The Secret Network of Black Teachers Behind the Fight for Desegregation

A teacher talks to her students at a recently desegregated elementary school in 1962.Bettmann / Getty

For 25 years, the Emory University professor Vanessa Siddle Walker has studied and written about the segregated schooling of black children. In her latest book, The Lost Education of Horace Tate: Uncovering the Hidden Heroes Who Fought for Justice in Schools, Walker tells the little-known story of how black educators in the South—courageously and covertly—laid the groundwork for 1954's Brown v. Board of Education and weathered its aftermath.

The tale is told primarily through the life of Horace Tate, an acclaimed Georgia classroom teacher, principal, and one-time executive director of the Georgia Teachers and Education Association (GTEA), an organization for black educators founded in 1878. Later in his career, he became the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Kentucky; at the time, Georgia still banned black students from state doctoral programs. Walker first met Tate in 2000. Over the course of the next two years, he told her about clandestine meetings among and outreach to influential black educators, lawyers, and community members tracing back to the 1940s. He also revealed black teachers' secret and skillful organizing to demand equality and justice for African American children in Southern schools. After Tate's
death in 2002 at the age of 80, Walker continued a 15-year exploration, relying on Tate's extensive archives to expose the full picture of how black educators mounted civil rights battles—in the years preceding and immediately following the Brown decision—to protect the interests of black children.

The resulting account, which features anecdotes about and cites wisdom from prominent black leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and W.E.B. Du Bois, offers an intriguing look at black education and helps inform the ongoing discourse on school desegregation. I recently spoke with Walker about the crucial role black educators played in the evolution of public education in the South. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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Melinda D. Anderson: The traditional narrative surrounding the history of school integration is filled with fearless NAACP attorneys, well-timed lawsuits, and national civil-rights leaders. As you write, this history is not incorrect. But in what ways is it incomplete?

Vanessa Siddle Walker: To overturn Plessy v. Ferguson—the 1896 Supreme Court case upholding the separate-but-equal doctrine—you have to have access to the people in the South. But if you're in the NAACP’s national office in New York, how do you know who in the South will be a plaintiff? How do you launch a movement when you can't really work well in the South because of the hostile climate? At the same time, black teachers in the South have data on school conditions and teaching resources and they know the plaintiffs, but they can't let it be known that they're part of the movement or they'll lose their jobs. So it's a perfect partnership. Black educators called themselves hidden provocateurs—these are the people figuring out, on a local level, how to provoke change and maneuver to get better facilities and more funding. To have it publicly known would undermine what they were trying to do. The generations of black people who followed learned the script that they wanted us to know.

[Black girls fueled the crusade to desegregate schools]

Anderson: Black citizens who challenged Jim Crow segregation by rejecting racial subordination faced violence, intimidation, and economic ruin. Talk about the personal and emotional costs borne by black educators who were fighting for black children during the civil-rights era.

Walker: There are obvious losses—black teachers were fired and demoted. Wonderful black principals were put in charge of running school buses. They were humiliated because they had once been leaders in their communities. Some of them had to relocate and move
north. But there are costs that we forget—like losing control over what black children learned.

The black educators taught math and science and everything else as best as they could with the limited resources that they had. You also saw the infusion of blackness in their classrooms. They were teaching black children how to be resilient in a segregated society. They seeded the civil-rights movement with this curriculum.

Those of us who reflect on the civil-rights era naturally think about people losing jobs and status. But to me just as important is understanding that they lost the chance to instill in another generation the ability to think about racial progress. We lost things that were foundational. We have to know the breadth of the costs, to understand both how we got to present-day conditions and how to think about moving forward.

**Anderson:** The implementation of *Brown v. Board* resulted in what Tate called a “second-class integration”—forfeiting all that sustained black children in all-black schools in the movement for equality. What went wrong, and what was lost in the integration of public schools?

**Walker:** Black educators supported and wanted integration. They imagined an additive model, in which black children would have more than what they already had. They had school climates that taught black students to aspire. They took the negative messages from the larger society, reconstructed them, and made children believe they could be anything they wanted to be. They had black educators working through their powerful organizational networks across the South, advocating on black children’s behalf. What they wanted was access—to newer school buildings and textbooks, bus transportation, science equipment, and playgrounds. They wanted for black children what many white people already had for their children.

It was their expectation that integration would retain the aspiration and advocacy, and they would gain access. Instead, with integration, they closed most of the black schools and fired many of the black teachers—there goes the aspiring school climates. There was a push following the *Brown* case to merge black and white teacher organizations in the South, to be on board with integration also. But white educational organizations never advocated for what black children needed. Many of the members of the white organizations were the very superintendents and principals who were oppressing black children. You put the two together—the capacity to advocate is lost.

Ultimately, all we got was compromised access. White southerners pulled their children out of public schools, so the access was never what the black educators envisioned integration—that additive model—would look like. But the momentum to desegregate in the late 1960s
and early ’70s—the good feelings that followed *Brown v. Board*—was too much of a distraction for mainstream supporters of integration. Nobody could hear black educators’ objections in real time.

Fast-forward to today, and think about the massive data on black children’s educational outcomes. Schools with climates that encourage black students to aspire are relatively rare. The advocacy structures—very tightly networked organizations that had been around since the turn of the century—are gone. And the access that we once had, as scholars have identified, is going backwards. So the question is: Where are we today?

**Anderson:** How did teachers juggle their activism with their job of teaching—and are there lessons for today’s educators?

**Walker:** The first thing is that you should not step out alone. I want to be very clear that the advocacy was through GTEA, not individual. It’s an important distinction because if you step out as individuals, you face reprisals from local school boards. If you speak as individuals, or without some sort of community support, then you’re vulnerable. You should not step out without knowing the local climate—both that which is spoken and that which is unspoken. You must also recognize that if you step out there could be consequences.

Another lesson: Don’t tell everybody everything. In none of the correspondence in Tate’s archives did black teachers talk about the fact that they were really well-educated. They didn’t tell people how they were going back to school and using state money to get master’s degrees from northern institutions. In written records of private meetings they talk about what they’re doing, and how they’re trying to create a generation of black children who will be as educated as they can make them, within the constraints of a segregated world. They told people only what they needed to know.

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