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## **Educating for Social Justice: The Life and Times of Septima Clark in Review**

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### **Abstract**

One of the most important goals of teacher education programs is to train preservice teachers on how to teach for social justice (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998). Educating for social justice is teaching people how to make just and democratic contributions to their communities and society. Many teacher education programs use Jean Piaget's (1963), Lev Vygotsky's (1978), and other male theorists' learning theories to convey this idea to students. Scant research shows how these programs provide minority groups' perspectives on social justice education. This paper fills these voids by highlighting Septima Clark's (1898-1987) endeavors of teaching for social justice. Septima Clark (1962) was a famous South Carolina educator and Civil Rights leader who used reading and writing to enhance African-American leaders. A lifelong learner, she combined her daily life experiences with the fundamentals of reading and writing to teach African-Americans how to become informed citizens of their communities. During this process, she continuously evolved and elevated her personal and professional philosophy of how to empower other people to change society. As such, her life and legacy bears significant implications for preparing preservice teachers to become lifelong leaders of graduating value-added, needs-satisfying citizens of society.

### **Educating for Social Justice: The Life and Times of Septima Clark in Review**

Teacher education programs are designed to create teachers who can educate for social justice (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998). That is, professors use educational theories to train their students on how to prepare children for making meaningful academic and social contributions to the betterment of society. Two of the most significant theories are Jean Piaget's (1963) cognitive learning theory and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) social cognition theory of learning.

In his cognitive learning theory, Piaget (1963) indicated that teaching and learning should be designed to facilitate students' innate ability to discover new information. Lev Vygotsky (1978) used his social cognition theory of learning to assert that culture is the primary determinant of children's development. He specified that culture helps children to grasp the academic and social meaning of knowledge. Vygotsky also indicated that the interaction of language and culture determines the extent to which students sustain their acquisition

of knowledge.

These theories define many students' preservice teaching experiences (Atweh, et al., 1998). However, they do not provide students with feminine and African-American theories on and examples of teaching for social justice. The researchers attempt to fill both voids by discussing the leadership style of Septima Clark (Clark, 1988). Septima Clark was an African-American educator and Civil Rights leader who used teaching and learning to enhance the academic and social development of African-American people. This study will highlight her use of a variety of teaching strategies to instill social justice in African-American communities and people.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in constructivism and social justice. The constructivist theory indicates that learning is constructed in accordance to past experiences. This theory is guided by three principles. First, learning is a search for knowledge (Piaget, 1963; Vygotsky, 1978). Second, knowledge is a construct that exists inside the learner (Hines, Cunningham, & Curtis, 2005). Third, the foundation of this construction is the synthesization of the five senses, imagination, and past experiences (Hines, et al., 2005).

In *Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1971) maintained that justice is designed to facilitate the unification of races and genders to discuss and resolve issues that affect the overall welfare of their communities. He continued that the underlying dynamics of these communities are collaborative and mutual reflections of diverse thoughts, actions, and beliefs. Rawls concluded that just and democratic societies inspire the creation of value-added citizens who evolve into displaying critical actions and beliefs.

### Literature Review

This study describes how Septima Clark symbolized the principles of educating for social justice. This literature review sets the tone for that description by presenting three significant views on educating for social justice. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Education for Critical Consciousness*, Paulo Freire (1970) indicated that educators must use three steps to educate for social justice. According to him, the first step is to acknowledge students' voices. A student's voice is a reflection of personal perspectives and experiences regarding issues and situations (Giroux & McLaren, 1996). According to Giroux and McLaren, students' voices should have as much value and influence as the instructor's knowledge and experience. The second step is to use students' voices and past experiences to develop the curriculum. The third step is to encourage and show students how to apply their voices and past experiences toward making significant changes in their communities. Freire concluded that this instructional design empowers students to experience a sense of belongingness in the classroom and society.

John Dewey (1916) related educating for social justice to his ideas on progressivism. In describing his progressivist theory, Dewey argued that teaching and learning should not focus on the memorization of isolated facts and skills. He strongly believed that teaching and learning experiences should be an inherent part of students' daily lives. He broadened his interpretation to include that teachers should create educational experiences conducive to the acquisition of lifelong critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Quinn (2003) continued that educating for social justice is predicated upon three transformations. They are a transformation of self, transformation of people, and transformation of culture. During the transformation of self phase, the learners examine their personal and professional views and feelings about situations. During the transformation of people, the learners use their views and thoughts to affect other people. During the transformation of culture, the learners begin to empower other people to affect social change in their communities.

According to Quinn (2003), the teacher assumes many roles to prepare students for becoming contributors of social justice. First, the teacher ensures that the students are able to reconcile new knowledge with pre-existing knowledge. Second, the teacher interacts with the students during their discovery of and reflection on new information. They particularly use critical thinking to arouse students' interests and motivation to internalize information. In addition, the teacher uses instruction to foster collaboration among students. Third, the teacher evaluates students' acquisition of knowledge to determine if their thoughts are aligned with the lesson's theme. Assessments are designed to allow students to provide multiple open-ended interpretations of the new information. This study highlighted how these theories relate to Septima Clark's (1962) use of innovative teaching to enhance African-Americans' standing in society.

## Case Study

### *Humble Beginnings*

Septima Clark (1962) was born in Charleston , South Carolina , on May 3, 1898. The second of eight children, she was raised by parents who believed in education. Septima's parents taught her to always help and share ideas with other people. They also encouraged her to recognize the worth of other people.

Septima Clark (1962) applied these principles towards negotiating her schooling experiences. In 1916, she graduated from Charleston 's Avery Normal Institute with a teaching certificate. Because of her skin color, however, she was not allowed to teach in Charleston County public schools. As a result, she accepted a teaching position on John's Island , South Carolina .

### *Island Ambitions*

When Septima Clark (1962) accepted the teaching position on John's Island , she found that the school was plagued by deplorable learning conditions. For example, the school did not have chalkboards, textbooks, or other educational resources. The school was also susceptible to hot summers and cold winters. Clark also realized that she and another teacher were the only two instructors of the school.

They were in charge of teaching 132 poverty-stricken students. The students were in grades that ranged from kindergarten to eighth grade. In addition, a wide disparity existed among the learning abilities of the students. In addition, most of them did not regularly attend school. The reason is that they were required to work in the fields with their families.

In spite of these setbacks, Septima Clark (1962) was able to make an immediate impact on the students. Her greatest accomplishment was creating innovative instruction in accordance to the students' personal experiences.

Septima Clark (1962) taught fifth through eighth grade, focusing primarily on helping students develop reading and writing skills through personal experiences. In particular, she would listen to the students' island stories and record them on dry cleaner bags. After posting the stories around the classroom, Clark and the students would translate key vocabulary words into the reading curriculum for the year.

Hines (2003) indicated that Septima Clark used similar teaching strategies to address the prevalency of illiteracy among the city's African-American adults. Many African-American men formed secret societies to acquire reading and writing skills and deliver speeches. They continuously sought Clark 's assistance in achieving this goal.

Under Septima Clark's (1962) direction, they learned how to read and write their names and solve math problems. The men used these skills to become informed participants of John's Island political community. These successes helped Clark to realize her life mission: using education to improve the academic and social

fate of African-American people.

### *Challenging Charleston : Part I*

In 1918, Septima Clark left John's Island to take a teaching position at the Avery Normal Institute (Hines, 2003). During her tenure, Charleston Civil Rights leaders launched a campaign to help African-American teachers gain the right to teach in Charleston County public schools. Septima Clark immediately joined the cause and garnered 20,000 signatures on a petition (Robnett, 1997). Because of her and the other activists' commitment to the campaign, the Charleston County School Board changed its hiring policies to include African-American teachers. In 1920, African-American teachers were finally allowed to teach in Charleston County public schools. That same year, Septima Clark resumed her teaching career on John's Island . By 1929, however, she desired to take her career to the next level. Consequently, she accepted a teaching position in Columbia , South Carolina .

### *Calling to Columbia*

Septima Clark's (1962) years in Columbia marked a period of self-reflection and self-improvement. She worked with C. A. Johnson, a principal who engaged his teachers in activities conducive to professional growth and development. He also held faculty meetings that allowed teachers to discuss and reflect on their instructional strengths and weaknesses.

These meetings inspired Septima Clark (1962) to pursue higher education and assume civic responsibilities in the community. A lifelong learner, Septima Clark took summer classes at Columbia University . She also matriculated to Atlanta University (now known as Clark Atlanta University ). While taking classes from Dr. W. E. B. Dubois, she learned how to create developmentally appropriate reading curricula. In 1942, she earned a Bachelor's of Arts Degree in Teacher Education from Benedict College ( Clark , 1962). In 1946, she secured a Master's of Arts in Teaching Degree from the Hampton Institute (now known as Hampton University ) ( Clark , 1962). As a community activist, Septima Clark (1962) participated in many civic activities and organizations. For example, she served as an adult educator, teaching soldiers at Camp Jackson (now known as Fort Jackson ). She then worked with South Carolina Adult educator Wil Lou Gray to teach other illiterate African-Americans. By working in his program, Clark developed additional strategies for training adults on the fundamentals of reading and writing (Mcfadden, 1994). As a result, she quickly gained a statewide reputation for being able to provide people with literacy acquisition skills. Septima Clark (1988) was also an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Brinson, 1994). As a member, she worked with Thurgood Marshall and other Civil Rights leaders to file a lawsuit for salary equalization among African-American teachers and Caucasian-American teachers. Many African-American teachers refused to support the lawsuit. They and other African-American leaders tried to pressure Septima Clark into withdrawing her support of the lawsuit. But Septima refused to relinquish her involvement. She was extremely happy when the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled in favor of salary equalization for all South Carolina teachers. In spite of this favorable ruling, Septima Clark grew homesick for Charleston . In 1947, she returned to her hometown to teach in the Charleston County public school system

### *Challenging Charleston : Part II*

In returning to Charleston , Septima Clark (1988) maintained her mission of being an innovative teacher and community leader. She served as a reading specialist in a Charleston County public school. She also integrated the Tuberculosis Association, uniting the African-American and Caucasian-American divisions of the organization. Clark was also instrumental in galvanizing the Youth Women Christian Association (YWCA) to serve African-American people. She eventually became the vice-chairperson of the Charleston County branch of the NAACP.



After the historic 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, South Carolina required Septima Clark and other African-American teachers to list their memberships in civic organizations (Robnett, 1997). In 1956, Clark listed her membership in the NAACP. Consequently, she was fired by the Charleston County school board. The South Carolina State Legislature then passed a law that prohibited public employees from joining civic organizations. Clark unsuccessfully attempted to organize African-American teachers into fighting the law.

She then enlisted the local and state branches of the NAACP to support her fight against the school board's decision. However, they were still unable to convince the school board to reinstate Clark (1988). Even worse, the school board took her pension. Consequently, she would spend the next 20 years on lobbying South Carolina to restore her pension. In the meantime, she had accepted a job offer to work at the Highlander Institute in Tennessee.

### *Highlander History*

In 1956, Septima Clark (1988) became the director of workshops for the Highlander Institute. The purpose of the Highlander System was to equip African-Americans with the literacy skills to become well-informed human beings (Horton, 1989). The organization's immediate goal was to help them become literate registered voters. In the summer of 1955, Clark conducted school desegregation workshops at the Highlander Institute. Her workshops were attended by Rosa Parks and other African-American Civil Rights leaders. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks ignited the Civil Rights movement with her arrest for refusing to give her seat to a Caucasian-American man (Branch, 1988). During many interviews, she often stated that Septima Clark's workshops inspired her to refuse to vacate the seat.

As the director of workshops, Septima Clark (1988) empowered other African-Americans with her Citizenship Schools. The Citizenship Schools provided African-Americans with the reading and writing skills to become registered voters. The success of the schools caused Septima Clark and her protégé Bernice Robinson to implement the program onto John's Island .

Septima Clark (1988) and Bernice Robinson conducted the first workshop in the back room of an old grocery store. At the beginning of the meeting, Clark noticed that Robinson was preparing to use elementary school materials to deliver instruction to the students. Clark then informed her that the materials would not meet the interests and needs of adult students. Clark also stated, "You don't tell people what to do. You let them talk to learn what they want to be done" (p. 152). She developed this idea by combining a "Two-Eye" theory of education with constructivist teaching. She used one "eye" to observe and gather participants' views on how they could acquire literacy skills. She used the other "eye" to envision strategies that would help them to independently fulfill these needs. Afterward, Clark and Robinson used this vision to help the participants draw from their personal perceptions of words and letters to construct meaningful reading and writing experiences.

Through this interaction, the participants learned to read the bible and newspaper and write their names. Septima Clark (1962) enhanced these experiences by teaching them how to use their literacy skills to interpret the South Carolina Constitution. Specifically, she coached them on interpreting the sections included on the voter registration test. As a result, the workshop participants passed the exam and received voter registration certificates. Many of them even became actively involved, decision-making community leaders. This success was the impetus for creating additional Citizenship Schools in other parts of South Carolina and the neighboring states of Georgia and Tennessee (Branch, 1988). In 1959, the program ended, however, when the Tennessee State Legislature revoked Highlander Institute's charter. But in 2 years, Septima Clark would use the Highlander concept to change the Civil Rights Movement.

### *The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)*

In 1961, Septima Clark accepted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s offer to serve as the Director of Education for his relatively new Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organization (Clark, 1962). Her most significant achievement was the creation of the Voter Education Project. The Voter Education Project was designed to create Citizenship Schools in the Southern states. The project was also a response to the South's use of difficult interpretations of the United States Constitution to prevent African-Americans from becoming registered voters.

Following the Highlander Institute framework, the Citizenship School teachers asked the participants to describe the voting issues of their communities. The teachers would then place the answers on dry cleaner bags. Afterward, the teachers would help the participants to apply their interpretations of the answers toward solving the voter registration problems in their communities.

In spite of these achievements, the Citizenship Schools never received the full support of the SCLC leadership (Branch, 1988). The reason is that Dr. King and the other SCLC ministerial leaders overlooked Septima Clark's (1962) potential to serve as a well-rounded leader of the organization. In effect, Dr. King and the other key Civil Rights leaders strongly believed that women did not possess the skills to effectively direct any significant event of the Civil Rights Movement.

Consequently, the SCLC leadership failed to consistently provide Septima Clark (1988) with the resources needed to continuously conduct meaningful voter registration workshops. In addition, Reverend Ralph Abernathy bitterly complained about Clark's membership on the SCLC executive council (Glen, 1988). Other African-American preachers even refused to donate time, money, or resources to the project.

Septima Clark (1988) responded to the criticism by politely confronting the SCLC officials about their chauvinistic behavior. She particularly informed them that they should begin to empower other people to assume major leadership roles in the Civil Rights Movement. Clark would also indicate that the Women's Rights Movement preceded the Civil Rights Movement. She further continued to hold Citizenship School meetings. Many participants lost their jobs because of attending the meetings. Moreover, the white establishment continuously threatened to kill Septima Clark and the other Citizenship School teachers. But Clark, a fearless leader, continued to help African-Americans become registered voters.

In addition, Septima Clark (1988) provided over 100 teachers with training on establishing Citizenship Schools in the segregated Southern states. By 1965, the Citizenship teachers had produced more than 1,000,000 literate African-American registered voters. These results galvanized President Lyndon B. Johnson to authorize the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Branch, 1988). In addition, the results laid the foundation for many African-Americans to be elected to as mayors, congressmen, senators, and commissioners. For the next five years, Clark continued to use Citizenship Schools to create more informed African-American citizens. In 1970, she retired from the SCLC.

## Humble Endings

In spite of her retirement, Septima Clark (1988) continued to serve as an activist in her hometown of Charleston (Hines, 2003). In 1976, she finally received her pension from the Charleston County School Board. In 1978, she founded the Septima Clark Day Care Center. In an ironic twist of fate, Clark also became the first African-American woman to serve on the Charleston County School Board.

During the last years of her life, Clark received numerous awards (Hines, 2003).

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter awarded the Living Legacy Award to her. In 1982, South Carolina honored Septima Clark (1988) with the Order of the Palmetto Award. This award is the highest honor given to a South Carolinian. Charleston showed its appreciation of Clark when the College of Charleston made her the

first person of color to receive one of its honorary doctorate degrees. The institution also named its auditorium after Septima Clark. Clark cherished these awards and accomplishments until her death in 1987.

## Discussion

This case study highlights Septima Clark's (1988) ability to use education to arouse and sustain social reform and academic achievement. In essence, Clark used people's past experiences to guide them to their individual and collective destinies. Apparently, the underlying dynamic of her work was a constructivist approach to educating for social justice. These concepts are indicative of developmental leadership. Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) define developmental leadership as the ability to help people become leaders. According to them, developmental leaders particularly focus on developing the leadership skills of silenced and disenfranchised people. They help these people to find and use their voices to become actively involved in effecting change in their communities.

Belenky, et al. (1997) continued that developmental leaders use dialogue and discussion to facilitate this achievement. First, they draw people into critical discussions by posing open-ended questions to them. Using the constructivist approach to learning, they carefully listen to and relate all answers to people's past experiences. They also use these answers to learn from people. Developmental leaders sustain these experiences by sharing and modeling their values and daily lifestyles for people. Belenky et al. (1997) continued that this modeling represents an intersection between developmental leaders' personal lives and professional careers. In other words, developmental leaders' personal lives become a public symbol of enlightenment and empowerment for other people.

Hines (2003) stated that African-American women have always served as developmental leaders. According to him, they have thrived on helping silenced people. Hines continued that the reason is society has often tried to silence African-American women. As a result, they have had to overcome stigmas: racism and sexism. Thus, of all interactive ethnic and gender-driven experiences, the African-American woman's experience is most closely aligned with the everyday struggles of disenfranchised people.

These struggles are clearly a part of the life and legacy of Septima Clark (1988). This case study shows that because of Septima Clark's life experiences, she was extremely qualified to serve as a developmental leader. Her leadership changed the lives of African-American people and communities. She facilitated this change by experiencing the three transformations of social justice. They are a transformation of self, transformation of people, and transformation of society (Quinn, 2003). It appears that during the transformation of self, Septima Clark realized that her personal life and professional obligations could serve as a public domain of enlightenment on how to achieve equal rights.

During the transformation of people phase, Clark (1988) challenged African-Americans to use their views and past experiences to affect each other's pursuit of becoming lifelong learners and leaders. She helped them to realize that these experiences could assist them with achieving equal rights and first class citizenry. As an example, Clark taught them how to use reading and writing to overcome illiteracy. As a result, many African-Americans departed her sessions and successfully passed the voter registration test. In addition, they developed a sense of ownership and belongingness to their communities.

During the transformation of culture phase, Clark (1988) inspired African-Americans to use their individual and collective growth to change society's views and respect for African-American communities. Evidence to this effect can be seen in how the Citizenship Schools forced the government to pass laws that preserved the civil rights of African-American people.

These actions support Paulo Friere's (1970) call to teaching for social justice by:



- acknowledging students' voices and past experiences;
- using students' voices and past experiences to develop the curriculum; and
- applying students' voices and past experiences toward making significant changes in their communities.

They also reiterate that teaching for social justice is using critical and civic-minded knowledge to convey relevant information to people.

### Implications

Septima Clark's (1988) achievements clearly highlight the significance of training teachers who can teach for social justice. To that end, the researchers have outlined some major considerations that should be shared with aspiring teachers. First, preservice teachers should realize that teachers are agents of social justice. That is, teachers are required to encourage their students to connect the curriculum to past experiences and the surroundings in the communities.

Second, preservice teachers must be taught that the role of the teacher is to create learning experiences that foster critical and reflective discussions among students. These discussions should also be extended through role playing, experiments, and other hands-on experiences. These interactive experiences will allow students to not only read about but also experience the curriculum.

Third, preservice teachers must realize that social justice classrooms reflect the larger context of society. Students must be taught how and encouraged to use daily lessons to discuss and address the most oppressive conditions and issues of their communities. Finally, preservice teachers should be aware of the significance of including students' voices in the classroom. The reason is that these voices are central to developing students' acceptance of the curriculum and instruction. As such, preservice teachers should understand that their in-service instructional practices must include: a) telling stories from students' perspectives; and b) seeking students' opinions and interpretations of the subject matter. In short, students' personal lives must be the center of all curricular experiences.

Overall, the significance of these arrangements is threefold. First, it highlights the need to use teaching and learning to promote and transfer democratic thinking from the classroom to the community. Second, it reiterates the need to ensure that the learners' needs and experiences are central to all teaching and learning experiences. Finally, it implies that in addition to creating A+ students, teachers must also be able to develop lifelong learners of society. The intersection of both goals is predicated upon the teacher's ability to listen with care, think with consideration, and teach with sensitivity.

### Summary/Conclusion

Septima Clark (1898-1987) is one of the most influential educators and Civil Rights leaders in South Carolina and U.S. history (Hines, 2003). Her greatest accomplishment is redefining the use of reading and writing to foster social change among people and within communities. During this process, her life became a public example of how to use education to promote social justice and social change in communities. Clark's developmental style of academic and social leadership benefits and redefines educational leadership in many ways. Her leadership style implicates that all human beings can be leaders. The reason is that they have the ability to serve others. Her efforts highlight the importance of using instructional leadership to ask two significant questions: "What do I want to learn?" and "How will I use knowledge to empower other learners?"

Her life and legacy should inspire teacher education programs to provide students with divergent views of teaching for social justice. In particular, her insights should inspire these programs to teach students that:



- teaching for social justice is a formative process of developmental learning and teaching;
- teaching for social justice is a formulaic mixture of nature and nurture; and
- teaching for social justice is the development of human potential through instinct, introspection, and intuition.

Finally, preservice teachers must realize that teaching is more than just the mere deliverance of instruction to students. As indicated by Septima Clark (1988), teaching is the ability to ensure that the instruction causes positive, permanent changes in self, other people, and society. As such, teacher education programs should include Septima Clark's developmental philosophy in the same curricula that discusses Jean Piaget's (1963) and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) instructional theories. The researchers strongly believe that Clark's pedagogy adds more diversity to the overarching and original objective of educating for social justice: maximizing human interests and needs.

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