

Introduction

The Power, Possibility, and Peril in Histories of Literacy

The history of the US public education system is the story of a nation that has continuously struggled to decide who gets educated and what type of education students should receive. While education was originally a privilege reserved for the rich, during the nineteenth century education reformers such as Horace Mann and Henry Barnard championed democratization through education. Mann saw mass education as a means to assist immigrants in becoming American and as a way to lessen the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The concept and practice of public education evolved alongside economic, political, and social upheavals the Civil War had brought on. The nation's landscape was changing, and the common school became the primary source of instruction for patriotism and civic values. In spite of hopes that free schooling could create a unified society, those in positions of power within the public education system and reformers working outside of institutional structures were not always able to articulate who public education would benefit. Diane Ravitch, historian of education, asserts that the struggle “to decide what children in school should learn

and how they should be taught” began at the very inception of public education and continues today (15). Early efforts at public education consistently excluded women, the poor, immigrants, and people of color. Many marginalized communities have continuously fought for access *into and within* these institutions and have built their own when necessary.

The vision for public schooling has never been clear. Noah Webster saw great possibility in being able to instill in students a common vision of the country. Later, John Dewey, like Thomas Jefferson, saw education as a means to create an informed public, thereby preventing tyranny. The idea that public education would help students develop as citizens and normalize a particular set of behaviors conducive to a democracy connects these disparate understandings. Schools have been recognized as much for their ability to educate as they are known for their ability to control. As Louis Althusser has argued, schools can function as institutions that reproduce power structures (50–51). Schools name, present, and promote particular behaviors and epistemologies among students, teachers, and communities. The inherent power and peril in public schooling lies in its promises for educating and preparing citizens.

The experiences of the Black community with regard to citizenship and education often differ from the experience of the majority. Since the arrival of slaves in the Americas, access to literacy and language has represented power.¹ However, acquisition of literacy has not remedied all problems of injustice. Beyond struggle and oppression, both Black adults and children have worked valiantly to provide our communities with access to educational opportunities when all else seemed to fail. A look at recovery work in rhetoric and composition and literacy studies since the late 1990s (Enoch, *Refiguring*; Prendergast, *Literacy*; Gold, *Rhetoric*; Logan, *Liberating*; Moss, *Community Text*; Schneider, *You Can't*; Wan, *Producing*) demonstrates the interdisciplinary effort to understand histories of rhetoric and literacy for groups that were long ignored by mainstream scholarship. This scholarship has helped us to interrogate master narratives about literacy, race, and citizenship.

The belief that access to literacy can offer an opportunity for full participation in a democracy presents a history of struggles, as access is often met with legally sanctioned opposition and empty promises. As Harvey J. Graff has advanced through theories about the *literacy myth*, literacy has long been associated with benefiting both individuals and nations, as it contributes to developing knowledge, order, and democratic participation. However, who benefits is not always clear. Graff's discussion on the history of literacy demonstrates the kind of moral progress that is often promoted about what literacy can do for a society. Graff writes, “The power of the literacy myth lies in the first place in its resiliency, durability, and persistence. It serves to organize, simultaneously focus but obscure,

and offer an explanation for an impressive array of social, economic, and political assumptions, expectations, observations, and theories on the one hand, and institutions, policies, and their workings, on the other hand” (“Literacy Myth” 643). The narrative most Americans are presented with depicts literacy as holding out the promise of progress. Graff complicates this narrative, offering a darker reading of literacy and its possibilities for damaging effects: “Perhaps the literacy myth expresses a hope that literacy alone is enough to end poverty, elevate human dignity, and promote a just and democratic world” (644). The problem becomes that, by attributing social and economic inequality to literacy, Western society obscures the real causes of poverty and oppression.

Graff’s critical reading does not mean to suggest that literacy is unequivocally useless for preparation of an engaged citizenry, nor do I. We cannot discredit the desire found in marginalized communities to obtain access and training in reading, writing, and speaking for advancement, but we do need to understand how this desire is met or is not. For the Black community, literacy has traditionally represented power. As Stephen Schneider has illustrated, literacy education “would prove to be an agency for community organization and rhetorical education in its own right” (10). This certainly would hold true for the Free School. Elaine Richardson’s detailed and thorough entry on African American literacies in the *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* describes literacy practices that come from within the community and delineates the primary goals of literacy for the Black community. Richardson writes, “Literacy for people of African descent is the ability to accurately read their experiences of being in the world with others and to act on this knowledge in a manner beneficial for self-preservation, economic, spiritual, and cultural uplift” (340). A look at scholarship in literacy and writing studies reflects what Richardson describes. From the Sea Island Citizenship Schools to the Black Panther Party’s educational platform, literacy has not made white supremacy disappear, but it has certainly challenged its power. Literacy then means much more than learning to write one’s name or read a job advertisement; literacy is a means of survival, growth, and countering injustices. Free School administrators and teachers were invested in literacy as being an opportunity to provide skills for these students and a way to counter the ideologies and arguments that dominated their communities.

Considerable scholarship in our field has recovered histories of rhetoric and literacy instruction designed for marginalized communities. Jacqueline Jones Royster’s foreword to Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald L. Jackson’s 2004 *African American Rhetoric(s): Interdisciplinary Perspectives* called for “a recovery of achievements and legacies,” as well as research that would “address directly and specifically complex pedagogical problems” (x). This project seeks to answer the call to explore the range of rhetorical and literacy practices the Black community

has employed to resist oppression. Many of the recovered histories in rhetoric and literacy studies illuminate the complicated alliance between literacy and citizenship for groups that have been systematically marginalized from democratic participation. Susan Kates has recounted how responsive curricula and pedagogies have helped marginalized groups confront sexism, racism, and classism. Jessica Enoch's work examining the rhetorical education women teachers employed for Black, Native American, and Chicano/a students in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century helped us to see how these curricula supported students' civic participation in the public sphere. David Gold's recovery of literacy practices and rhetorical educations has challenged our understanding of the relationship between conservative practices and ideologies, arguing that current traditional practices of teaching reading, writing, and speaking do not always oppress students. Jacqueline Jones Royster's pathbreaking examination of nineteenth-century African American women's literacy practices sheds light on a group often erroneously assumed to have had limited literacy. Further, Shirley Wilson Logan has pointed to the importance of understanding sites outside of the traditional—literary societies, Black newspapers, places of worship, and military camps—to demonstrate the multifarious ways in which the Black community has acquired and used language. Carmen Kynard's formative investigation of Black freedom movements in relation to literacy further expands our understanding of literacy in the Black community.

Such rich accounts have allowed us to realize that literacy is more than a set of skills given (or denied) to individuals; literacy also includes practices that represent powerful ideologies that are often connected to citizenship. Scholars such as Amy Wan have now called us to interrogate the history of citizenship and literacy instruction. In *Producing Good Citizens: Literacy Training in Anxious Times*, she argues that scholars in rhetoric and composition have not fully defined or theorized literacy's connection to citizenship and that citizenship "serves as shorthand for a variety of objectives in the writing classroom" (30). Wan's historical analysis recognizes the ways that literacy has been marked as not only a necessary pathway to citizenship but also a restriction. While we have a more robust understanding of how literacy practices have been developed, taught, and employed across communities that have faced systemic oppression, our job now, as Wan suggests, is to continue to interrogate literacy's coupling with citizenship as we work toward the development of curricula and pedagogies that are beneficial for citizens of the twenty-first century. In other words, we must continue to grapple with the question Bradford Stull raised in *Amid the Fall, Dreaming of Eden: Du Bois, King, Malcolm X, and Emancipatory Composition*: "Can composition (literacy) serve the creation of a just society?" (5). I believe the Free School

provides us with a historical response that has contemporary implications for answering this question.

This book continues the work of scholarship in rhetoric and composition and literacy studies that has presented us with windows into the complicated relationship between literacy, citizenship, and the Black community. In this, my work responds to calls for more nuanced histories of literacy that unpack the hope, possibilities, and difficulties in responding to systemic racism through literacy. The Free School is a site where important rhetorical work took place. Its mission statements, philosophies, and curricular guides served not only as documents that guided outcomes and policy but also as arguments against racialized constructions of citizenship in Prince Edward County. Two key questions guided this project in responding to these calls: How was citizenship constructed and contested rhetorically? How did teachers from the Free School teach and encourage marginalized students to become citizens?

Chapter 1 frames the 1959–64 school closures by presenting background on Prince Edward County's earliest struggles with race and the Black community's access to education. I introduce the key theoretical concepts this project investigates: rhetoric, citizenship, and literacy. These terms are pivotal to understanding how the Free School functioned as a response to Virginia's discourse of Massive Resistance and to comprehending the role of the Free School's institutional rhetoric and praxis against systemic racism.

To understand the Free School as an institutional response, one must first understand the arguments and actions to which it responded. In chapter 2 I utilize archival sources to present and analyze the white communities' varying levels of resistance to the *Brown* ruling and the Black response to this resistance on both the national and local levels. By the early 1960s, the Massive Resistance effort had subsided in most parts of the South, but Virginia's social and political leadership continued to uphold laws and a climate of resistance. The closing of Prince Edward's schools depended on this continued effort. Chapter 2 presents an analysis of the key rhetorical tactics used by leading segregationists throughout Virginia.

Segregationist arguments and the school closures did not meet silence or passive acceptance on the part of the Black community. The second half of chapter 2 presents an analysis of the grassroots efforts of the Black church, community organizers, and allies. In particular, the partnership between the Black community and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), part of the Quaker religious organization, would eventually lead to President Kennedy's awareness of the plight of Prince Edward's children. I will argue that the Free School's re-

sponse had much in common with the protest movements of the civil rights era that centered on respectability and access.

Chapter 3 presents the Free School's curricular goals for literacy and pedagogical practices as responses to the segregationists' rhetoric of resistance. This chapter focuses on documents present in the Free School archive. Through the analysis of central documents (handbooks, statement of philosophy, accreditation materials, and curricular guides) I demonstrate how Free School teachers and administrators designed programs to support reading, writing, and speaking that were reflections of their desire to speak back to the institutional structures and powers that kept schools closed. In my review of archival materials, three themes emerged that speak to how teachers and administrators attempted to make this possible. These include: demonstrating respect for students, instruction in Standard English that welcomed students' individual expressions of language and identity, and pedagogical practices that supported and encouraged a variety of ways for students to practice civic participation. These curricular goals and aims were quite similar to those found in segregated Black schools, where teachers believed it their duty to create school systems and opportunities that emphasized the importance of teacher/student relationships and affirmed the students' ability to learn despite the arguments white educators often made about Black children (Walker 200).

The Free School had a vision to teach students "to think and observe carefully" and "formulate answers that are important to our civilization" (Sullivan, "Prince Edward County Free School Association" [Handbook]). To realize this vision, teachers and administrators had to continually negotiate how to meet these goals inside the school, realizing that the school itself was part of a larger community in Prince Edward. There was general support among Free School faculty for the founding mission to create thoughtful, active citizens, but administrators and teachers did not always agree on the praxis necessary to sustain this commitment. Both groups struggled to define and practice a literacy curriculum with culturally relevant pedagogy that could respond to the argument that public civility in southern communities depended on segregation. Conversations reflected in various archival materials reveal both the tensions and challenges involved in establishing curricula and engaging pedagogies that were responsive to the needs of students and mindful of the power white supremacist ideologies held in this community.

While archival documents represent an abundance of formal institutional guidance, and reports teachers completed twice each term describe their experiences in the classroom, the voices of students are thin. Chapter 4 presents student responses that appear through teachers' reflections and contemporary interviews with students who attended the Free School. I work to present a more

holistic sense of what the experience was like for some students, as understanding the students' experiences through the information teachers recorded can be problematic. In this chapter I note themes that surface across both the archive and interviews. First, students recognized the school as a response to Massive Resistance. Second, teachers and administrators at the Free School had to work hard to earn the trust of students.

I conclude with reflections on the contemporary implications of this history and analysis. The Free School offers an example of both curricular and pedagogical responses to political powers and systemic oppression. The unfortunate situation parents and youth in Prince Edward faced is unlikely to occur in the United States again, but the Free School's response does have significance for those committed to antiracist pedagogies, literacy instruction as preparation for citizenship, and programmatic design that responds to institutional racism. The Free School's story reaffirms the inherent power and hope that literacy has held for many marginalized communities; however, it also demonstrates the harsh reality that literacy alone does not solve the problem of inequality and systemic racism. The idea of literacy as a magic remedy, which contemporary scholars and communities have dismissed has waned. We are now challenged to see how the literacy myth perpetuates ideologies and systems that further secure literacy as a gatekeeping function. The hopefulness of communities that turned to literacy as a response to or action against oppression supports a fuller understanding of the limitations and possibilities of literacy instruction as part of the remedy for systemic oppressions.