

## **Discovering a Silenced Impact: Connecting Students to Their Academic Heritage**

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While collaborating on separate sections of the same introductory teacher education course, university educators saw an opportunity to strengthen their class and support the students in becoming culturally relevant teachers. Modelling for pre-service teachers a deep dive into the history of one university, educators discovered the life of a remarkable Black woman and student who was made invisible. This critically reflective research turned a broad, disconnected lesson on the history of education into something meaningful and valuable to the field of teacher education and the wider community.

Austin Peay State University, located in the state of Tennessee, evolved over two hundred years with eight name changes and sixteen university presidents from a private school for the elite to a public university for a diverse population. Once a rural area, the now urban Clarksville area has grown around this university to serve about 9,000 students majoring in more than fifty academic majors. The university is named after the well-known state governor, Austin Peay (1923-1927), who was progressive in improving the education system across Tennessee. He sponsored legislation that established state salary schedules and standardized licensing for teachers while supporting equal funding for eight-month elementary schools across the state. Peay funded numerous Tennessee universities' programs such as the Normal Teacher College currently known as Austin Peay State University.

Philander Claxton served as the president of Austin Peay Normal School from 1930-1946. His extensive resume included accomplishments as the U.S. commissioner in Education, a peace advocate among War World I educators, and most importantly he was instrumental in the General Education

Bill of 1909 which would improve funding for Public Education in the state of Tennessee (Allison, 2017). Additionally, Claxton helped create the School of Education and improved teacher training. During an address to the New York High School Teachers' Association, Claxton stated that the United States Bureau of Education would "work toward a program of equal opportunity to obtain an education, and to make the opportunities of education in the home as well as the school" (Lewis, 1948, p. 150). The history of Peay and Claxton was a significant influence on Austin Peay State University. Philander Claxton, along with other well-known educational philosophers such as Dewey, Piaget, and Locke, were major game changers when it came to voicing their viewpoints about education. In contrast to the abundant information about these philosophers, this article introduces the limited historical account of the first African American woman to earn a graduate degree from Austin Peay State University, Hattie Clay. This discovery supported the value of exploring academic heritage as an introduction to a Foundations in Education course. This article offers a brief history of

education in Tennessee, describes the collaborative efforts of a class project that addressed the local history of education in an introductory education course, and promotes culturally responsive teaching for reflective practitioners.

### **Discovering Academic Heritage**

Unlike the well-known educational philosophers, Hattie Clay's game changer was the silenced impact she made the day she attended Austin Peay for graduate school in 1957. She previously attended Fisk University, a historically Black university, under the first African American university president, Dr. Charles S. Johnson, who was known for his impact for change through his method of "sidelines activism" (Gasman, 2001, p. 7). Hattie's training at Fisk University and 38 years as a high school English teacher were considered an accomplishment for a woman of her era. However, that was not enough for Hattie. It may be that the words of Philander Claxton (1948) resonated in her mind, "The state must give the university wise direction, keeping it free from all influences of partisan politics, sectarian bias, social caste, and unrighteous personal ambitions" (Lewis, 1948, p. 256). Even though in 1954, the US Supreme Court declared school segregation laws unconstitutional, the public schools in Tennessee did not begin to implement a "stair-step plan" until three years later. It is this state's history that may provide a clear understanding as to why the 62-year-old Hattie continued her educational journey.

The promising Supreme Court ruling on *Brown vs the Topeka Board of Education* in 1954 was instrumental to the integration of schools. However, the well-intended ruling cost over 38,000 Black teachers their jobs (Lutz, 2017) in the Jim Crow southern states. Hattie may have been one of the many well-trained and well-educated teachers who was

troubled by a system that would easily denigrate her career as an educator. The substantial loss of Black teachers during 1954 continues to shape the current classroom, since only 14 percent of the public teaching force identify as a person of color (Lutz, 2017). In 1955, following the *Brown* ruling, southern states purposely weakened all teacher tenured laws applicable to Black teachers (Fultz, 2004), and for 61-year-old Hattie, the possibility of not keeping her 38-year-career as high school English teacher through a due process may have been unsettling. The Tennessee General Assembly then adopted an amendment, leaving it up to the local school boards to determine the competency of a teacher as well as whether or not the teacher was fit for the classroom. Teacher evaluations were based on competency, compatibility, and suitability. Any teacher not meeting these requirements could be discharged from service on the explanation that it was in the best interest of students (Fultz, 2004). This ruling resulted in dismissal, demotion, or forced resignation of highly credentialed Black teachers.

### **From Past to Present**

The historical impact of *Brown vs the Topeka Board of Education* (1954) continues to widen the diversity gap involving the number of Black teachers in today's classrooms. Prior to the 1954 court case, Black teachers counted as much as 35 to 50 percent of teachers – even in the segregated southern school systems – today only seven percent of public-school teachers are Black (Will, 2019). One of the unfortunate outcomes of this court case, one that is not widely known, is that of Black teachers and administrators being demoted or dismissed throughout the south. One such event involved a Georgia principal Horace Tate who had 14-years' experience. Tate was docked \$3,000 from his salary and forced to

move his office to the attic in the superintendent's building, something that eventually caused Tate to resign in humiliation (Walker, 2001). Carter G. Woodson, the "Father of Black History" and founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History forewarned that "the large majority of negroes who have put on the finishing touches of our best colleges are all but worthless in the development of their people" (Woodson, p. 5). Black teachers who had the training and experience were no longer valued professionals.

Southern states were slow to integrate schools, evidenced by the extreme efforts made to modify tenure laws only for Black teachers (Fultz, 2004); revoking licenses of Black teachers belonging to the NAACP and closing school districts that were federally mandated to integrate (Fultz, 2004; Tillman, 2005). The ultimate purpose for these efforts was to limit the hiring of Black teachers in integrated schools. A federal judge in the state of Arkansas stated, "the Fourteenth Amendment...is not a teacher tenure law" (Detweiler, 1967) giving no support to Black teachers who were fired as part of the desegregation process. Overall, during a five-month period between May to September 1965, 93% black teachers were displaced or downgraded due to desegregation efforts (Fultz, 2004).

Since the 1940s, many stories of Black teachers' efforts to organize secretly and skillfully for the equality of Black children in southern schools have gone untold (Walker, 2001). The 1896 Supreme Court case, *Plessy versus Ferguson*, meant that the NAACP's national office needed access to the hostile south to uphold the law. It is Horace Tate, teacher, principal, and one-time executive director of Georgia Teachers and Education Association (GTEA), an organization for Black educators founded in 1878, who shared in an interview with Vanessa Siddle Walker

how Black educators in the south laid the groundwork for enforcing court rulings in the south. The quiet efforts of these "hidden provocateurs," as dubbed by Vanessa Siddle Walker, were to promote improved funding changes that would support the same opportunities for Black children. Black educators wanted an integrated environment where Black students could aspire and believe they could be anything that they wanted to be (Anderson, 2018). Black educators hoped that integration would gain public support; instead, it only closed the doors to improved school environments.

### **Hattie Clay's Experiences**

Modeling a deep dive into the regional history of education, as well as the history of our university and college, critically reflective educators embarked on discovering important elements of history that may have been made invisible. We wanted to know more about Hattie Clay's influence as a teacher in her community. A thorough investigation of Hattie Clay's story provided inspirational details to the narrative. This research soon turned a disconnected and broad lesson on the history of education into something with meaning and value to students, the local community, and beyond.

On November 17, 1895, thirty years after the Civil War ended, Hattie Clay was born in Berea, Kentucky. The founding of Berea is not coincidental to Hattie's story. An abolitionist by the name of John G. Fee founded Berea College, the first college in Kentucky to admit Black students. Fee had the support and assistance of the American Missionary Association, and antislavery politician Cassius M. Clay. Clay provided 10-acres in Madison County where Fee established an interracial college and church. Fee welcomed freedmen to a community of "anti-caste principles of impartial love and Christian brotherhood" (Burnside, 2001, para

4). By 1870, Fee invited numerous Black families from Camp Nelson, a recruitment and training center for African American soldiers, and refuge for their wives and children. He wanted to support these once enslaved people to make a new life and get an education. It is estimated that two hundred Black families settled in Berea to help build the interracial town, churches, and Berea College (Burnside, 2001). However, in 1904 when Hattie was 9 years old, Carl Day, a member of the Kentucky House of Representatives introduced the Day Law mandating racial segregation in educational institutions in Kentucky. It was designated as “an act to prohibit white and colored people from attending the same school” (Jordan, 2016, para 1). According to Jordan (2016) the purpose of the law was directed at Berea College since it was the only integrated college in Kentucky (and in the south) at the time.

Was young Hattie inspired by stories at a young age told by her parents St. Claire Walker and Sarah Elizabeth Reed? Was her upbringing in an interracial community what gave her the understanding of the importance of diversity? Perhaps her parents had an awareness of what education would mean for their eight children. At the age of 14-years-old Hattie attended school, she could read and write which laid the foundation for her pursuit of higher education. The Walker family would not be hindered by the narrow-mindedness of white privileged politicians to keep their daughter from continuing her education at Fisk University in Tennessee. In 1866, the university was named in honor of General B. Fisk of the Tennessee Freedmen’s Bureau in Nashville, Tennessee. Here Hattie pursued a degree in education where she could thrive effectively and responsibly as a teacher in a multicultural society. Hattie started her career at the age of 27-years-old as a high school English teacher at the segregated Burt High School, Clarksville,

Tennessee. In 1956, Hattie attended Austin Peay State University and earned her master’s degree in education at the age of sixty-one. It was only four years later that she passed away from colon cancer.

Perhaps, Hattie Clay was one of the hidden provocateurs Tate spoke about. Maybe her goals in life were not about her personal accomplishments but the achievements of her students. In Tate’s archives, Walker indicated that Black teachers did not share how well-educated they were with others. In fact, they did not share how they were going back to school using state money to earn master’s degrees (Anderson, 2018). In private meetings, Black teachers discussed what they were doing to create a generation of children who would be as well-educated within the constraints of a segregated world.

### **Class Project Overview**

With the gripping details of Hattie’s story in hand, the diverse historical facts about our education system were no longer limited to a select few prestigious white educational philosophers. It was our goal that a voice for those silenced but impactful teachers like Hattie Clay finally be heard. The strength of the hidden provocateurs to secretly change the education system may have been what influenced African American teachers to share what people needed to know – a push for racial justice in education (Lash & Radcliffe, 2014).

Motivated to share Hattie’s inspirational story, we selected an education course typically focused on a wide sweep of our nation’s history of education. Traditionally, the course calendar allows one week to discuss the history of education with only highly regarded and prestigious individuals as important contributors. Discussions about the biased mindsets regarding the history of education indicated some gaping deficiencies

of what the history of education meant for everyone. Hattie's academic achievement as the first Black woman to receive a graduate degree in education inspired the need to delve further to understand what education meant for all, not just the elite few. Continuous questions surfaced as to why Hattie would venture down a path of uncertainty to earn a master's degree during such tumultuous times—whether she wanted job security, a better income, or a chance to make a difference. No matter Hattie's motive at the time, her silenced impact benefitted the pre-service teachers who came after her.

When we started this project, there were numerous current events that weighed on our minds about how best to help our students see that education is not equal for all. Maybe it was COVID-19 that brought to the forefront the inequality and disadvantage for the lower socioeconomic students. Maybe it was the unfortunate reminders that we really did not move beyond racist and biased acts towards Black people such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. The reasons were countless for why it was necessary to establish an interconnection between current events and the history of education. Despite the election of our nation's first Black president in 2008, the concern that history was repeating itself became evident when white nationalist hate groups' rallies had more than doubled for the first time in a generation (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020).

Through informal conversations, faculty members and instructors for the Foundations of Education course contemplated the historical attempts locally and state-wide to address race and education. Inadvertently, Hattie Clay was continuing her work as a Black educator as she opened the door for us to begin a journey into the unknown past of what she encountered. We were inspired by this woman's desire to further her education but wanted to know why she would put

herself in such a precarious situation. Trying to picture her here, on a much more segregated version of this campus, prompted our continued discussions over time about implementing strategies to help engage students and make relevant connections between the past and present. As historians say, "those who ignore the history has no past - and no future." We knew with Hattie's help that we could no longer ignore the local history of education.

### **Project Details**

The first attempt of the proposed history activity was with a graduate-level section of Foundations in Education since the class meetings are longer than the 50-minute undergraduate classes. This would allow us to see how things worked out time-wise with each part of the activity. The lesson began by separating the students into groups to discuss articles of local history. One group was focused on the history of our university, one on the man for which the College of Education's building was named, and the third group read about the first two Black students who received their master's degrees from our university. Each group was asked to produce a timeline that included events from their topic as well as some "outside" events that would help put their topic into context.

As a class we decided that each group would include ten items for their timeline, which would include five specific events about their topic. For example, if one group was researching the history of our university, they would need to identify at least five points in history that were important to include on a timeline (ex: founding of university, when the school changed names, when it earned university status, when it began desegregation, etc.). They would also need to consider other historical events that took place in and around those other timeline items to help show events in the world, the

country, or the state. If any wars, legislation, court cases, or other significant events shaped or influenced these local events, students could begin to see the importance of the local events.

Even though the first attempt of this activity was not as smooth and seamless as we planned, we focused on the positive aspects and as a self-reflective practice discussed how we could make this lesson more productive. The next time we taught the activity we would plan at least two 50-minute class meetings, which allowed us to stay on task. We began by asking the class why we should study the history of education with the prompt: “The first American schools began over 450 years ago. List three or four reasons why it is important for future teachers like yourself to study this history.” One graduate section did not have an introduction to the subject matter other than reading the chapter before class from the textbook. We wanted a way to hook the class into the content. Once the members of the class had their lists individually, we gave them a chance to chat in small groups to grow their lists. Each group of students was asked to share and combine their lists so they have about five or six reasons why teachers should study the history of education. This think-pair-share (Lyman, 1981) culminated with the whole class creating a list on the board with items from the small group discussions. Some of the ideas include:

- Learn strategies that worked before;
- Understand the evolution of schooling and education;
- Discover the importance of education;
- Continue to evolve as educators;
- Find out what has not worked, so we are not doomed to repeat history.

While discussing the class list, we distributed a short reading to each student, stating, “Here is a reading about the local

history of education. Please take a moment to read and identify some important points.” This time we randomly distributed the readings, so students were placed into groups based on the topic they received. After a few minutes, the students with the same handouts found each other and started to discuss their topic. Each group was given a timeline graphic organizer to record their ten historical events. Just like the first attempt, each group was asked to identify five topic events and five context events from state, national, or world history.

The details of the lesson were provided as the groups researched and put their timelines together. For all members of the class to learn about the different local history topics, each group would teach their topic to the rest of the class by sharing the major points of their timeline. By the end of the first class, each group submitted their graphic organizer. Some had the ten items we asked for, but students were given the opportunity to regroup at the start of the next class in order to organize their teach-out.

When the second class began, we organized into the same groups and reviewed what we had done so far and where we are heading. A couple of groups had new members (absentees from the previous class), so they took time to recap the activity. Everyone had ten minutes to teach their topic to the class, leaving twenty minutes to complete the timeline items. Groups transferred their information to the large paper timeline on the wall. The discussion of the local history events was discussed in chronological order and each group spoke about the contextual history events.

After we finished, the discussion circled back to Hattie Clay. We explained that this lesson and timeline activity originally grew out of the need to learn about her life. As a class we looked back at our timeline and discovered that Hattie died before she was able to legally vote. We also found out that

she was a teacher at a local high school for almost thirty years. She came to our university to get her master's degree she was in her mid-fifties. During this discussion the class was able to see how history ebbed and flowed, great and horrible events took place. We shared amended versions of the local news stories provided by the university library. The articles used patronizing terms to report the arrival of Black students on the campus. As a class we wondered why Hattie would want to attend college when she already had a job, especially since the local news was presenting biased coverage of her existence at our university. The contextual history of our whole-class timeline led us to hypothesize that she became a student here shortly before Tennessee desegregation was complete when a graduate degree may have been required for Black teachers to continue teaching.

To wrap-up the activity and expand on the investigation of local history, we asked our students to visit a mural on campus. "The History of Austin Peay" by Max Hochstetler (2001) displays the history of our community, including our university. Students were asked to visit the mural and, using what they learned from the in-class work, reflect on the educational history of our university, our city, and the state of Tennessee. They reflected on how our local history may inform our educational future and predicted where they see the field of education heading in the next five-to-ten years.

While many students are apprehensive about entering the teaching profession, we are witnessing attempts by our current state governments to pass "divisive concept" and "anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT)" laws. Parent groups all over the country continue to challenge books found in school and public libraries. Despite these challenges, many students reflected on how optimistic they felt. Hattie Clay encountered obstacles from her

white classmates but worked to earn her graduate degree so she could continue teaching. Our students wrote and spoke about Hattie's inspiration, hoping to inspire a new generation of students by choosing to become a teacher.

### **Project Reflections**

As reflective practitioners, we contemplated how the course project could be improved for future Foundations of Education students. What we discovered was that we were no longer sharing the history of education in a linear narration with little or no variation - a straight line from the beginning to the end of a story in a confined time frame. Instead, our local- and state-wide history of education was a circular narrative that did not yet have a conclusion. Door after door continued to be open to provide insight into the meaningful and purposeful life events of a Black teacher who lived and studied where our students live and study. We will continue our examination into Hattie's past. This will guide our next steps to learn and teach about inspirational influencers in the field of education.

### **Culturally Relevant Teaching**

These project reflections led to class discussions about the importance of culturally relevant teaching. Ladson-Billings (2021), in building on her 1994 groundbreaking and essential work, *The Dreamkeepers*, reiterates that to be a culturally relevant teachers, our practice must include "academic achievement/student learning, cultural competence, and socio-political/critical consciousness" (p. 71). As teachers, we need to find ways to connect and sustain our students' lived experiences rather than assimilate to the old, tired, and traditional ways of the status quo. We should not have any confusion on how to hold a culturally relevant stance in our classrooms;

Ladson-Billings provides us with a blue-print and shows us examples of what being culturally relevant looks like. This is not a checklist that we pull from to perform culturally relevant – true cultural relevance comes from within; it is part of our identity as teachers.

There are three things that all culturally relevant teachers do, according to Ladson-Billings (2009). None of these are any more important than the next; these pieces should all be considered equally for one to be truly culturally relevant. First, they have to have to be open to positive ideas of themselves and others. As teachers we should find ways to collaborate with our students; our mutual effort should give back to the learning that is taking place. Modeling failure as a learning opportunity is a big part of having culturally relevant ideas about who the members of our learning community are. The Social Relations of our classrooms is the second thing culturally relevant teachers do. The relationships we make within our learning community should be evident to all involved – and these relationships should be apparent in our lessons. Every learning opportunity should include a way for our students to get to know each other better and for us – we are building a community of scholars, after all. As we compose our lessons and planned learning experiences, we should be purposeful in how we are creating opportunities for the social relations to grow. The last thing culturally relevant teachers do falls under the Conceptions of Knowledge. Within our learning community, all members should demonstrate how knowledge can be re-constructed. Knowledge should be seen as something applied and reconsidered rather than something that is to be remembered and recalled. Culturally relevant teachers consider how knowledge is treated, allowing students to excel academically.

While these three areas are all things that culturally relevant teachers have in common,

it is only part of the picture. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is the methods of teaching students from diverse backgrounds, and must include three things: academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. True CRP sets a high, but not unreachable bar for all students. We do not set a lower bar for some students because we know they live in a high poverty community. All students are expected to meet – and surpass – the academic standards for their grade level. CRP does not enforce any kind of prerequisite in order to exceed expectations. As teachers, we meet our students where they are and support them through facilitation of benchmarks as they progress. It is essential to CRP that we not only affirm our students' lived experiences but allow our students' cultures as the basis for the learning that takes place in our classroom. When we all understand all the multiple identities that we all hold and find ways to value and uphold these identities in each other. Being conscious and aware of the sociopolitical world we exist within is the last piece of CRP. This is usually the part that is either omitted or minimized in the work many teachers do with their students. Encouraging students to think about and question the world around them, including the world we bring into our classrooms allows them to see themselves as agents of transformation and social change.

It is with all aspects of being culturally relevant educators that we lean into critical reflective processes so we and our students can confront the dominant “ways of acting” (Shandomo, 2010, p. 101). In the last couple of years, America has seen an uptick in private businesses, athletic teams, and company brands investigating and being critical of who they are named after or what visuals represent their trademarks. Universities are no different – all over the country we have seen building names

changes, monuments removed, and curriculums revised. Being a critical reflective educator allows teachers to see how our teaching styles “enhance [our] ability to challenge the traditional mode of practice [and how we] will grow toward greater effectiveness as teachers” (Shandomo, 2010, p. 112).

### **Project Review**

A typical *Intro to Education* or *Foundations of Education* course includes a unit on the history of education. Most textbooks written for these courses begins with a description of education and schooling in the time of the colonies and continues to the date of publication. Over 450 years of educational history is reduced to one chapter and one week of class. While the history of education is of essential importance to a professional education, covering so much history in weeks does not typically allow for students to make real-world connections to the content. Even if an introductory course spent a couple of weeks on this part of the content, it still would not be enough time to delve deep enough to do it justice. Instructors are forced to decide how to edit the curriculum to spend an extra week on the history of the American education system. It is also difficult to decide which events from between the 1700s and current day should be covered, and which events omitted. The solution, for us, was to narrow the scope. Local history allows pre-service teachers to engage with the essential context of the area as they make real-world connections. Members of the learning community of the foundational education course can then identify local history to help them analyze their place in larger (national) events.

This became evident when we attempted to do a bit of research into Hattie Clay. Her story piqued our interest when we found out her degree was in education. Though we

searched for more details, there was little information about her. We spoke to the archivist at our university library, we did a deep dive into local history sites, and we even spoke to the organization on campus that has a scholarship named for Hattie Clay. The only information we found were old local newspaper articles from the time when she was attending our university – neither of which called Hattie by her name.

The fact that there was no information about the first Black woman to receive a master’s degree from our university – and that she was a teacher in our community for decades – was disheartening and frustrating. But it was not surprising. A lesson was developed and expanded to include the history of our university, the man for whom the College of Education building was named, and a remarkable Black educator. Our students could then connect a larger discussion about the history of the American education system to our university, our college, and a student who once learned in the same space.

### **Conclusion**

We started this research with many questions, and while some of the information about Hattie Clay’s life were attained, we are left with fewer answers than questions. During the writing of this article, we unfortunately learned that Hattie’s valuable transcript information was missing, leaving a gap in our research. Due to decades of transitions in record keeping, the loss of even one transcript is sufficient reason to implement a more purposeful system that avoids these types of errors. It was our goal that her transcript could be used to inspire future teachers to dig deeper and learn more about the local history of educators such as Hattie Clay. Our research and course project would be more complete with this missing piece but unfortunately, we may never fully

understand Hattie Clay's place in education. We hope to instill in our students, our college, and our university the desire to know more about her when they see her face on our university mural timeline, in the yearbook, or on a scholarship awarded in her honor. We want Hattie Clay to be a valued part of our history of education in our foundations course and not just a racial token that appears to make us feel better about ourselves.

In an imperfect world, of human error, bias, and racism, we must continually educate our students, and ourselves, about the local history of education. Our history of education project is not complete. It is an ongoing process to learn more and hopefully one day answer more questions that can fill in the gaps about Hattie Clay. We opened a door that we hope will lead us to more in-depth conversations about the importance of telling our students' stories for the benefit of future generation. Our university is not alone. Historically white institutions are doing the hard – and essential – work to look critically at their long-established practices, the individuals their buildings are named for, and the status quo to un-do generations of anti-Black racism. One step in this critical journey is to look at our history.

It is important that over sixty-five years later, we ask ourselves what has our university, our college of education, and our faculty learned from Hattie Clay's life? What, as we ask our students, are our major takeaways from this learning experience? What do you know; what do you believe? As more and more women of color earn awards and degrees and honors, are we providing them with the same space as Hattie or are they allowed more space – possibly the same amount of space as their white classmates? Will there be a lesson taught in a foundations of Education course fifty or sixty years from today asking about the lives of our current teacher candidates, even the ones who were considered outstanding education majors?

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