

"Looking for Ms. Wheeler": An instructional model for teachers

By Gregory L. Gudger

The succession of Gudger Brothers who attended D.C.'s Shaw Junior High School were 'turned on' by Ms. Wheeler. In fact, the majority of our peers who had the pleasure of attending her 7th grade English classes--whether they were scheduled to or not suffered the same adolescently-amorous affliction. All the male teachers who sought her attention had advanced cases of the same.

Physically, she was a strikingly voluptuous brown-skinned woman whose carriage reflected both dignity and the restrictiveness of skin-tight dresses. On her head, she wore a red-tinted wig that fooled no one (the 'afro' didn't exist in '63), and nearly matched her heavily-rouged cheeks and painted lips.

Not only was she 'fine', but Ruth Wheeler's reputation as a teacher was well documented; punctuated by waiting lists of 'transfer-vultures', hoping for dropouts which were so sadly common in low-income, inner-city schools.

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Speaking with a partially-controlled lisp, accenting her word endings, Ms. Wheeler conveyed formality and competence; on the other hand, she could 'break it down' to you if necessary, having proven on occasion that she could wrap a 'bad' kid up in the 'word-games' ghetto children play as if she taught 'joining' too. And nobody threatened her: that would bring every male teacher in the building down on your behind...and these big black men did not play around when it came to discipline.

Parents liked Ms. Wheeler also, because she could talk at length about each of her students--past and present--high lighting both assets and shortcomings while recommending a specific strategy for academic success. She would always compare me favorably with my two brothers whom she had also taught. "He's a loud little thing, and he is too talkative...but he's a good student," she'd say, not totally revealing the full extent of my wrongdoing. I think every kid 'owed her one' on that.

However, I must confess (17 years later, and 3,000 miles farther from my mother's wrath) that I made Ms. Wheeler angrier than any student had ever done.

My day of reckoning was a cold one--like most are during Capitol City winters--and the classroom was buzzing in Ms. Wheeler's absence just before the final bell for the beginning of the period rung. We were still talking about the morning 'shakedown'--a periodic 'safety precaution' employed by the school administration which entailed the frisking of each student before he/she entered the building, to stem the flow of knives, box-cutters, 'little sluggers' and zipguns into Shaw Junior High. (Footnote: this school was well-known as one of the toughest in the City--even the East Coast. Shaw posed such a discipline problem, it is said, that the United States Congress passed an austere school disciplinary program and aptly named it 'the Shaw Plan.'

Just as somebody was finishing the report of how one 'Jolly Joe,' had taken some dude's place in line by literally beating the sn-- well, the congestion out of him, Ms. Wheeler strode in at the bell and commanded our attention.

"Let us turn to page 210 in the text," she said, lipping slightly. "And would someone describe what they see in the picture, there?" The drawing depicted a setting in 17th century Italy, scene of the Shakespearean work we were to have already read. Hands raised, followed by brief descriptions of the marketplace, the crowds, the buildings, merchants, et cetera.

"Did you notice the Black man here in the corner," she asked, holding up her book in front of the class, pointing to the rather well-dressed dark gentleman.

The entire class rumbled with subdued laughter; this was 1963, and the word 'Black' was used as an epithet by the ignorant and the racist.

Ms. Wheeler, anticipating our reaction, waited quietly for the giggling and chuckling to subside. Someone mumbled "Bluejuice,"

and the laughter peaked, lead by my own guffaw. "B-BI-Blueju--Blueju-who-who-ha ha ha." I coupled my laughter with wide-eyed antics that I'd picked up from somewhere outside of my real world.

"GUDGER!"

The unmistakable voice rang in my ears like a shot, mortally wounding all humor; the alacrity of her tone froze my antics. A murmur: "Uh oh."

"What's-so-funny?" she asked, punctuating each word. All eyes in the class were on me; hallway nomads gathered at the open door, "I told you that was Ms. Wheeler," one whispers, "oooo-wee, that dude's in trouble!"

"Yes, I said Black man" she said, weaving through a maze of faces--some snickering--toward my desk, "...and I don't see anything funny about that."

"You're Black...and Blacker than everybody in here at that," she emphasized, eliciting a chuckle that immediately dashed for cover once skewed.

"I'll tell you what...I've got something funny for you, Gudger...I want you to bring me a seven-page book report--tomorrow--on a Black man named Hannibal," she charged. "Now, I'm not going to tell you anything else but his name--Hannibal," and you'd better be ready first thing tomorrow to tell us all about this Black man named Hannibal, and if you don't I will FLUNK you...you hear me?" I nodded meekly. "You might as well not come back to my class again if you don't, DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

"Yes ma'am," I muttered, while struggling to keep the tell-tale gloss of welling tears under control.

We didn't discuss Shakespeare proper at all that day; Ms. Wheeler told us of Black people who lived before, during, and after him. She spoke of status, occupations, contributions and just basic existence of a people I took for granted, like failing to see the forest for the trees.

Finally, she talked about us--Black children--and how we should be very proud to be called Black. Like it or not, we were.

At the end of the period, as I tried to slip quietly out the door, I turned to find Ms. Wheeler's eyes, with warmth--not fire--fixed on mine. I thought I saw her nod slightly, with a smile.

Now, having learned to appreciate my mother's distaste for academic failure--and the encumbrances it could bring--I tore into my World Book Encyclopedias looking for Hannibal. Mom asked me why I was so enthusiastic about wanting to find out more (enough for seven pages) on this most celebrated African military tactician and ruler of Carthage (247-183 B.C.).

"Oh..uh, this is a special project that Ms. Wheeler picked me to do...out of all the other students." Whew, close.

Once completed, I took a certain pleasure in reporting to my classmates that "Victor Mature should not have played Hannibal in the movie." Though somewhat of an unorthodox approach, it brought a smile from Ms. Wheeler, which I interpreted as a sign of forgiveness for my previous display of ignorance. It was okay to have a crush on her again--and a snowball's chance--like my current peers, and my brothers before me.

"...a quality education...is one which does not ignore the fundamental reality of culture, and which honors that reality in the construction of educational experiences..."

The Ruth Wheelers of the world are a special breed of teacher to which other Black teachers, and white instructors, should look to as models. In fact, the retrospective scenario presented above alludes to some of the requisite characteristics for providing quality education, not only to Black students in inner-city schools, but all children...anywhere in this country.

According to the "NAACP Report on Quality Education for Black Americans: An Imperative," published by the NAACP Special Contribution Fund in September

1977, a list of 26 descriptors of a quality education included the following criteria, all of which are reflected in the story:

(1) A curriculum which fosters knowledge and understanding of various cultural groups in America and the world.

(2) A curriculum that provides diverse teaching strategies geared toward individual learning styles and sets...

(3) A curriculum climate which encourages students to develop habits and skills of logic, questioning, and analysis.

(4) Total school effort which undergirds and utilizes the considerable strength of the Black family.

(5) Helping students achieve a positive self-image and understanding of self, plus a knowledge of the environment within which s/he must live; a self-view and world view from cultural, historical, physical and aesthetic perspectives.

(6) Fostering an atmosphere that excludes concepts that destroy, dehumanize, and attempt to attach a badge of inferiority....

(7) Staffing (and governance) patterns at each school level...which reflect the make-up of the total school population so that all children can have appropriate role models.

Outside of the textbook, which included a non-negative cultural reference within the context of the general subject matter, these conditions could either be attributed to, or existed as a function of, Ruth Wheeler's view of herself as a Black teacher. Without question, Ms. Wheeler had embraced--some 14 years earlier than this report--the assertion in the NAACP report that "a quality education...is one which does not ignore the fundamental reality of culture, and which honors that reality in the construction of educational experiences..." indeed she recognized the role of the teacher as both an educator and socialization agent.

The Ruth Wheelers of the world, rare as they are, should serve as models from which to design multicultural, multi-ethnic education models for those who teach Black students.

The NAACP Report recommends (and Ms. Wheeler seemed to embrace and encompass) that course content in teacher education.

- must not only prepare an educator to convey knowledge of the curriculum, but also equip teachers to transmit multicultural/multi-ethnic knowledge within the scope of the curriculum.
- should include meaningful field experiences to encompass knowledge of communities from which students come, and to work with parents and community volunteers.
- should enhance skills in facilitating non-stressful transition of students from one educational setting to another, whether from one city system to another or from a 'racially isolated' setting to a more heterogeneous one.
- must develop skills and sensitivities in group dynamics as well as the emotional and psychological needs of minority students.
- should include the role of adult modeling in the context of learning theory.
- must encompass the study of philosophies of education and cultural pluralism; the history of education and the role of minorities as both producers and consumers.
- must include training in the use and misuse of tests.
- must include training to avoid equating poverty with limited educational capacity.
- must include training to recognize skill and competency 'transfunctionability' to inform

students of many vocational applications of knowledge attained in any particular course of study.

Such a 'Wheeler' model should provide the preservice or the inservice educator an opportunity to know and/or experience the 'meaning' of being Black. "Simply stated," reads the report, "the teacher must be able to sense and/or feel the nuances of being a member of another group in the affective, as well as the cognitive, domain."

The passage of HB 2360 by the 1977 Oregon Legislature--which

requires teachers to demonstrate a knowledge of Civil Rights laws and their underlying philosophy as a condition for certification--is a progressive step toward enhancing the sensitivity of the state's teachers toward Black students.

All education, training, and legislation notwithstanding, the key ingredients necessary for quality education are those that the individual teacher brings to the job. The kinds of people needed for a quality education must like children; be fair; have physical and mental stamina; have basic intellectual competence, and especially, be committed and dedicated to education.

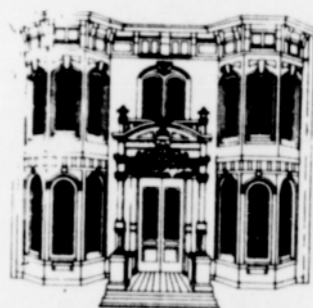
Given all the educational influences and personal characteristics mentioned above as my oils, I could easily paint a portrait of a voluptuous Black woman in a tight dress and red 'fried' wig, who commanded the respect of a long line of adolescent roughnecks like few teachers (people) do.

(Editors Note: Gregory L. Gudger is Chairman of the NAACP Press and Publicity Committee. This article appears in the Portland Branch NAACP newsletter, "Go Tell It...", October, 1979.)



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