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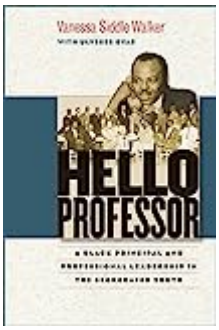

Vanessa Siddle Walker, Ulysses Byas. *Hello Professor: A Black Principal and Professional Leadership in the Segregated South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. xiv + 293 pp. $32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3289-9.

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Contradictions of Black Public School Leadership in the Pre-*Brown* Era

A small book written by Beth Day in 1955 entitled *The Little Professor of Piney Woods* told the story of Laurence Clifton Jones, president and founder of Piney Woods Country Life School. In many ways, Jones is the antecedent of Ulysses Byas, the subject of *Hello Professor*. African Americans applied the term âProfessorâ or âFesserâ to educated black men, particularly those who were teachers. Jones (1884-1975) earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Iowa in 1907. He then spent a year in the South, teaching in a Mississippi school. Inspired by Booker T. Washington, Jones established a school in Rankin County, Mississippi, in 1909, that featured an agricultural-industrial curriculum.

Two generations later, Byas served as the principal of a black high school in Gainesville, Georgia, during the 1950s and 1960s. Vanessa Siddle Walkerâs book is an examination of how Byas navigated this difficult social period–in particular, how a black principal negotiated the complicated territory of serving as a black school administrator in the segregated South on the cusp of the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Walkerâs book is divided into six chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. She also provides a useful explanation of methodology and delimitations.

Her treatment of a black school administrator is an outgrowth of her first book, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (1996), a study of the Caswell County (North Carolina) Training School (CCTS). Walker explains that Byasâs voice is a substitute for that of the principal of the CCTS, N. L. Dillard. Since Dillard was deceased by the time of Walkerâs research for *Their Highest Potential*, Byas became a surrogate and an informant for this current study. The title *Hello Professor* refers to Byasâs title as well as to his salutation to Walker during the interview process. According to Walker, the comparison of the meaning and circumstances of their relative âprofessorshipsâ not only created a cultural bridge from one black educational professional to another but also a âsacred historical and cultural space where scholarship, mission, and responsibility mergedâ (p. xiii). It seems to have also provided an opportunity to reflect on her pro-

fessional life as laid against that of black professionals from an earlier time. It should be noted that this is a professional biography rather than a full-fledged treatment of Byasâs life, however. By way of explanation, Walker states, âHello Professor uses an individual biography as it intersected with a systematic structure to make more explicit the similarity of black educational activity and mission evident in the individual case studiesâ (p. 5).

Born in 1924, Byas was raised by a single mother in Macon, Georgia. He began working at the age of six to help support the large family. He graduated from Hudson Industrial School, joined the United States Navy, and then enrolled in Fort Valley State College. His pursuit of graduate work reveals a break with tradition. As was customary prior to the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, blacks often took advantage of out-of-state tuition scholarships given to black students so that they could travel to northern states for graduate study. Although the practice was ruled illegal in *Gaines v. Canada* (1938), the use of the scholarships allowed the governments of southern states to circumvent calls for the integration of higher education as well as the commitment of more state resources to provide opportunities for graduate study at black universities. Under this pattern, students were oftentimes only able to attend institutions during the summer. As a result, the completion of a graduate degree often took several years. Byas chose to forego this method of funding his education since he had resources available from the G. I. Bill and was, therefore, able to pursue graduate education at Teachers College-Columbia as a full-time student. At Columbia, he encountered Harold Rugg and Ruth Strang, both of whom, according to Byas, left a lasting impression on him. After a year of study, he took a teaching job at Blackwell Memorial School in Elberton, Georgia.

The most cohesive portion of the book is the three chapters detailing the purpose and activities of the black professional organizations and the extent to which Byas relied on them for support. Walker concludes that âtwo interrelated forms of professional development help explain Byasâs vision as a professorâ (p. 81): national school accreditation organizations, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (Southern Association); and state and local organizations, such as the Georgia Teachers and Education Association (GTEA). These professional organizations constituted a formalized structure of support and professional development. Byas also describes an informal system of mentoring that occurred when he was travelling to professional conferences with colleagues from other schools or by exposure to African Americans who represented higher education at the conferences.

Since blacks could not join the Southern Association under Jim Crow, the Association of Colleges and Schools (Association) was the black counterpart to the Southern Association. The Association dated to 1928 and was formed in reaction to the publication of the Arthur J. Klein report, âSurvey of Nero Colleges and Universities,â which criticized the facilities, curriculum, faculty, and administration of black institutions of higher education.[1] The Southern Association, however, was the body that âapprovedâ black colleges and universities. In the accommodationist tradition of Washington, black administrators assured the Southern Association that they would not press for âjointâ meetings, but they did request leadership and technical assistance in order to improve black schools. Black administrators and teachers used the Southern Association accreditation criteria to evaluate black schools, complete a self-study, and go through external review. If they passed, however, they could be âapprovedâ but not âaccredited.â Nevertheless, âapprovalâ became the goal and focus of the Association. A more subversive agenda was to use the approval status to lobby for equity in access to resources. Although this classification was the stepchild to the accreditation awarded to white schools, it was better than nothing. In addition, membership in the Association provided a venue not only for networking but also for the sharing and dissemination of ideas and materials. Moreover, the focus of the Association was specifically on the education of black children, an element that was ignored by the Southern Association. Byas learned about the use of surveys and methods of assessments with which he could make the case for additional resources from members of the black intelligentsia that included psychologists, sociologists, and educators, such as Kenneth B. Clarke, Allison Davis, Whitney Young, and Charles S. Johnson.

Another national agency that focused on black children was the American Teachers Association (ATA). Formed in 1903, the ATA was the black counterpart to the National Education Association (NEA). But here again, the NEA did not concentrate on the needs of black children and did not have a social justice agenda. The ATA provided collegial support, professional development, and the opportunity to learn administrative strategies. It also assisted black administrators to remain connected to the black community, which was of primary importance. Locally, the School Masters Club, which consisted of the principals of black approved schools in Georgia, functioned as a sort of elite membership of black

administrators of approved schools. It provided three services: mentorship and modeling of practice, collaborative discussion of curricular innovations, and research projects that could lead to increased opportunities for students. It mirrored the Georgia Education Association, which was a white educational organization.

Walker and Byas struggle to achieve a focus for the book. They experience difficulty deciding if it should be a biographical study of Byas, a case study of a black principal, or a historical account of the function of black school organizations in the pre-*Brown* era. Certainly all three aspects are intertwined, but they seem to pull away from each other rather than to make Byas the âcentral conduitâ of a black educational system operating within a white world (p. 8). Organizationally, Walker states that she reordered some of the chapters as a result of feedback from Byas. It might have been helpful to begin the book with chapter 2, âFrom High School Dropout to Classroom Teacherâ instead of âPlaying Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.â The term âplaying Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hydeâ is not attributed directly to Byas but to Clemmont Vontress, a black guidance director in Indiana who wrote in an issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan* that the âNegro principal must respond to the expectations of the superintendent, who is generally white, and to his teachers, who are usually Negro. This dual responsibility creates an ethnic dilemma for himâ (p. 25). Walker, however, argues that it was a deliberate faÃ§ade–a kind of double-consciousness necessitated by the need to discuss black student achievement within a dominant white context. Indeed, the black principal had to appear to side with a variety of constituencies: the black community, black teachers and students, and white administrators. Although this was crucial to the success of black school professionals, it is not the general theme of the book.

The authors do not address the paternalism of school administrators in the context of the sexism of the period. By way of explanation Walker states, "Since most of the high school professors and black intellectual elite were male, Byasâs perspective on these events is that of a male administrator. The voice of women, in general, (and female professors in particular) is not included in part because gendered differences in the experiences are not typically addressed in the sourcesâ (p. 235). The reader does not hear from teachers or students and that too is a delimitation that Walker admits.

In addition, Byas indicates that one of his regrets was that black parents gave black schools too much autonomy in regard to their childrenâs welfare and were (in comparison with white parents) generally absent during a period when Byas was running a desegregated summer school. One wonders if there is a cultural or social class explanation (as Byas suggests) or if Byasâs authoritarian personality was not challenged by black parents, thereby inviting another explanation. Nevertheless, there is no question that *Hello Professor* contributes to the historiography of black educational leadership during this period. It also, however, reinforces the notion that the initial hopefulness about *Brown v. Board* gave way quickly with the demise of black professional organizations and schools. This is poignantly reflected in Byasâs bitter disappointment at being offered the âassistant superintendentâ rather than the superintendent position in the wake of the ruling. Rather than take a subordinate role, Byas chose to retire. Much like the closing of CCTS as the result of desegregation in Walkerâs earlier book, the effect of *Brown* was to provide opportunities as well as to constrain them.

Hello Professor contributes to the field of the history of education by offering a personal portrait of a black school administrator during the Jim Crow era. Forced into the role of trickster by an oppressive southern white system, the black principal had to find ways to work âwithin the systemâ in order to obtain resources for black schools. At the same time, he had to gain the support of the black community and teachers. Although the lessons learned at Teachers College-Columbia must have seemed largely irrelevant in this milieu, Byas managed to construct an educational leadership style that was a blend of formal education, cultural expectations, and social necessity. Historians of education have tended to focus on black leaders in higher education, and Walkerâs book not only widens the lens but also reveals the complexity of the position.

Note

[1]. Arthur J. Klein, "Survey of Negro Colleges and Universities," U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education, Bulletin 7 (Washington DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1929).

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