

Reflecting on the Great Black Migration by Creating a Newspaper

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“We are in the center of something people are calling the Great Migration: a huge movement of African Americans moving from the South to the North in the search of freedom ... New York’s black population is 327,7000. Last year it was 152,400. We better get ready for that wave of people!” Such are the words of two “reporters” for the *309 Tribune*, a newspaper created by intermediate grade students as they investigated a series of events that forever altered the culture of the United States. This article describes the ways in which I guided my third- and fourth-grade students in the use of historical fiction and primary and secondary sources (letters, historical newspapers, census data, photos) to think and write critically about provocative historical events. In creating their own newspaper, students learned to summarize and transform what they were learning into an organized format. They learned to appreciate the writer’s perspective in reporting and responding to provocative events. Specialist teachers (of art, music, woodshop, and computer technology) lent their talents to a large-scale project that was used, along with the newspaper, in a memorable culminating presentation.

A Teacher-Designed Curriculum

In the fall of 2005, I began teaching third and fourth grade at a progressive, independent school in downtown Manhattan. The “grade level” I teach is more accurately called the 8-9s (referring to the age range), as classrooms at our school are multi-age and non-graded before sixth grade. In this social studies-based school, students in the 8-9 classes typically spend the year studying large-scale movements of groups of people both within the United States and into this country from elsewhere. The social studies work is embedded in math and language arts, and integrates the special areas as well. As much as is possible, we address these subject areas under the umbrella of the central social studies topic. In years past, the 8-9 classes have studied broad topics



such as immigration to New York City; westward expansion and the Oregon Trail; and the Four Corners (native cultures of the Southwest). The design and execution of the social studies curriculum is, for the most part, in the hands of the individual teacher, and this autonomy is one of the things that made this school an attractive place for me to accept a teaching position. There are about 300 students in grades K-8, and this newspaper project involved my class of 21 students.¹

I chose to design a year-long investigation of the Great Black Migration because it is an intriguing historical narrative through which one can teach a set of standard social studies concepts appropriate for eight and nine-year olds. Major concepts (which intersect with several of the social studies curricular standards) include: United States geography; milestones in U.S. history (with special emphasis on slavery and Reconstruction); how people adapt to their physical and social environments; how people get their basic needs met (including competing and

cooperating for limited resources); how groups of people interact with one another; and how a culture (religion, art, music, food, literature, and traditions) develops, evolves, and migrates along with its people.²

The Role of the Black Press

The Great Black Migration was the largest internal migration in America's history. It took place in two distinct waves, the first beginning around 1916 with the first World War, and continuing with fervor until the Great Depression. Between 1916 and 1930, half a million African Americans left the rural "Jim Crow" south, which was characterized by a nearly feudal sharecropping system, and moved to northern industrial centers like Chicago, New York, Detroit, and Cleveland to take advantage of the abundance of higher paying war-related jobs.

The migration owed a great deal of its sustained intensity to the black press, most notably, newspapers like the *Chicago Defender*, New York's *Amsterdam News*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. African American families, just one generation removed from slavery, pored over (and shared with friends and neighbors) copies of the *Chicago Defender*, and answered its call of greater financial opportunity, social dignity, safety from lynch mobs, and political freedom believed to be present in the industrial North. It is difficult to obtain an accurate account of the readership of these newspapers, because most of the purchased copies were shared by as many as a dozen people. The *Defender* was banned in several states in the South, but this effort to stop distribution failed, in large part because Pullman Porters smuggled them into the area, at great risk to themselves.

The second wave of migration was ushered in with the Second World War, and continued through the 1960s.

This historical context was critical in setting the stage for our investigation, lasting several months, into the factors motivating the Great Migration. The facts are available from many resources, but a free resource that was most useful for its breadth, depth, and ease of use was "In Motion: The African American Migration Experience," a website designed by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a research branch of the New York Public Library.³ This website, www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm, covers the migration experiences of people of African descent, from the Transatlantic slave trade through the African migrations of the 21st Century. The Great Migration is one "chapter" to which a website visitor may go directly. From that portal, one has access to a large collection of photographs, interviews, audio recordings, maps, official documents, news and journal articles, and book chapters. There is also a companion book of the same title, published by the National Geographic Society.⁴

Historical Fiction

One of the first assignments in class was defining "history" as a broad construct. I asked the children to think about what the concept of history means to them, and then I recorded their responses. The children had varied, well-informed ideas. They listed historical sources such as: interviews with real people, textbooks, news articles, Internet sites, and photographs.

Next, we discussed the work that historians do, based on the question, "How do historians find out about the past?" Throughout the year, I relied heavily on the historical newspapers cited above, mostly the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Amsterdam News*. We used items from various sections

of the papers, including articles, photos, letters to the editor, editorials, advertisements, and even political cartoons. The main publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *The Crisis*, was also a valuable media resource, useful because of its inclusion of news as well as stories, poetry, and material specifically written for children.

I was able to access historical articles from these publications at the "In Motion" website, as well as at Proquest Historical News Papers, a database to which I have access through my affiliation with Columbia University.⁵ My curriculum also utilized historical fiction, particularly the novel *Color Me Dark* by Patricia McKissack.⁶ This novel, part of Scholastic's extensive Dear America series, is written as the diary of eleven-year-old Nellie Lee Love, whose family moves from rural Bradford Corners, Tennessee to Chicago, Illinois in 1919, after the murder of a beloved uncle. The novel makes reference to numerous political figures, authors, artists and events that characterized the Great Migration. Given these references, the novel was the perfect "anchor" for our year-long study. When McKissack references actual historical poems, songs, and news reports in the novel, I could usually locate the full texts online so that we could read and use them in class.



An invaluable resource for song lyrics is the website negrospirituals.com, where one can find poetry by Fenton Johnson and Claude McKay, as well as the lyrics to “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” the so-called Negro National Anthem (known as the “Black National Anthem” today).⁷ Excellent resources about the Harlem Renaissance also had useful information about the many cultural achievements of black Americans during this era.⁸

Throughout the novel, the fictional Love family reads *The Crisis* and the *Chicago Defender*. The father even solicits the aid of influential editor of the *Defender*, Robert Abbott. In fact, many blacks living in the South addressed letters directly to Mr. Abbott, soliciting information and assistance in their efforts to relocate.

Planning and Publishing

In the novel’s climax, the Love family is caught up in the Chicago race riots of 1919, which were real events. They find that two Chicago newspapers, the *Defender* (written and read by African Americans) and the *Daily Tribune* (Chicago’s mainstream newspaper), write very different accounts of the causes and outcomes of the four days of violence.⁹ We took this as an opportunity to compare and contrast the two newspapers’ perspectives.

As a year-end culminating activity, our class produced its own version of a World War I-era newspaper. We modeled our newspaper on the *Defender*, which was published by and for African Americans, and remained for decades an invaluable resource for blacks across the country. Having used real newspapers throughout the year to access and respond to historical information, we chose this format as the best means for consolidating our knowledge and sharing it with parents and peers in a meaningful way.

Our class had several conversations during the year about the role of audience in writing, and how this comes into play in newspaper writing. Following are some of the questions I asked the students to consider as reporters:

- ▶ Whose story will you tell?
- ▶ Will you show sympathy for one group over another?
- ▶ How much detail will you report?
- ▶ What details will you choose to leave out?

This project provided a natural assessment opportunity for me. Our guidelines for writing an article included the so-called five Ws (who, what, when, where, why/how), so student authors were challenged to cover a topic thoroughly. A related assignment was for students to write letters to the editor, taking a stand on the question of who was mostly at fault in the riots of 1919 and supporting their argument with examples. This kind of assignment forces students to go beyond the information given, and use inferences (about cause and effect) to write persuasively. This is part of what real historians do: use information to develop a model of important historical events, with an appreciation for perspective and potential bias.

In the weeks leading up to the newspaper project, as a way to have material that was prepared to go into the paper, I planned

opportunities for the students to carefully study topics related to the cultural context of the Great Migration. One example is comparing, contrasting, and creating advertisements for beauty products. We learned about the biography of Madame C.J. Walker, whose “Walker System” included a broad offering of cosmetics, licensed Walker Agents, and Walker Schools that offered meaningful employment and personal growth to thousands of Black women—and made Madame Walker America’s first self-made woman millionaire.

Another controversial issue we were able to address through this project was language, and how usage of certain words and labels changes over time. The novel was set in the year 1919, when the most common way to refer to African Americans was with words like “Colored” and “Negro.” Most of the children were not familiar with these words, although a few assumed that the latter was a swear word. I explained to them that although these were not swear words per se, they would likely cause offense if used in present conversation; they are considered “old fashioned” and out-dated ways of referring to African Americans. However, because our newspaper was to represent stories and attitudes existent around 1919, it was necessary that we use them in our writing. We added a special note to the back of our newspaper explaining, in effect, that these elements were included in our attempts at authenticity, and that we hoped we were not giving offense.

From start to finish, the newspaper project took about six weeks. I made certain that every student had at least one item (not necessarily an article) featured in the finished product. The technology teacher instructed students in the use of *Pages* (part of Apple Computer’s iWork software), and in seeing the final product to fruition; she even ordered, picked up, and hand-delivered copies for all the parents! All students spent two sessions of Technology class (45 minutes each) exploring and using the program for small independent projects. Later, we selected a group of four students to serve as editors-in-chief. They assembled their classmates’ submissions into the *Pages* program, giving up four 20-minute recess periods to do the work.

Beyond the tasks of creating and selecting the full length articles, the class had fun with the process of selecting a name for our newspaper; finding photos on the Internet; and composing a slogan along the lines of the “All the news that’s fit to print” from the *New York Times*. We made these decisions democratically as follows: First, each student submitted their ideas. Next, I selected a small number of representative samples. Finally, the students voted to determine the winner. As we met in room 309, we settled on the name *309 Tribune* for our newspaper and the slogan, “History is now!” Our front page consisted of stories about the 1919 riots in Chicago, women’s suffrage, and the end of World War I.

It All Comes Together

The end-of-the-year program was an unforgettable presentation of drama, music, and art. The students dramatized a series of key scenes from *Color Me Dark*. Under the direction of the music



Stage set representing a Tennessee front porch, ca. 1918.

teacher, they performed an original blues song, and sang the first verse of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.”

The woodshop teachers had assisted the children in planning and building an actual front porch to serve as the central scenery for the performance. It was complete with a platform, canopy, steps and a banister! In planning the set, we examined photos and paintings of front porches (several examples of these are featured in the artwork of William H. Johnson, which we acquired by taking apart an old calendar featuring his work).¹⁰ The set represented the front porch of the Love family home in Tennessee, and later, the front stoop of their row house in Chicago. (We are a unique school in many ways, most notably, in terms of having woodshop instruction every week for every student. In other schools, the stage set could be made with cardboard.)

With guidance from the art teacher, students created facades by painting large murals to look like the fronts of these two different buildings. As for the newspapers, copies were set on the seats in the classroom, which the audience enjoyed reading while waiting for the performance to begin.

The students reacted with pride to their published “historical” newspaper. “Wow, it totally looks like a real newspaper,” Danny exclaimed when he saw it. Through this extended group project, students were able to consolidate and communicate what they had learned about the Great Migration, in a variety of written items and graphics, assembled into one coherent package. Students were able to tap into their various talents and interests, and work both independently and with small groups. They created something challenging and unique. We brought all facets of the curriculum together, and integrated all of our educational

specialists’ gifts as well.¹¹ Next year, I will be teaching the Great Migration curriculum again, and with only minor changes, I intend to make the newspaper play a prominent role in our learning and reflection once again. 🌐

Notes

1. The student body of the Village Community School is 23 percent children of color, with about nine percent African, African-American and biracial including African-American. A gradual but consistent change in the “face” of the school is the result of the council’s commitment to diversity (in terms of race, religion, economic status, sexual orientation, and family composition). While most of our families may be considered affluent, about one-fifth of our students receive financial assistance, making for a socio-economic mix somewhat atypical in independent schools. Village Community School is not only independent; it is a progressive school. The progressive philosophy is most evident in its commitment to an anti-biased, noncompetitive atmosphere; its celebration of diversity in students, families and staff; and the autonomy with which its faculty are able to explore a diversity of curricular themes with students.

2. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).

3. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, “In Motion: The African American Migration Experience,” The New York Public Library, www.inmotionaame.org

4. Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf, *In Motion: The African American Migration Experience by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2005).
5. Proquest Historical Black Newspapers, www.proquest.com/products_pq/descriptions/histnews-bn.shtml. Use of this website requires a subscription. Check with your school librarian.
6. Patricia McKissack, *Color Me Dark: The Diary of Nellie Lee Love, The Great Migration North, Chicago, Illinois, 1919* (New York: Scholastic, 2000).
7. “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” Negro Spirituals. www.negrospirituals.com.
8. Primary Sources, Inc., *March On Till Victory 1877-1970; Making Freedom: African Americans in U.S. History, Sourcebook 5* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004); Walter Dean Myers, *Harlem Summer* (New York: Scholastic, 2007).
9. “Ghastly Deeds of Race Rioters Told: The Chicago Defender Reports the Chicago Race Riot, 1919,” *History Matters. The U.S. Survey Course on the Web* (historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4976/) and “A Crowd of Howling Negroes: The Chicago Daily Tribune Reports the Chicago Race Riot, 1919,” (historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4975/).
10. Reynolds Price, *Out on the Porch: An Evocation In Words* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 1992).
11. I would like to thank technology teacher Yumi Iwasa, art teacher Diana Jensen, music teacher Jeanette Miller, woodshop teacher Judy Kashman, and social studies coordinator Joan Schur for their assistance in this project, as well as Head of School Eve Kleger for her support.

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