



RBG set the record straight, our curriculum should too: Centering the work of Dr. Pauli Murray and Black feminism in social studies

Tiffany Mitchell Patterson

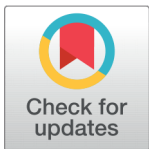
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I am a Manager of Social Studies at District of Columbia Public Schools in Washington, D.C. Prior to joining the DCPS Social Studies team, I was an assistant professor of secondary social studies at West Virginia University. With 10 years of experience teaching middle school social studies, I am interested in racial and social justice in education, education activism, critical civic education, teaching Black and underrepresented narratives in social studies education. Education is my revolution. My own professional development efforts have focused on advocacy, activism, intersectionality, decolonization, and anti-racist/anti-oppressive education, which lies at the core of my teaching practice, research, and community work. Outside of my professional pursuits, I enjoy community/organizing work, spending time with family and friends, watching TV and I love listening to music.

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INTRODUCTION

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's legacy is cemented as a staunch advocate in the struggle for women's rights in the United States. In 1971, one of her first cases with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote an amicus brief for *Reed v. Reed*, the first major Supreme Court case to address gender discrimination utilizing the 14th amendment. This landmark decision determined that discrimination on the basis of sex violates the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th amendment ([ACLU, n.d.](#)).



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She named Pauli Murray and Dorothy Kenyon, two activist women’s rights lawyers as co-authors of the brief although neither were involved in the writing of it. Murray and Kenyon co-wrote an ACLU brief in 1966 that successfully argued for the right of women to serve on juries utilizing the 14th amendment and the ruling set a precedent that recognized “sex” was included in equal protection standards (Scott, 2006). Ruth Bader Ginsburg used Reed’s case as an opportunity to pay homage to the ideas that helped shape her arguments (Saxby, 2020).

In particular, Pauli Murray, queer, Black, intersectional feminist, civil rights activist, poet/writer, professor, legal scholar and first Black woman episcopal priest had a profound impact on Ginsburg’s work. In her own words about Pauli Murray, “We knew when we were writing that brief that we were standing on her shoulders. We owe so much to her courage, to her willingness to speak out when society was not prepared to listen” (Waxman, 2020 p. 2). It is critical that as the legacy of Ruth Bader Ginsburg is taught, the contributions of Pauli Murray should be included as well. More importantly, the impact of Black feminist scholarship and the ways in which Black women have pushed the women’s rights movement forward should be central in the curriculum.

An analysis of K-12 state social studies standards in the United States reveals women’s rights movements in the 19th and 20th century is grossly underrepresented in the curriculum comprising only 9% of the standards (National Women’s History Museum, 2017). The few times women’s rights movements are mentioned the topics are related to feminism, sexism, abortion, Title IX, Roe v. Wade and the Equal Rights Amendment. While Justice Ginsburg is not currently mentioned in the standards, it is likely that when women’s rights movements or landmark Supreme Court decisions are taught, her work is used as an example. This is also an opportune time for educators to address the trailblazing legal scholarship of Pauli Murray that influenced a generation of legal scholars, feminists, and racial justice activists.

Murray’s life and contributions provide invaluable insight in multiple movements, civil rights and women’s rights and the tensions within them. Among her many contributions, Pauli Murray coined the term “Jane Crow” in the 1940s as a student at Howard law school. Murray described that time as, “the harsh reality was that I was a minority within a minority, with all the built-in disadvantages that such status entailed” (Murray, 1987, p. 240). This powerful play on words succinctly recognizes notions of Black feminist thought that while race and gender may be analytically distinct, they are inseparable in the daily lives of Black women (Hill Collins, 1990). In the following quote, Murray argues for the valuing of their full humanity:

And since, as a human being, I cannot allow myself to be fragmented into a Negro at one time, a woman at another, or at a worker at another, I must find a unifying principle in all these movements to which I can adhere... This, it seems to me, is not only good politics but may be the price of survival.

Black women and Black queer people like Murray have long provided articulations of intersectionality through their lived experiences of the various ways systemic isms are operationalized and overlapping. Murray called out racial and gender discrimination and



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worked diligently to address it in both civil rights and feminist movements.

As educators and teacher educators, how are we making room in our classrooms to explore the complexities of intersectionality? In my research on teacher education, I have found a nuanced understanding of privilege and racism is vitally important to examining and recognizing systems of power (Mitchell-Patterson & Mcwhorter, 2020). However, teachers need the space and skills to engage in that work. Teacher preparation programs and professional development should provide preservice and in-service teachers opportunities to critically examine their own cultural and social identities (Haley et al., 2019) to support all students in their classrooms. As a Black woman educator, I have experienced the lack of representation of people like me aside from a few heroes whose stories were never fully told. Black women's intersectional experiences continue to be marginalized in the social studies (Vickery & Salinas, 2019). It's important to think about what is lost when the complexities of Black women's experiences, scholarship and contributions to society are left out of the curriculum. When the experiences of Black women like Murray are not included or fully reflected in the social studies curriculum, powerful instructive stories are erased, and inaccurate revisionist histories are maintained. Black feminist perspectives offer a lens to the world that could be transformative in social studies education, and we should teach that.

Murray not only spoke through legal scholarship but through poetry. In 1939 poem, *To the Oppressors*, Murray (2018) wrote:

Now you are strong
 And we are but grapes aching with ripeness.
 Crush us!
 Squeeze from us all the brave life
 Contained in these full skins.
 But ours is a subtle strength
 Potent with centuries of yearning,
 Of being keged and shut away
 In dark forgotten places.
 We shall endure
 To steal your senses
 In that lonely twilight
 Of your winter's grief.

We are here, let's work to bring the lives of Black women and Black queer people out of the dark and forgotten places and honor their intersectional lives in the social studies curriculum.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

As educators, it's important to do the necessary pre-work by reading, listening and learning the stories of Black women both historically and now. We must recognize that the experiences of Black women are not merely additive but in fact instructive to teach as the



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curriculum. For example, engaging students in inquiry-based learning about “Jane Crow,” provides students with a fuller understanding of intersectionality. Using primary and secondary sources centered on the ways in which Black women have led and worked tirelessly in civil rights and women’s rights helps students move beyond traditional master narratives of social movements in textbooks and mandated curriculum.

Murray wrote extensively in their memoirs and personal papers about the personal struggles associated with their gender and sexual identity. Murray identified as a man and used she/her pronouns. Later scholarship tended to use they/them pronouns to honor the way Murray identified. This was in a time where the language didn’t really exist yet to articulate what might be considered transgender today. As Cooper (2017) states “Murray’s struggle was made more difficult by her acceptance of deeply entrenched and societally imposed heteronormative assumptions that made it nearly impossible to consider expressions of sexuality and gender that we would today call queer or gender nonconforming” (p. 90). The use and misuse of pronouns, othering and navigating multiple forms of oppression remains an issue today as legislatures continue to propose anti-LGBTQ+ bills and is important to explore in the classroom. Engaging students in the complexities of navigating various gender and sexual identities before widespread LGBTQ+ social movements is another point of entry for educators.

In our remembering of prominent historical figures, we must also center the ones that have come before and paved the way for them. Therefore, in our teaching of Justice Ginsburg, we must center Dr. Murray. She (Ginsburg) honored her and we should too. Further, Murray’s work is built upon the activism of many African Americans that have invoked the 14th amendment. It’s never just the individual, it is the collective. There is so much power in teaching our students that.

Q&A WITH TIFFANY PATTERSON

Question #1

Teacher’s Question:

What primary and secondary sources do you suggest teachers and students read?

Tiffany Patterson’s Answer:

There is lots of scholarship including memoirs, letters, diaries, speeches, legal briefs, interviews and even poetry to learn about Murray’s life and activism. There are some accessible classroom resources that have been cultivated for teachers by the Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice: <https://www.paulimurraycenter.com/for-teachers>. The Southern Oral History Program developed a lesson plan titled, Pauli Murray: Civil & Women’s Rights Trailblazer, which includes links to 7 audio clips of Pauli Murray. In addition, the National Museum of African American History and Culture has an exhibit, Pauli Murray’s Proud Shoes: A Classic in African American Genealogy, including a video interview with Pauli Murray in 1985: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/proud-shoes-story-amer>



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ican-family. There is even a forthcoming documentary that will be streaming later this year, *My Name is Pauli Murray* from the same directors of the RBG documentary.

Most importantly, I would suggest reading of the writings and poetry of Pauli Murray. Murray wrote two memoirs, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* and *Song in a Weary Throat: Memoir of an American Pilgrimage*. Excerpts and quotes from these memoirs might be useful to explore. Perhaps what might be most accessible to students would be Murray's poetry. Murray's poetry can be found in the book *Dark Testament and Other Poems*, and includes poems about race, youth, and humanity.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

Teachers sometimes feel that they must be able to make explicit connections to content and skills in the standards. In their position, how do you address a skeptical or questioning administrator?

Tiffany Patterson's Answer:

I first want to honor and acknowledge that this tension does exist. Systemic pressures such as testing or perceptions of testing, lack of academic freedom, and time constraints, to name a few, influence the curricular decisions of teachers in the classrooms. I also want to lift up the creativity of educators to teach through and beyond the standards, as it is the floor and not the ceiling.

Murray's multifaceted life and career connects to the curriculum in many ways. The use of the 14th amendment post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow, women's movement, civil rights movement, and legal precedence appears in most social studies curriculum across the country. By teaching the work of Murray, students will meet the standard and go beyond it.

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

What are real-world civic connections to this topic that students can use for assessment purposes, like writing a letter advocating for Dr. Murray's inclusion in museums, memorials, and/or curricular materials?

Tiffany Patterson's Answer:

In light of Dr. Murray's legacy, informed action would be a great way to make real-world connections. Advocating for Dr. Murray's inclusion in museums, memorials and/or curricular materials is one way. Also, students could engage in informed action projects in which they develop solutions to social issues such as gender discrimination, racial discrimination, LGBTQ+ discrimination, voter suppression or equal protection under the law. Unfortunately, the social issues Dr. Murray fought to eradicate still exist and in that vein of activism students can provide new solutions to old problems.



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Question #4

Teacher's Question:

To what extent was the influence of intersectional feminist legal scholars like Pauli Murray exceptional during RBG's tenure on the courts?

Tiffany Patterson's Answer:

Dr. Murray was influential to RBG, Thurgood Marshall and many legal scholars. Remember, Murray was deeply involved in both feminist and civil rights movements. In thinking about the legacy of RBG's tenure, it was fortified by Pauli Murray's groundbreaking ideas on using the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment to secure equal rights for women. This served as a foundation not only for RBG's first Supreme Court case, but her entire career.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

You discuss how Black feminist scholarship should be more central to the curriculum. If this topic is a springboard to centering this scholarship, what are some of the logical next steps or directions you would suggest for teachers?

Tiffany Patterson's Answer:

Take stock of the curriculum. How many Black women appear in the curriculum? Then ask yourself when Black women appear in the curriculum how are their stories told? Is it a singular narrative? Do they only appear in certain time periods (enslavement and later civil right movement)? What message does that send? How can you disrupt that? These are ongoing questions to grapple with and explore.

Black feminist scholarship is a field of research that asserts that Black women are valuable. The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) is a good place to start, as they see "Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face" (p.1). I would suggest being intentional about reading, learning and engaging with diverse material about Black women and Black queer people (preferably by Black women and Black queer people) to explore their multifaceted experiences. Start with going beyond the traditional narratives of Black women that appear or don't appear in the curriculum. For instance, *A Black Women's History of the United States* by Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross is a great example of telling a more complete truth about history.

Also, listen to the Black women and youth in your lives and in schools. Often, we value knowledge in the research field and not the experiential knowledge of those around us. Hear them, their concerns and their joys. Are you making space for the conversations in an authentic way that is not transactional but a genuine place of understanding? If not, how can you do that? Be a listener and learner to do the work.



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