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Watkins, Audrey, P. (2009). *Sisters of Hope, Looking Back, Stepping Forward: The Educational Experiences of African-American Women*. New York Peter Lang Publishing, INC.

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Sisters of Hope, Looking Back, Stepping Forward: The Educational Experiences of African-American Women describes the educational trajectories of five African American women at home, school, and work. It also outlines the influences of Black English Vernacular and religion in these women's lives. Audrey Watkins incorporates her lived experiences as a 30 year old-woman employed professional and non-traditional student from Jamaica who pursued a bachelor's degree, when obtaining even an elementary school education was rare in her family. Other inspiration for the book comes from the author finding a gap in the literature in terms of African American women's voices missing from the debates and discussions in education. This book is a qualitative study that explores the stories of the five participants and

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“uncovers dimensions of the spiritual, economic, material, and social aspect of Black women’s lives” (p. 4).

In Chapter 1: *Motivation and Inspiration*, Watkins introduces the research study by stating the research goals, which are to “design, collect, analyze, and contextualize information with input from and collaboration with participants consonant with my vision for educational equity and social justice” (p. 6). The specific research methods employed in the study included: (1) interviews to develop personal narratives of the participants between the year of 1994 to 1995; and (2) informal observations of the participants in the workplace. She gained access to the participants by previously working with them at a bank in the Midwest. There, she served as the instructor of a speech communications program, which consisted of multiple workshops to help the clients master Standard English. In the study, she asked the participants (ages 24 to 49) about their “elementary, high school, and for some, business school education, as well as their learning throughout various phases of their lives” (p. 7). The study employs multiple frameworks from spirituality to critical praxis, and constructivism to better understand the challenges that the working-class African American mothers face given the “political and socioeconomic structure of our society” (p. 11). She argues that “the relationship between schooling and employment shape the socioeconomic location of African-American women in American society” (p. 14).

Chapter 2: *Life Texts: Participants’ Life Stories* presents some background information on the participants, including home life and schooling. Yvette was born in 1949 in Chicago. She lived in a family where parents came first, then God, and finally the kids. So, her parents had limited time to invest in her and encourage her to pursue her goals. Her mother and father worked low-wage jobs, a construction worker, and a housewife. She watched some of her siblings and raised others. This caused her to miss school. She also worked beginning at age 12 and had a baby during her first year of high school. When she moved to California at age 16 to live with an uncle, she continued to babysit the younger kids in his family. As an adult, she reported having challenges during her primary and secondary schooling, due to racism via teacher biases, along with teasing which lowered her self-esteem. Despite

these challenges, she raised five kids and continued to work low-wage positions averaging 10 to 12 hours per day. When her children were in school, she acknowledged that she had limited time to devote to her kids' studies, due to her work schedule.

Similarly, Gwen who was born in 1960 and her family members worked in low-wage positions. Her mother was a teen mom and she had five kids. Her father had limited time to devote to her mother and siblings. He also abused alcohol and molested two of his five daughters. As a single woman, her mother worked three jobs to survive. She began working at age 14. During that same time, a few of her siblings dropped out of school, due to becoming pregnant or joining gangs. The only person so encourage her to pursue an education was a teacher. After attending Robert Morris College, she obtained a job at a marketing company, due to them fulfilling a racial quota in the workplace.

Unlike Gwen and Yvette, Trudy was born in 1971 to parents who graduated from college. Her parents worked in higher paying jobs, in the factory and a clerk in a medical facility. Her parents held high aspirations for their children. As a result, one of Trudy's brothers attended college. When her siblings had challenges with homework, her parents tried their best to help them with the homework. Her parent's divorce coupled with the peer culture (e.g., teen moms) contributed to her having a baby with a boyfriend in her final year of high school. She finished high school and attended Robert Morris College. Despite her college education, she found it challenging to secure positions at the bank, due to her typing skills. She mastered those skills and passed the tests. Now, as a mother she tries her best to help her son with his homework.

Parental support for education was lacking in the families of Ida and Colleen, due to their parents' educational trajectory. In 1955, Ida was born. She grew up in a family with parents with a limited education. Her father did not finish elementary school. Her mother went back to school so that she could make her own wages outside of her husbands. Ida's mother also taught the kids to be financially independent as well. The structure of schooling did not work for Ida, because her instructors did not cater

to her learning needs. She admitted to being unprepared for high school. Similarly, Colleen was born in 1947 to a family who utilized economic resources to run a business. Her mom was also one of the few people to work in the neighborhood. Her parents taught her the basics, cooking and cleaning. Her relationship turned for the worst with her father who later became an alcoholic before he died. Her parents sent her to private schools beginning in first grade. These schools were predominantly white until about eighth grade, when the school changed to predominantly Black, due to changes in the neighborhood demographics.

Chapter 3, *Getting an Education at Home: Precept upon Precept, Line upon Line* examines the education that the women received inside and outside of the home. Some women in the study learned life lessons to develop socially for the real world outside of the home (e.g., Yvette, Trudy). Others learned about real-life situations through open communication inside the home (e.g., Ida, Colleen). Parents taught their children to think critically, use Standard English, and utilize resources like the encyclopedia in the case of Colleen. Defending oneself is a skill that Gwen and her siblings were taught by their mother. Ida taught her daughters, that “you reap what you sew,” (p. 43). In other words, what you do (or not) will come back to you.

These women also learned the importance of working to become financially independent and self-reliant inside the home. This teaching came from their parents working and them making further earnings at jobs beginning in elementary school and as late as high school. Besides working, the women learned to value education from their parents who encouraged them to pursue their high school education, a diploma, which many of the parents never acquired. As a result of the limited education of the parents, few of the participants were exposed to professional positions as youngsters and few went to a four-year college and few pursued professional careers. Now the participants encourage their kids to attend college by exposing them to college graduations (e.g., in the case of Ida) and/or through them pursuing degrees at a community college.

This chapter reiterates that the family plays a crucial role in educating children. As an adult, Yvette is involved in

her child's (Evelyn's) education. When she learned that her girl wanted to be a teacher, she encouraged her to pursue that goal. She also was concerned about the substitute teacher in the classroom for a long-period of time, because she knew that her daughter would receive a different type of education and thus the quality of instruction would differ as well. Trudy also served as an educational resource for her son beginning in pre-school. She also assisted him with his studies. Gwen went further to provide her child with a better education by sending her child to a school outside of the neighborhood so that her child could obtain a quality education. Beyond serving as an educational resource, the mothers found it to be important facilitators/motivators for their children in school and they taught their children to be confident. Additionally, these mothers advocate for parents to learn how "to discipline and [provide] personal guidance" (p. 58), and build character or the kids inside the home. As such, the chapter ended by stating that "competence, confidence, encouragement, and interests are some of the recurring themes that overlap in participants' home, school, and work settings" (p.62). The participants stories thus far point to "the critical role of informal education in the lives of participants and their families" (p. 62).

Chapter 4, *Getting an Education at School: Competence and Confidence* begins by explaining some historical research on the education of Black women. As early in the Civil War, Black women wanted to learn how to read and write. In the 1800s, Black girls who attended school learned curriculum to serve in roles as domestic workers and teachers in American society. In the current day, the importance of a quality education for children is noted by the following quote: "parents work experiences and other aspects of life in an unequal society illustrated the need for better and higher education for their children than they themselves received" (p. 70). Unfortunately, the curriculum taught in the school is widely debated, due to students' lack of interest in the subjects being taught in school. For instance, when Colleen became disinterested in math, she obtained a C. Some of the boredom in classes can be due to the limited connection to their lived experiences. Despite the disconnect in content to children's lives, a participant, Ida points out that "students should be encouraged to persevere, even in boring classes,

while we simultaneously struggle to have teachers make classes relevant and interesting” (p. 73). Beyond students’ interest in course materials, instructors’ interest in the course materials is important for students to see through the teaching of course materials. Teachers should consider making the curriculum relevant to the lives of children. Instructor feedback is also important for students, like Ida whose native language is not English. Understanding the language and words spoken and written by instructors becomes important for students like Ida to learn in the course materials. One-on-one instruction with students also helps some students grasp the course materials.

Outside of instruction, there are noticeable racial differences in content taught in high schools. When the participants went to college, they immediately noticed the differences in their preparation for college curriculum. The fact that math was a review for their suburban counterparts provided proof of the differences in high school curriculum for the participants who attended public, private schools that were majority Black versus their counterparts who attended predominantly white schools. The chapter concludes by discussing how competence is unequally distributed in schools, due to discriminatory practices in “instructional techniques, resources, policies, expectations, language use” (p. 91), which diminishes the quality of education for students.

Chapter 5, *Getting and Education at Work* discusses “what participants learned about education and about their place in society from significant work experiences and the effect of these experiences on their lives” (p. 96). The author then describes that some Black women’s employment pre- and post-slavery to the 1960s was mainly relegated to domestic work in homes. Similar to the past, in the current day, race, class, and gender influenced the wages and jobs available to the participants. Despite attending community colleges, Trudy and Andrea (young mothers) still live below the poverty line, due to their wages from their jobs. Limited English language proficiency coupled with computer skills serve as barriers to Black women in the study who aspire to work at a bank or in secretarial positions. The Black women also face racial discrimination when applying for job positions. Many times they are passed over even though a white candidate

was less qualified than them. After four tries, Trudy obtained a position at a bank. When they were at the job and felt as though they should have been promoted, once again instead of advancing in the job, they faced discrimination and a white employee was offered the advanced position.

Other Black women learned that at work they had to prove themselves to show that their skills were comparable to their white counterparts. They also learned that bosses wanted to control them on the job. This contributed to Gwen leaving a job after two years to show that ultimately she had control. Ida also “resigned when racism blocked her advancement in a corporation” (p. 117). As a result, factors such as race and social class preventing the job advancement of some Black women in the study. One participant, Colleen acknowledged the politics of corporate America, by “getting knocked down several times” (p. 129). As a result of racism, they learned “the importance of competence and the need for and the role of quality education and training to prepare them for success in the workforce” (p. 129). They continue to endure the struggles in the workplace, so that “their children [have] more options as well as more self-determination through informal and formal education” (p. 130).

Chapter 6, *Speech and Power: The Role of Black English in Participant's Lives*, describes the challenges that the Black women participants faced due to the use of Black English Vernacular. In school, Ida was unable to attend the college of her choice, due to her low score on the ACT. The majority of participants needed to learn Standard English in order to transition into the workforce, so that they would be able to understand the language utilized by their bosses and co-workers. Andrea attended Robert Morris College in order to hone in on Standard English in speaking and writing. After participating in multiple workshops on speaking Standard English, Gwen's confidence rose in speaking with people inside and outside of the workforce. Similar to the participants, the research showed that many African Americans who attend predominantly Black schools' curriculum values Black English Vernacular over Standard English. As a result, many African American students at these schools are at a disadvantage when they transition into places like the workforce or Corporate America, which values the use of

Standard English in speaking and writing over Black English Vernacular.

In Chapter 7, *Religious Perspectives: A Quest for Meaning, a Search for Hope*, explored participants' exposure to religion as youth. As adults, the participants who worked at the bank held the Christian faith, which enabled them to survive in the workforce, the place where they held minimum control. Being a Christian contributed to Ida's participation in community service. Beyond this, the women trained their children to live spiritual lives and uphold the Christian faith principles. The participants also know that change will come, but the foundation "begins in the heart" (p. 160).

The final chapter, *Conclusion: "I Don't Feel No Ways Tired,"* after the completion of the study, the participants found ways to fulfill their educational goals that had been deferred due to family responsibilities and finances. Inside the home, low-income mothers in the "study strive to create nurturing home environments where effective communication and informal education [were] vehicles to prepare children to function creatively, confidently, and competently in the world" (p. 170). Within schools, the participants were educated in ways to contribute to society. What was lacking was curriculum on how to successfully navigate through the workforce with training in computer skills and Standard English. In the workforce, the participants were oftentimes undervalued, and they overworked due to discrimination. Additionally, discrimination in the workforce resulted in them being passed over for positions. Due to these experiences, the research recommends that communication, motivation, church, and education be further explored. These topics are relevant and important to understanding how education has the potential to enable people to become emancipated from oppressive environments that serve as impediments in their daily lives.

The book, *Sisters of Hope, Looking Back, Stepping Forward: The Educational Experiences of African-American Women* is relevant to researchers in primary, secondary, and post-secondary settings because it tackles inequalities in schooling, due to race, gender, and social class. These inequalities include: limited parental education, school resources, school curriculum, and school

quality. Scholars who want to learn more about the challenges (e.g., financial, family, work) that low-income Black women encounter when trying to pursue a degree should consider reading this book to develop different ways to facilitate their success at community colleges along with four-year institutions. Furthermore, in an economy where funding is becoming tight, scholars and institutions will have to think better about how to make college affordable for low-income students, which again is why this important is helpful for understanding the experiences of low-income Black women who serve in dual roles as mothers and workers in pursuit of a higher education.

About the Reviewer

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