Joseph Miller

Chris B. Gaff

Accepted for the Council:

Hilton A. Smith  
Vice Chancellor for  
Graduate Studies and Research

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer wishes to express appreciation to her graduate committee: Dr. Mark A. Christiansen, Dr. F. DeWolfe Miller, Dr. Orin B. Graff, and Dr. Robert S. Thurman.

Gratitude is also expressed to the principal of George Washington Carver High School, Mr. J. P. Johnson, and his wife for their cooperation, advice, and assistance during the course of this study.

Special indebtedness is acknowledged to the writer's husband, Robert L. Woodyard.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which reading ability and self-concept were influenced by the teaching of all black literature rather than the materials in the state adopted text to a ninth-grade class at George Washington Carver High School in Picayune, Mississippi.

Two ninth-grade literature classes with 30 students each were taught for one semester. One of the classes was taught material from the state adopted text; the other was taught a collection of black literature.

The California Reading Test and the Tennessee Self Concept Scale were administered to both classes at the beginning of the semester and again at the end of the semester. Mean score increases for the two classes were tested to determine significant differences in increased reading ability and change in self-concept.

Analysis of the data produced the following results. Both classes increased their reading scores, but there was no significant difference in increases between the two classes. Both classes scored higher on all dimensions of the self-concept scale, but Class II, which had been taught the black literature, scored statistically significantly higher on all five of the self-evaluative dimensions.

The results of the study seem to warrant the following conclusions: (1) the kinds of reading ability measured by achievement tests is not greatly increased or retarded by studying black literature

instead of the state adopted text; (2) the self-concept or self-esteem of Negro students may be greatly enhanced by studying black literature; and (3) textbook publishers would be justified in giving wider recognition to Negro writers and material about Negroes.

PREVIEW

## PREFACE

Before undertaking this study, the writer considered a number of related problems which might have affected the results of the research or the welfare of the participating students. The reaction of students in an all-black school to a white teacher was considered a potential problem. Any student hostility, resentment, or failure to participate in class activities would have been detrimental to the learning process. The possibility of language differences was also considered.

As the study progressed, both this writer and the regular teacher, Mrs. J. P. Johnson, concluded that there was no observable undesirable reaction. Student participation and cooperation were excellent in both classes, attendance was better than average, and several parents indicated that they too had been reading the paperbacks which their children had received.

However the presence of language difficulties was more difficult to determine accurately. The students were always willing to explain words or expressions which were unfamiliar to the writer and only two students displayed any difficulty understanding classroom English.

It is the opinion of this writer that the successful relationship which she was able to establish with the students was due largely to the influence of the regular classroom teacher, Mrs. J. P. Johnson, who was always warm and hospitable.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### I. THE PROBLEM

##### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which reading ability and self-concept were influenced by the teaching of all black literature rather than the materials in the state adopted text to a ninth-grade class in a Negro high school in southern Mississippi.

##### Importance of the Study

Recently there has been a growing awareness on the part of educators that the literature available for classroom use reflects, with few exceptions, the lives, interests, values, and achievements of white people. The Negro is often either omitted or presented as a caricature or stereotype.

Reading ability is generally believed to be one of the most important factors for success in school work. It is also believed that interest in and identification with the literature being used encourages reading and thus improves reading ability. Logically one would conclude that presenting the Negro student with literature that depicts his race, with its problems and its achievements as a worthwhile part of American society, would increase his interest in reading and his sense of identification and thus improve his reading ability and his concept of himself as a member of his race.

At a time when ways are being sought to improve the educational opportunities of the Negro, it is obviously important to know whether the above conclusion is valid. The importance of this study is in the attempt that it made to test that conclusion.

### Delimitations

This study was limited to ninth-grade students at George Washington Carver High School in Picayune, Mississippi, a rural community where racial segregation is the accepted social pattern. The students participating in the study live in what is currently referred to as a culturally deprived area. Approximately one-third of the 10,000 people living in the school district are Negroes. Dual school systems for the two races have always been maintained. Nearly all of the Negro families have very low economic status and are restricted to menial jobs. They live in sub-standard housing in segregated neighborhoods. On the basis of race, they are denied use of the public library and swimming pool, and the hospital except for emergency treatment. Doctors and dentists maintain separate waiting rooms for them. Presumably the amount of printed material that students from these families have access to is limited and that which depicts Negroes in a favorable light is especially restricted. Local newspapers rarely picture Negroes involved in social or civic activities but usually have news and pictures of those involved in crime.

Members of the Negro community display considerable interest in the school and in the general welfare of their children. A volunteer summer recreation program provides sports activities, swimming, scouting,

and church activities. The high school library is kept open daily during the summer months. The children and youth are provided for by responsible Negro leaders and agencies in the community, but all their activities are racially segregated.

In this study an attempt was made to evaluate only those increases in reading ability measured by the California Reading Test and changes in self-concept measured by the Tennessee Self Concept Scale.

## II. ASSUMPTIONS

The following assumptions were basic to this study:

1. The study of literature influences reading ability and self-concept.
2. The units developed for this study represented the best available black literature suitable for the age group being taught and permissible in the selected geographic location.
3. The difference in degree of influence of various kinds of literature can be measured.
4. The effects produced by the difference in race of the teacher and the students were similar for the experimental and the control class and did not affect the results of the study.

## III. DEFINITIONS

Black literature. This term was used to designate literature (fiction, biography, poetry, drama, history, and essays) by both Negro and white writers dealing with themes and characters that are predominantly

Negro. In selecting materials, an attempt was made to avoid the stereotype that pictures Negroes as universally lower-class, uneducated, picturesque, simple souls. The best selections show Negroes as people faced with the universal problems of mankind: earning a living, hating and loving, rejoicing and grieving, experiencing success and failure, learning to find their way through a complex world of ideas, and living with other people.<sup>1</sup>

Reading ability. For purposes of this study, reading ability included only those items which were measurable by the California Reading Test: vocabulary and comprehension.

Self-concept. The self-esteem with which the student viewed his physical self, moral-ethical self, personal self, family self, and social self as measured by the Tennessee Self Concept Scale was considered to be his self-concept.

#### IV. STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESES

The basic concern of the study was to compare the effects of teaching black literature with those of teaching the state adopted textbook. The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested for significance in order to make comparisons.

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<sup>1</sup>Charlemae Rollins, We Build Together (Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), p. xiii.

1. There will be no significant difference in achievement in reading ability between classes taught black literature and those taught the state adopted text.
2. There will be no significant difference in change in self-concept between classes taught black literature and those taught the state adopted text.

#### V. OVERVIEW TO PROCEDURES

Arrangements were made with the Picayune Separate School District superintendent and with the principal of George Washington Carver High School to permit the writer to teach two ninth-grade English classes of 30 students each for one semester. No language instruction would be given. The classes would study only literature selected by the writer. All materials selected except those in the state adopted text were supplied by the writer and were subject to the approval of the principal and superintendent.

Since no method of homogeneous grouping was used by the school, classes were presumed to have similar scholastic ability. Students with very low ability levels were assigned to special education classes.

During the first week of school in September, the Tennessee Self Concept Scale and the California Reading Test were administered to both classes.

For the remainder of the semester one class was taught the material uniformly used for ninth-grade classes in the Picayune school system.



The other class was taught a collection of black literature selected by the writer for this study.

At the end of the semester, the Tennessee Self Concept Scale and an alternate form of the California Reading Test were again administered to both classes. After the tests were scored and data tabulated, results were tested for significant differences in progress between the two classes. Progress was measured for reading ability and for self-concept.

During the study the teacher regularly assigned to the two classes spent time in the classes as an observer and was available for advice or consultation.

## VI. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Chapter I contains a statement of the problem, assumptions, definitions of terms, hypotheses, and an overview to procedures. Chapter II presents a review of related literature. Chapter III includes a description of teaching materials, classroom procedures, and measuring instruments. Chapter IV consists of a presentation of the data. Chapter V is composed of a summary, conclusions, and suggestions for further study.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Recently the attention of various groups and individuals has been focused on the teaching of black literature. Black studies programs have been initiated on college campuses. A number of large school systems such as Washington, New York, and Los Angeles have prepared curriculum guides to fill the need for black literature studies in the public schools. Publishing companies have released numerous books by and about Negroes. Even textbook publishers have begun to present a more balanced view of minorities in American life. English teachers have become more aware of Negro literature, and professional publications such as English Journal have begun to deal with the problems of selecting and including Negro literature in the English curriculum.

The Board of Education of the City of New York has prepared a curriculum guide for secondary schools entitled Teaching about Minorities in Classroom Situations which includes a section on the Negro. Suggestions are provided for dealing with specific social situations in the classroom. An outline for teaching Negro literature and Negro culture is included. Lists of books dealing with Negroes and Negro life are provided along with suggested reference books for teachers. The guide is intended to help the secondary minority student improve his

self-image through appreciation of his heritage and to recognize the interdependence of various groups in American life.<sup>1</sup>

What About Me is a summary of materials, available from Scholastic Book Services, that relate to the black experience. The materials include a teaching unit called Which Way to Equality that contains filmstrips, paperbacks, recordings, a resource unit and a teaching guide. Many recordings of Negro music and poetry are available which are suitable for young people. A wide selection of paperbacks for social studies and language arts and hardcover library editions of books for very young children are also available.<sup>2</sup>

The Ebony Book Club provides a source for obtaining the best current books being published by and about Negroes. The selections include books dealing with various aspects of Negro life and thought. Titles include such diverse works as Contemporary Art in Africa by Ulli Beier, Before the Mayflower by Lerone Bennett, Jr., To Be Young, Gifted and Black by Lorraine Hansberry, and Die Nigger Die by Rap Brown.<sup>3</sup>

The Negro Bibliographic and Research Center, a nonprofit, non-governmental, nonpolitical organization, centralizes information about writings on the Negro. The listings report and review American and foreign

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<sup>1</sup>Teaching About Minorities in Classroom Situations: Resource Bulletin for Teachers in the Secondary Schools (Curriculum Bulletin, 1967-68 Series, No. 23. Brooklyn, New York: Board of Education of the City of New York, 1968), pp. 50-55; 106-107.

<sup>2</sup>What About Me? (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Scholastic Magazines, 1969), pp. 1-4.

<sup>3</sup>Ebony, XXV (June, 1970), 123.

publications, both past and current. Adult and juvenile, fiction and nonfiction, and bound and unbound publications are listed. Special issues for July, 1965, and September, 1965, and 1966, focused on books for young readers.<sup>4</sup>

The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History publishes, in addition to the periodicals The Negro History Bulletin and The Journal of Negro History, a number of books that can be used in schools. Among these are An Introduction to Black Literature in America--1746 to Present by Lindsay Patterson, I Too Am America by Patricia W. Romero, An Anthology of the American Negro in the Theatre by Lindsay Patterson, and African Heroes and Heroines by Carter G. Woodson.<sup>5</sup>

The Macmillan Gateway English series which was developed by the Hunter College Project English Curriculum Study Center provides materials for three years of developmental literature and language arts instruction. The program provides four softback anthologies of reading selections for each year. The anthologies were created with educationally disadvantaged students and reluctant readers in mind. The settings, characters, and situations explored in the reading selections are meaningful to students with varied backgrounds and different ability

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<sup>4</sup>Beatrice M. Murphy, Bibliographic Survey: The Negro in Print (Washington: The Negro Bibliographic and Research Center, Inc., 1970), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Brochure (Washington: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1969), p. 1.

levels. The readings are taken from varied sources including This Week Magazine, The Reader's Digest, and A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.

The forms represented in the anthologies include short stories, vignettes, articles, interviews, plays, folk tales, fables, songs, proverbs, poems, and excerpts from books. The illustrations are photographs. There is a comprehensive teacher's manual for each anthology along with recorded songs and poems and transparencies for the overhead projector.

Anthology titles include A Family Is a Way of Feeling, Stories in Song and Verse, Who Am I, Coping, Striving, A Western Sampler, Creatures in Verse, Two Roads to Greatness, Rebels and Regulars, People in Poetry, Something Strange, and Ways of Justice.<sup>6</sup>

Gross and Hardy have compiled a collection of essays which represents various images of the Negro in American literary works. In the essays critics discuss the literary tradition of the Negro in colonial literature, the Southern novel prior to 1800, literature of the Reconstruction, the American Gothic, the early Harlem novel and twentieth-century fiction. The use of the Negro is examined in the work of Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. A useful bibliography of literary criticism dealing with the Negro in American

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<sup>6</sup>Macmillan Gateway English (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), pp. 1-10.

literature is included. This could be a useful work for teachers of Negro literature.<sup>7</sup>

Barbara Dodds studied and evaluated many works by Negro writers. Her purpose was to acquaint teachers and others interested in American literature with the contributions of the Negro. Her work includes a survey of the history of Negro writers from the post Civil War period to the contemporary writers. She evaluates junior novels and biographies for high school students and provides sample classroom units utilizing the work of Negro writers.

Dodds points out that books about Negroes for boys are difficult to find. She recommends four that are popular and of acceptable literary quality: South Town, North Town, Durango Street, and Lions in the Way.

Dodds' work includes a unit for eleventh-grade students based on the Harcourt, Brace textbook Adventures in American Literature and a guide for teaching a unit of ninth-grade Negro literature. The Negro literature guide was prepared for use in the Detroit Public Schools. Useful suggestions are provided for selection of literature, and study guides are included for selected novels. There is a guide for using The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, The Lilies of the Field, and Mary Jane. Dodds' suggestions and recommendations were used extensively by the writer of this dissertation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy, Images of the Negro in American Literature (Patterns of Literary Criticism, No. 5. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

<sup>8</sup>Barbara Dodds, Negro Literature for High School Students (Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1968).

Another current writer, Charlemae Rollins, summarized the changing role of the Negro in literature and in American society. After World War II a growing awareness that the Negro must be fully integrated into American life was noted. Earlier many books depicting Negro life were written in an author-created dialect and were difficult to read and understand. Illustrations were often offensive to Negroes. Relationships between white and Negro were patronizing. Negro characters were usually stableboys, maids, porters, or other menials. No professional Negroes were in the books. The Negro character always spoke in a Southern dialect.

Many books now being published depict Negroes in all roles in society. They live and work as equals and are presented as human beings with strengths and weaknesses. Books about Negroes now reflect the strides that the Negro has made in his struggle for human dignity.

Rollins' work is a valuable reference book of Negro literature for children and young people. She provides an extensive bibliography, an evaluation of many works, and a comprehensive list of publishers and prices. Her work lists Negro literature available in picturebooks, fiction, history, biography, poetry, folklore, music, science, and sports.<sup>9</sup>

Robert Bone discussed problems of Negro literature in English Journal for April, 1969. He stated that next to nothing had been done

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<sup>9</sup>Charlemae Rollins, We Build Together (Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), p. xiii.

by way of preparing materials for Negro literature for high school and junior high school students. He evaluated two anthologies of Negro literature: Black Voices edited by Abraham Chapman and Dark Symphony edited by James Emanuel and Theodore Gross. The level of taste in these two anthologies was judged to be high. Bone felt that both contained teachable materials for high school students. However he felt that more material that treats Negro literature extensively and in depth should be made available.<sup>10</sup>

Dorothy Dee Bailey directed a class which worked as a research team in compiling an annotated bibliography of reading materials to be used with culturally deprived students. A bibliography for teachers lists both books and articles helpful for those working with deprived students.<sup>11</sup>

Dorothy Sterling found that despite the current emphasis on racial problems few books exist that present honestly the Negro experience in the United States. In the past decade the number of children's books which deal realistically with Negroes has increased, but they comprise only about 1 percent of the total number of children's books published. Children's readers have improved, but history texts are "disappointingly full of misstatements, omissions, and bias."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Robert Bone, "Negro Literature in the Secondary Schools: Problems and Perspectives," English Journal, LVIII (April, 1969), 110-115.

<sup>11</sup>Dorothy Dee Bailey, Teaching English to the Culturally Different (West Chester, Pennsylvania: West Chester State College, 1967).

<sup>12</sup>Dorothy Sterling, "The Soul of Learning," English Journal, LVII (February, 1968), 166-180.