Black High School Student Activism in the 1960s: An Urban Phenomenon?

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Most accounts of student activism in the 1950s and 1960s examine the protests launched by black and white college and university students to bring about social and educational change. This article examines the contributions of black teenagers to civil rights campaigns during that period, as well as protests launched by black high school students to obtain the teaching of Black History in public schools. Based on articles from The New York Times, Jet Magazine, and other reports on student protests, the author found that while black teenagers were involved in campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s to bring about the integration of rural, suburban, and urban public schools, the school boycotts, marches, and other protests in the 1960s to obtain "quality integrated education" and courses in Black History took place primarily in large urban public school systems.

On the Friday afternoon, November 17, 1967, a crowd of black high school students estimated at 3,500 converged on the Philadelphia Board of Education Building at 21st and the Parkway. From the beginning of the 1967-68 school year black students had been calling for the introduction of Black History into the public school curriculum and a number of other educational changes and improvements. In October 1967 a bill passed the Pennsylvania House of Representatives requiring the inclusion of information on African Americans and other minority groups in history courses offered in public schools throughout the state. Black high school students at Ben Franklin, Simon Gratz, and other high schools in the city had demonstrated outside their school buildings in support of the demand for Black History, but on November 17, 1967, the students decided to bring their case to the School Board members (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 1994).

Unfortunately, while several black teachers and leaders were conferring with School Superintendent Mark Shedd, the police began arresting the students, under the orders of Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo who was present at the demonstration. When the students attempted to prevent the arrests, the police attacked the students and a full-scale riot erupted. Twenty-two people were injured in the violence and fifty-seven students were arrested. While school board president Richardson Dilworth accused Rizzo of triggering the violence, a court order was issued banning further demonstrations at public high schools, something Police Commissioner Rizzo believed was long overdue. At the same time, however, the police action against the black students was widely condemned by black and white parents and community leaders[1].

When we review the literature on student activism in the 1960s in general and among black students in particular, we find articles and monographs primarily on college and university students. In the Philadelphia area, for example, there is the well-documented article by Jonathan Goldstein, "Agent Orange on Campus: The Summit-Spicerack Controversy at the University of Pennsylvania, 1965-1967," which described the massive protests launched by white and black students to end the university's on-going involvement in the research and production of chemical weapons used in the war in Vietnam (Goldstein, 1992). However, black students also participated in campus protests and demonstrations at Cheyney State College in March 1968, Swarthmore College in January 1969, and University of Pennsylvania and Rutgers University in Camden in February 1969 (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 1994).

In the case of the black high school protests in November 1967 and the actions of black college students in the Philadelphia area in 1968 and 1969, they fit into a pattern of black student activism that emerged with the modern Civil Rights Movement (CRM). These patterns and protests are the topic of the larger research project on black student activism in the United States between 1954 and 1972.

Black college student activism in the area of civil rights has been the topic of research by many scholars beginning in the 1960s. Howard Zinn's *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*, Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, Aldon Morris' *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing*

for Change, and Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and Mississippi Freedom Movement* are the most important works that examine the contributions of African American students to specific civil rights campaigns. However, in most instances the objectives for the campaigns in which these students and former students took part laid generally outside the arena of public and private elementary, secondary, and higher education. In other words, while these books provide us with very detailed information about the contributions of black students, who became full-time organizers for civil rights campaigns, they barely touch upon the issue of black student activism and educational change (Zinn, 1965; Carson, 1981; Morris, 1984; Payne, 1995).

Several book-length studies have also been published on black student activism on college campuses. These works can be divided into two categories: sociological studies published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and historical case studies published in the 1980s and 1990s. In the first category we have James McAvoy and Abraham Miller's edited volume *Black Power and Student Rebellion*, which is collection of essays on black student activism at six universities, primarily in 1968 and 1969. Harry Edwards' *Black Students* focuses also on black student protests at various schools in the late 1960s. Robert Smith, Richard Axen, and DeVere Pentony's *By Any Means Necessary: The Revolutionary Struggle at San Francisco State* is a case study of the events on one campus in the late 1960s; while the NAACP's *College and the Black Student* provides an overview of black students and campus unrest. Anthony M. Orum's *Black Students in Protest: A Study of the Origins of the Black Student Movement*, is a study of black student activism at the historically black colleges between 1960 and 1964; and George Napper's *Black Than Thou: The Struggle for Campus Unity* examines the formation of black identity among student activists at University of California at Berkeley in the early 1970s (McAvoy & Miller, 1969; Edwards, 1970; Smith, Axen, & Pentony 1970; NAACP, 1971; Orum, 1972; Napper, 1973).

There are three book-length historical analyses in the form of case studies of black student activism at predominantly white universities. William H. Exum's *Paradoxes of Protest: Black Student Activism in a White University* examines student protests at University College, New York University between 1966 and 1972. Richard P. McCormick's *The Black Student Protest Movement at Rutgers* describes what occurred at the New Brunswick campus of Rutgers University between 1965 and 1971. More recently, Donald Alexander Downs published a detailed analysis of one of the most controversial incidents involving black student protest in the late 1960s. *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* describes the short and long term consequences of the university administration's decision to grant certain concessions to gun-toting black students who had taken over a campus building in 1969 (Exum, 1985; McCormick, 1990; Downs, 1999).

While there have been several book-length studies of activism among black college students, the protests, boycotts, and demonstrations launched by black secondary students has not been documented. Marc Libarle and Tom Seligson's edited volume *The High School Revolutionaries* contains numerous interviews with black and white high school students from the Spring of 1969, but it presented no analysis of the significant role played by secondary students in bringing about the introduction of Black History courses, the hiring of minority teachers, and other educational changes that took place during that period (Libarle & Seligson, 1970).

Black High School Students' Activism in the Late 1950s

In the case of black high school students' participation in civil rights activities, it would be fitting to trace their involvement to September 1954 when the first black students attempted to enroll in all-white public schools in Greenbrier County, Rupert, Cricton, and White Sulphur Springs, W. VA and they were forced to withdraw by mobs of angry whites[2] The story of the Little Rock Nine at Central High School during the 1957-58 school year is well known, and it was clear from their statements that they viewed themselves as civil rights activists. Ernest Green, the first black graduate from Little Rock Central High School, made this very clear in an article he wrote for *Jet Magazine* published on June 19, 1958. "So many people today talk about young people going to the dogs and I think our example has shown adults just what this coming Negro kid is made of and what he can do under pressure" (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 2000; Green, 1958).

Novelist and social critic James Baldwin traveled south for the first time in September 1957 to learn about the significant social changes taking place following the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision in 1954 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-56. Baldwin interviewed Gus Roberts, the first black student enrolled in an all-white high school in Charlotte, NC. Baldwin's essay, "A Hard Kind of Courage" was first published in *Harper's Magazine* in October 1958, and was included in his second book of essays *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) under the title "A Fly in the Buttermilk." Baldwin found Gus Roberts quiet and impassive. "I found myself wondering - again - how he managed to face what must surely have been the worst moment of his day - morning, when he opened his eyes and realized that it was all to be gone through again. Insults, and incipient violence, teachers, and - exams." Baldwin concluded that "Pride and silence were his weapons. Pride comes naturally, and soon, to a Negro, but even his mother, I felt, was worried about G's silence, though she was too wise to break it....'It's hard enough,' the boy said later, still in control but with flashing eyes, 'to keep quiet and keep walking when they call you nigger. But if anybody ever spits on me, I *know* I'll have to fight" (Baldwin, 1961).

The retaliatory violence in which black students engaged in Philadelphia and other cities in the late 1960s

when they were attacked by white students, adults, or the police could also be found in the 1950s. Many of us know that only eight of the Little Rock Nine made it through the 1957-58 school year. Minnie Jean Brown was expelled from Central High School in February 1958, after the third incident of her responding in self-defense to attacks by white students. Thus from the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement, the patterns of black student activism for the next fifteen years were being established (Brown, 1958).

Quality Integrated Education and the Teaching of Black History

In his study of *Black Students in Protest*, Anthony Orum examined the influence of structural factors and community settings on student activism at historically black colleges in the South in the period from 1960 to 1965. Orum reported that black college student protests were more likely to occur at small, private, residential colleges in smaller cities with low percentages of black residents. The close-knit campus community and personal relationships with the local black population provided a conducive environment for launching sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and other nonviolent direct action protests (Orum, 1972; Matthews & Prothro, 1966). Black high school student activism that began in the 1950s continued into the early 1960s when the objective was to achieve a "quality integrated education" in urban public schools. Whereas in the late 1950s black high school student activism involved attempts to enroll in all-white public schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas in the face of white opposition, violence, and mob action, in the early 1960s the student protests for "quality integrated education" was an urban phenomenon that took the form of massive school boycotts. The most significant of these school boycotts, involving hundreds of thousands of black and Puerto Rican students, took place in Chicago and New York City. There are two book-length studies of the school protests in Chicago - Alan B. Anderson and George W. Pickering's *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago* and James Ralph's *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement*. The school boycotts in New York City were examined in the recent book by Clarence Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (Anderson & Pickering, 1986; Ralph, 1993; Taylor, 1997). In the projected study of black student activism, campaigns in other northern small and large cities for "quality integrated education" will be identified and assessed.

While quality "integrated" education was the objective of black high school student activism in the first half of the 1960s, "quality education" and the teaching of Black History became the goal in the late 1960s. As early as March 1966, we find published reports of black politicians from Detroit, Michigan introducing bills into the state legislature calling for the inclusion of Black History in the teaching of United States history in public schools throughout the state[3] ("Mich{igan} Solon," March 24, 1966). By the middle of 1966, and several months before SNCC's Stokely Carmichael issued in Greenwood, MS his controversial call for "Black Power" during the civil rights march begun by James Meredith, the absence of Black History in public school curricula led to protests by black high school students. It appears that black students in urban public schools began to launch serious protest movements, aimed at obtaining the inclusion of Black History in the curriculum, after the textbooks already in use were criticized publicly by noted educators, politicians, and government officials. For example, it was reported that after Mark Rosenman, the NAACP's assistant national youth director, charged that the textbooks used in the Connecticut public schools were filled with "distortions and inadequacies in portraying the role of the Negro in the country's history," over 130 black high school students in May 1966 in Bridgeport, the state's second largest city, left their social studies textbooks in front of the doors of the Warren G. Harding and Central High Schools (*Jet Magazine*, June 16, 1966).

Early in 1966 state education officials in Sacramento, CA were considering the adoption throughout the state of the eighth grade textbook *Land of the Free*, written by historians John Hope Franklin, Ernest May, and John Caughey. In May 1966, however, the book came under attack from Emery Stopps, an education professor at University of Southern California, who claimed that the book was "slanted in the direction of civil rights...with high praise for militant groups and with condemnation of the great majority." Franklin responded that as historians they were not "running a laundromat to clean up sordid details. We wrote it as it appeared" (*Jet Magazine*, May 26, 1966).

"*Land of the Free*" committees were formed throughout the state of California between May and December 1966. They circulated literature attacking the book for spending too much time discussing "Negro slaves," "slavery" and "freedom," for suggesting that Rosa Parks should be remembered as an important "freedom fighter," and asking students to write a report on Revolutionary War martyr Crispus Attucks. John Hope Franklin came under severe attack in a pamphlet called *Splash-Down of Negro History* published by "Facts, Inc." Despite the all-out campaign by right-wing groups, the California Board of Education voted in December final approval for use of the textbook throughout the state beginning in September 1967 (*Jet Magazine*, December 29, 1966).

In August 1966 Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. declared that "something should be done about racially distorted and offensive textbooks and biased library books which depict minority groups solely in an inferior and subjugated position - or even worse, ignored them altogether." Powell, chair of the House Sub-Committee on Education, launched five days of public hearing over the matter that month. In his testimony before Powell's subcommittee on August 23, 1966, the U.S. Commissioner of Education Harold Howe II declared that "we should no longer let this problem be swept under the rug," these books should

be exposed to public view. While the Office of Education had no power to force changes at the state and local levels, "our efforts should be to encourage voluntary action by the states and localities by getting information into their hands[3]"

Howe also questioned the "relevance" of the material found in many textbooks. "The world of 'Look, Jane, Look' usually is a white suburban world where Daddy goes off to work each morning and returns each evening; mother stays home with the children and her pretty house and well kept green yard. What relevance does this scene have to the child of the city whose mother works outside the home, whose yard is the street?" (*New York Times*, August 24, 1966).

In Detroit in October 1966, Richard Henry, member of the Group for Advanced Leadership, removed his daughter from a local public school and threatened to organize a citywide school boycott over the use of the textbook *The Story of Man's Achievement*. Henry claimed that the book completely distorted the history of Africa and African peoples. As a result, the Detroit school board voted to purchase eight sets of books on African, Asian, and Latin American history at a cost of $20,000 for use in the public schools (*Jet Magazine*, October 22, 1966).

In December 1966, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) held a national conference in Washington, DC on "Racism and Education." Among those participating were labor leader A. Philip Randolph, and historians John Hope Franklin, Lerone Bennett, and Sterling Stuckey, and other leaders and scholars of "Negro history." Over 1500 teachers were in attendance and several resolutions were passed. One called on the AFT to make sure that black workers' role in the trade union movement was included in union literature; while another called for AFT contracts to include provisions for teaching "Afro-American history" and the establishment of training programs in this area for teachers (*Jet Magazine*, December 29, 1966).

Throughout 1967, as the national debate over the escalating war in Vietnam dominated newspapers, and black leaders and spokespersons began to define the various shades of meaning they associated with the "Black Power" slogan, public school officials came under increasing attack for failing to include the experiences of African Americans and other racial and ethnic minority groups in the curricula. In January 1967 Georgia state representative Julian Bond, who earlier had been denied his legislative seat for supporting his SNCC colleagues' public statements against the war in Vietnam, introduced a resolution describing the "outstanding achievements and many contributions" of African Americans in the United States. After the resolution passed, copies were made and distributed to all public school districts in the state (*New York Times*, February 3, 1967). The Kentucky state board of education voted in March 1967 to adopt a new American history textbook for eleventh graders that included discussion of the black experience. The textbook in use at the time had been adopted in 1955, and made no mention of African Americans other than during the era of slavery (*Jet Magazine*, March 23, 1967).

In June 1967, state legislators in Connecticut passed legislation, similar to that in Michigan, New Jersey, and California, calling for the inclusion of the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in public school curricula. That same month the NAACP published *Integrated School Books: Descriptive Bibliography of 399 Pre-school and Elementary School Texts and Story Books*. With an introduction by former U.S. Education Commissioner Francis Keppel, the guide was meant to serve as a reference work for school administrators interested in adopting new textbooks that reflected the diversity of the American experience (*New York Times*, June 6, 1967; Jet Magazine, June 15, 1967).

During the summer of 1967 rioting again erupted, with the greatest devastation taking place in Newark, NJ and Detroit, MI in July. In October 1967 President Lyndon Johnson appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, headed by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, to investigate the rioting and urban violence. When the Kerner Commission report was issued in March 1968, the members concluded not only that the United States was headed toward the development of two communities "one white, one black, separate and unequal," but also pointed out that the major causes and precipitating events that led to the urban rioting involved police brutality (Kerner et al., 1968).

The attack by police on unarmed high school students that took place on November 17, 1967 at the Board of Education Building in Philadelphia was another example of the type of "police brutality" that was subsequently documented in the Kerner Commission's report. Following the attack on the black high school students, lawyers from the Community Legal Services brought suit in federal court against Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo. Unfortunately, the federal judges dismissed the suit (Collier-Thomas & Franklin, 1994). Although they did not usually result in serious attacks by the local police, even larger numbers of black high school students engaged in protests activities related to school issues in 1968 and 1969. In the year 1968, newspapers and magazines reported that black high school students engaged in significant protests and demonstrations calling for the teaching of Black History in public schools, and related issues, in Boston, MA; Benton Harbor, Detroit, Oak Park, and River Rouge, MI; Chicago and Zion, IL.; Dade County, FL; Downey, CA; Houston, TX; Shelby, MS; Social Circle, GA.; Swan Quarter, NC; Milwaukee, WI; New Haven, CT; Omaha, NE; and New York City. These protest activities, as well as those that took place in the years 1969 to 1972, will be documented as part of the larger research project. And although the list of places for 1968 includes small towns and cities, such as Shelby, MS and Social Circle, GA; the greater number of black high school student protests took place in large urban areas.

Conclusions

While this essay represents a preliminary assessment of black high school activism in the 1960s, some trends and

patterns can be identified. In the first half of the decade, the campaigns in several large northern cities for "quality integrated education" led to widespread boycotts of public schools by black students. Historians have concluded that these public school boycotts were considered part of the on-going civil rights protests taking place in these cities. Thus black high school students' participation in school boycotts for "quality integrated education" should be considered part of the contribution that children and young people made to the larger Civil Rights Movement. The pattern of black students participating in large numbers in civil rights demonstrations in the South had been established in the 1950s, and in the early 1960s the student sit-ins launched a new phase in the larger black-led, nonviolent protest movement. As civil rights campaigns were undertaken in northern, midwestern, and western cities, black high school students participated in large numbers.

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Footnotes

[1]For information on the controversial career of Frank Rizzo, see Hamilton, R. J. (1993). *Rizzo.* New York: Viking Press; and, Paolantonio, S. A. (1993). *Frank Rizzo: The Last Big Man in Big City America.* Philadelphia, PA: Camino Books.

[2]For newspaper reports on the attempts of black students to enroll at all-white public schools in West Virginia in 1954, see Collier-Thomas, B. & Franklin, V. P. (2000). *My Soul Is a Witness: A Chronology of the Civil Rights Era, 1954-1965.* New York: Henry Holt, 10-17.

[3]For the introduction of legislation into the state senate to teach black history in the New Jersey public schools, see *Jet,* (May 26, 1966), 45.

[4]At the 57th annual NAACP convention held in Los Angeles in July 1966, a list of 175 new textbook titles was released by the major publishing houses that sought to "expose children to depictions of interracial society." The publishers "hoped to shape the thinking of white children to consider Negroes an unexceptional part of the American scene...{and} to help Negro children improve the concept they have of themselves." See *New York Times* (July 10, 1966, August 24, 1966).

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