

Inclusive Curriculum: The Legacy of Dr. Carter G. Woodson

Dr. Dorrance Kennedy, LCSW
Associate Professor
School of Social Work
Fayetteville State University
1200 Murchison Road
Fayetteville, North Carolina 28301
USA

Dr. Terri Moore Brown
Professor
School of Social Work
Fayetteville State University
1200 Murchison Road
Fayetteville, North Carolina 28301
USA

Mr. Abraham Watson
Bachelor of Social Work Student
School of Social Work
Fayetteville State University
1200 Murchison Road
Fayetteville, North Carolina 28301
USA

Abstract

Dr. Carter G Woodson was an African American historian, author, publisher, and activist. He is known as the Father of Black History. He was the second African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard University. He was the founder of the Journal of Negro Education and the Associated Publishers. He wrote many important books including The History of the Negro Church and The Miseducation of the Negro. He died in Washington, DC in 1950.

Keywords: African American history, education, social justice

1. Introduction

Dr. Carter G. Woodson was told by his professor, Dr. Edward Channing, that African Americans had no history of significance. American and world history has been filled with misinformation and stereotypes related to people of African descent. The continent of Africa was portrayed as savage and uncivilized. The great kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai were unknown. The achievements of African Americans were unrecognized. He decided to make it his life's mission to prove his professor wrong. Woodson engaged in a lifelong struggle to educate himself and then to enlighten his students and eventually the nation. His career focused on history, higher education, and social justice.

Review of the Literature

2. Early Days

Dr. Carter G. Woodson was born on a small farm in Virginia in 1875, ten years after the end of the Civil War. His parents, James Henry and Annie Eliza, struggled to feed and clothe seven children. The food was scarce, and he would leave the table hungry to go to the woods and pluck persimmons (Hopkinson, 2021). He had only one pair of pants and a shirt to wear for church. He attended school four months out of the year. He was asked to read the newspaper to adults. He drove a garbage truck and worked in the coal mines of West Virginia. In the mines, a piece of slate came crashing down on his head. He worked in the mines for three years (Hopkinson, 2021).

When he was twenty years old, he moved back to Virginia to start his high school education. He finished his coursework in two years. He then entered Berea College and earned a bachelor's degree in literature. He became a teacher and later became a principal at Frederick Douglass High School. He also worked in the Philippines to train natives to govern themselves. Dr. Woodson earned a master's degree from the University of Chicago at the age of thirty-three. He entered Harvard to pursue a doctorate in History. During his matriculation, Dr. Woodson failed his comprehensive exam in history and had trouble getting his dissertation approved. At the age of thirty-seven, he earned his degree. Dr. Woodson was determined to prove that Black History was a legitimate field of study (Hopkinson, 2021).

In 1915, he published his first book, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*. In 1919, he became the Dean of the Howard University School of the Liberal Arts. He left after one year because of his frustration with the college administration. In 1920, Dr. Woodson became a Dean at the West Virginia Collegiate Institute. He once again experienced the politics of higher education. Subsequently, he decided to leave the university and pursue his life's mission (Goggin, 1997).

3. Change of Focus

In 1915, Dr. Woodson established the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and led the organization for twenty-eight years. In response to Dr. Channing's challenge, Dr. Woodson established Negro History Week in 1926 to correlate with the birthdays of Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. He traveled the country giving speeches and sent pamphlets about the celebration out to schools, colleges, and churches.

Dr. Woodson developed Negro History Week because African American were seen as a burden to society. However, African Americans had the potential to excel if given a fair opportunity. African American had the power to lead in the struggle to overcome oppression. He succeeded in making Black History a respected academic discipline and he popularized it among the masses of the people (Goggin, 1997).

4. Miseducation of the Negro

Dr. Carter G. Woodson's seminal work was *The Miseducation of the Negro* published in 1933. In this book, he made several important points. Dr. Woodson stressed that modern education had failed to teach African Americans how to make a living. They were unable to provide each other with employment. Dr. Woodson stated that African Americans were trained in the economics of corporate America and Wall Street. Because of this training, they rejected opportunities to become blue collar entrepreneurs. He also spoke against universities that were not legitimately accredited but bestowed doctorate degrees upon unworthy candidates (Woodson, 2000).

In other aspects of the book, Dr. Woodson highlighted the importance of the church as the strongest resource of the African American community. He stressed that African Americans must not expect broader society to assist them in their struggle to uplift themselves. African Americans must create opportunities for themselves and overcome their lack of independence.

Dr. Woodson expressed his discomfort about charismatic leadership in the community. He stressed that the community could benefit by having more workers instead of so-called leaders. He stressed that strong speeches and provocative oratory would not free African Americans from their oppression. He also counseled against overusing protest as a strategy without having a concrete, constructive program to stand on (Woodson, 2000).

5. Role Model

Dr. Woodson was extremely diligent and worked eighteen hours a day. He was a prolific scholar who published more than twenty books. He was also very frugal and lived on only twelve dollars a week. He urged others to avoid debt and live a life of thrift. He lived a life of sacrifice and discipline. He was progressive in his thinking. He endeavored to be self-reliant and independent and inspired others to do the same. He traveled the world and was extremely well read. He was an advocate of physical fitness who routinely walked to his appointments. (Dagbovie, 2014).

6. Past, Present, and Future

Dr. Woodson strongly believed that there was value in the lessons of history. America is currently having a debate about how history should be taught in the nation's schools. Many people are concerned about whether our nation will continue to embrace our growing diversity or see it as a threat. Legislation to restrict the teaching of history has been introduced in over twenty states this year. However, an educational underground railroad is being created. In response, African American churches have begun to hold history classes during Bible study. Renowned professor, Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw, has initiated the "Freedom to Learn" campaign to combat misinformation about Black History. Also, an organization named Faith in Florida has started a Black History program which offers an online teaching toolkit of videos, books, etc. (Berry, 2023).

I believe that Black History should be taught in America's educational institutions but also comprehensive courses about Native Americans, Latinos, and LGBTQ communities. Honesty about the past empowers us to live a more harmonious future. America must make a choice about her future direction. The choice is ours to embrace the power of our diversity or retreat into exclusivity.

References

- Berry, D. (2023, October 4). Finding workarounds to teach Black history. *USA Today*.
- Dagbovie, P. (2014). *Carter G Woodson in Washington DC*. Charleston: The History Press.
- Goggin, J. (1997). *A Life in Black History*. LSU Press.
- Hopkinson, D. (2021). *Carter Reads the Newspaper*: Peachtree.
- Woodson, C. (2000). *Miseducation of the Negro*. Chicago: African American Images.