

Howard University

Digital Howard @ Howard University

Faculty Reprints

10-1-1935

Guiding Principles in Teaching of Social Sciences in Negro Colleges

Charles H. Wesley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/reprints>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wesley, Charles H., "Guiding Principles in Teaching of Social Sciences in Negro Colleges" (1935). *Faculty Reprints*. 205.

<https://dh.howard.edu/reprints/205>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Reprints by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

Guiding Principles in the Teaching of Social Sciences in the Negro Colleges

By CHARLES H. WESLEY

WHAT are the guiding principles for instruction in the social sciences as they should be taught in Negro schools? Are these principles for Negro colleges at all different from those for the white colleges? Do the Negro colleges require approaches to the social sciences and treatments of them which are additional to those used in white schools? For the sake of clearness, the answers to these questions forming the principles for presentation will be grouped into three classes and will be discussed separately, but the principles are so merged in actual teaching that they do not operate singly either in the mind of the teacher or the student. They form parts of the entire fabric of teaching and they are presented individually only for clearness of presentation. The first set of principles group themselves around the teacher, his equipment and personal attainments. The second set concern themselves with the teaching process and the third set relate themselves to our students.

These principles are in the main similar to those which may be used for any colleges, whether white or Negro. There are additional principles which are needed in a special way in Negro colleges because of the peculiar position occupied by the Negro population in American life, but these additional principles are not so numerous as it would seem. Negroes are Americans but they live a segregated life and constitute a distinct part of the American population in many aspects of life. While subject-matter will not be altered, there are points of view in textbooks and in university lectures to which teachers in Negro schools have been exposed which ought to be altered and corrected.

The first of these guiding principles is that the teacher must know the social sciences which he teaches. He must have resources of knowledge at his disposal and he should possess and be familiar with the books in his field. If he does not have the facts in his mind, he should know where to go to obtain them. This is a *sine qua non* of teaching in any school. The teacher should know something definite about the development of social life and about social life as it is. He should know not only his own special field in the social sciences but he should have studied or read widely in the other social fields. He would thus broaden his own equipment and enrichen his teaching.

It was asserted by Professor E. B. Reuter of the University of Iowa in 1927 that there were not enough trained Negro teachers in all of the Negro colleges to man one first-class college. This statement may have been an exaggeration and at the same time displeasing, but there is a measure of truth in it. The report of the Southern Association in 1930 shows that there were 73 or about one-third of the teachers in Negro colleges who had the Bachelor's degree; 95 or less than one-fourth with the Master's degree and 20 or less than one-tenth with the Doctor's degree. There are reasons for these discrepancies and inequalities in the Negro college teacher's equipment as compared with the white college teacher's equipment. The small salaries which are paid to Negro teachers, the isolated cultural environment which surrounds the Negro college and the emphasis upon "buildings" rather than "men" by administrators and boards of trustees are more responsible than the faculties themselves for their lack of formal training and degrees.

It is nevertheless within the grasp of every teacher to learn his subject by wide reading in the field, by intensive thinking in his field and by library contacts with the views and the subject-matter of the field which he teaches. A knowledge of facts is fundamental to thinking in the social sciences, although they are composed of more than isolated facts or sequences of facts. Is it not also desirable to have some critical and constructive thinking? With the changes taking place in society and in the social studies, every teacher must be an eager reader in these fields in order to enlarge his knowledge of past theories and facts and the more recent investigations in his special field. The facts of social science knowledge are fundamental to all efficient social science teaching.

A second guiding principle affecting the teacher's equipment is the realization of the essential oneness of the social sciences. For many years each of the social sciences has developed as a separate subject, each traveling progressively along its own path, using the same materials frequently and yet separate and distinct both in departmental organization and in instruction. Within recent years the individual social subjects, history, economics, political science, social psychology, social ethics and philosophy, anthropology, education, and sociology are being made to realize that they have likenesses and that there is need for a more complete co-operation.

There are several happenings which have contributed to this co-operative development. One was the formation of the Social Science Research Council composed of representatives of seven organizations, the American Anthropological Association, the American Economic Association, the American Historical Association, the American Political Science Association, the American Psychological Association and the American Statistical Association. Another of these events was the publication of the *Encyclopedia of*

the Social Sciences. This publication venture was launched by a joint committee composed of representatives of the following societies, the American Anthropological Association, the American Association of Social Workers, the American Economic Association, the American Historical Association, the American Political Science Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Society, the American Statistical Association, the Association of American Law Schools and the National Education Association. Advisory editors were chosen from the fields of anthropology, economics, education, history, social hygiene, law, philosophy, political science, social psychology, sociology and social statistics.

Another important trend towards co-operation between the social sciences was the publication of James Harvey Robinson's *The New History* and Harry Elmer Barnes' *The New History and the Social Studies*, and also the volumes of the commission on the social studies of the American Historical Association. The change in the title of a well known historical magazine is also significant. *The Historical Outlook* was changed to *The Social Studies*. Introductory courses in the social sciences were established as parts of the college curricula and divisions of the social sciences began to appear. Professors from the several departments began to unite in co-operative courses treating the development of civilization and in orientation courses which were introductory to the individual social subjects. These co-operative courses were often required of majors in the social sciences and of those who were not specializing in the physical sciences.

These trends in the social sciences will lead the teacher to read beyond his immediate field. This will result in an enrichment of the content of his special field and a breadth of scholarship which was hitherto unknown to him. Teachers in the individual subjects should begin to co-operate in instruction as

well as in departmental activity. This has been one of the distinct advances made by the social sciences at Howard University during the past two years. A division of the social sciences has been formed of the departments of history, economics, philosophy, political science and sociology.

A third guiding principle is that our teachers must work out for themselves a philosophy of personal thinking in relation to society. It is a true maxim that if the blind lead the blind both may fall into the ditch. Teachers ought to have an underlying philosophy for their lives and their thinking and encourage their students to develop the same. Whether we will or not, most of us either consciously or unconsciously have some kind of a philosophy. It is either our own or we receive it from someone else. However, the teacher shows himself at his best when he examines the beliefs and traditions which are current and reaches a decision concerning their subjects through his own thinking. This is frequently the beginning of intellectual growth. But teachers as a rule cling to the past and seem to delight in their own conservatism.

At the last meeting of the National Education Association in June of this year, the teachers showed more militancy of action than ever before. The resolution on academic freedom read as follows, "The National Education Association believes that administrators, teachers and schools should have full opportunity to present differing points of view on any and all controversial questions in order to aid students to adjust themselves to their environment and to changing social conditions." This convention sounded a new note in the issue of the freedom of teaching. The forces of reaction strongly entrenched and powerfully financed as they are seem prepared to fight against the right of the teachers of the nation to discuss dispassionately the weaknesses of society.

Liberty, of course, should never run to license and a teacher should be careful in his teaching when he realizes that there are immature minds before him, but nothing can be accomplished either for the social sciences or the nation or ourselves by muzzling the teachers. Our philosophy should include an abiding belief in the American doctrine of freedom: the freedom of speech, the freedom of thought, the freedom from the weight of authority and tradition, the freedom of religious belief, the freedom of teaching and learning. Indoctrination and restricted speech have been more detrimental to societies than the pursuit of truth and the freedom of speech at any period of the world's history. Such freedom, however, is rarely found in narrow provincial sections of the country and teachers have to show themselves to be law-abiding citizens. At least, we can have silent protests against the shackling of our thinking and our teaching.

Only the adoption of a philosophic attitude towards the purposes of his tasks can give the teacher a satisfactory approach to effective social science teaching. Neither subject-matter nor methodology can of themselves make the successful social science teacher. It is true as Charles A. Beard has said, the teachers "must secure for themselves a clear and realistic picture of modern society, gain insight into the central concepts of our industrial order and its culture, acquire habits of judicially examining its issues and problems, develop the power to look with calm and untroubled eyes upon the varieties of social pressures which bear in upon them, and nourish, by wide study, their capacity for dealing justly and courageously with current modes of living."

The report of the Commission on the Social Studies of the American Historical Association composed of historians and leading educators suggests the following conclusions from its studies:

1. In the United States as well as in other countries, a collectivistic society is replacing an individualistic one.
2. The actual integrated economy of the present day is the forerunner of a consciously integrated society in which individual economic action and individual property rights will be altered and abridged.
3. The country is in a state of transition.
4. Acquisitive individualism with all of its cruder manifestations in gambling, speculation, exploitation and racketeering is to be subdued to the requirements and potentialities of an emerging society.
5. The dangers of goose-step regimentation of ideas, culture and invention must be avoided.

The social sciences are given a sense of direction by this group of scholars. The knowledge of these trends in society is an invaluable aid to one's philosophy of the social sciences. Teachers should be familiar with these views and should engage in reflective thinking concerning them.

Surrounded as we are in our respective communities by average thinkers and separated from the fountains of scholarly work, it is so much easier for Negro teachers to adopt the views of the crowd, to follow the thought of the mediocrity, and to seek security in our jobs than to strike out boldly for new fields in the modern spirit of scientific inquiry. Luther Burbank has observed that we have reasoning powers which enable us to discriminate in all of our thinking, but he raises the question, "Can we use them or must we be fed by others like babes?" Without doubt too many social science teachers prefer mentally to be fed "like babes" than to do their own thinking. Negro teachers seem willing to become receptive "babes" in the social sciences, it has been declared by some observers.

The teacher who decides within himself to pursue the truth whether it should be in

religion, politics, social relations or economic life, is on the way towards the larger life for himself and for the students who look to him for light. Those who demand that the teachers of the social sciences stick to the "facts" and let "theories" alone are opposing the effort to begin improvements in the social order. To be certain, when theories are confused with facts and forced upon minds eager to learn, education begins then to border upon propaganda, which is the effort to pass as truth what is known to be untrue. Freedom of teaching does not consist in teaching that which is known to be untrue nor does it consist in the pervading of propaganda. The teacher who is afraid to expound or refrains from expounding the social trends which he really knows ought to be explained to his students is dishonest with himself, and he should realize that he is failing to preserve the scientific freedom which is the basis of the pursuit of truth. A philosophy of independent thinking in relation to society is an indispensable aid to successful social science teaching.

These three principles concern rather directly the teacher himself. They relate to his equipment, his concept of the oneness of the social sciences and his philosophy of society. In so far, these principles would be effective for teachers in any of our American schools and not only for Negro schools. And yet, the Negro teachers must not be judged by any separate standards, nor does he desire to be. Let us endeavor first of all to meet American standards of scholarship and efficiency and then to pass beyond these standards in order to accomplish the special tasks expected of us in the Negro colleges.

The second group of principles relate to some of the things which social science teaching should aim at in the process of teaching. The first of these is, to teach our students that we live in a World of Reality and not a World of Abstraction. We must teach the facts of this World of Reality in which our

students and graduates must live, both as it has been and as it is. It is entirely true that students are to be taught to think and to reason about society, but there must be a basis of fact upon which to build. Basic social facts must be acquired and mastered, and for these there can be no substitute. Our beliefs and impulses are derived from the world of fact as well as of opinion. Students should be made to realize that they are studying life and not solely books, and that the life which they study is not static but dynamic. It is changing life accompanied by changing opinion.

This should lead every teacher to reach the conclusion that the colleges must not become indoctrinating agencies for the propagating of fixed ideas about life, even though these ideas are written into the text books which we use. For the world in which we live is changing rapidly today as it did yesterday. President Hoover said before leaving office, "We are passing from a period of extremely individualistic action into a period of associational activities." These are the words of one who has been termed a reactionary. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in whose administration this transition was more evident, has spoken freely about the end of individualism and the beginning of co-operative enterprise. National and local planning and intelligent co-operation are the newer processes through which we are endeavoring to establish a new order in agriculture, industry and government. But we stand upon the shoulders of the past, as we plan the present and the future. The dead issues of the past are often solutions to the live issues of the present. This does not mean that the student is to repeat formulas and to recite creeds but he should be making a realistic study of the present on the basis of the past.

It is frequently said that the teacher should stick to the "facts" of the social sciences and leave controversial ideas alone.

How can he do this and deal with a world that is real? The practice of this principle would require that we give to our students a picture of the past, an introduction to the present in which we live and work and a concept of a progressive society of the future. Such a conception of society is not a radical one, neither is it communistic nor socialistic, nor can its value be lessened by calling it by any unpopular name. A progressive society is outlined and envisioned in American tradition and is written into the Constitution of the United States. The preamble calls attention to the purpose of the Constitution and of the union in its references to the formation of a *more perfect union*, the establishment of *justice* and the promotion of the *general welfare*. This ideology is as much of a reality as is the fact of disunion, of injustice, and of the welfare of the few as opposed to the welfare of the many.

As Negroes our students should be made to realize that they too live in a real world, a world which is sometimes unkind to black people, a world which on the question of color is narrow, selfish, prejudiced and unjust. If these approaches are made through the social sciences the disillusionment for our students will not be nearly so abrupt and so frustrating in their later life as if we would permit them to live in a world of dreams, abstractions and books for four years, while he is disillusioned by many more years of bitter defeat. The transition from college life to the world outside will be made without any distinct and necessary change of view, if as teachers we insist upon an adjustment to the real in life rather than the sham in life.

Our teaching in the social sciences should describe the real world of segregation as it affects Negroes, the limited occupational life of Negroes, the restricted school facilities of Negroes, the poor health facilities of Negro communities, the maladministration of law and the operation of the processes of justice

in Negro life, the prohibitions upon Negro political life and the social ills which infest Negro population areas. One does not have to teach these conditions directly but where the discussion of the classes lead, the teacher should be prepared not only to follow but to take the leadership and to give his students a picture of the real world of which he is to be a part. The positive side of this picture with its evidences of advancement must not be overlooked, for it is also desirable to show how the Negro has made use of the obstacles and inequities of segregated life to forge ahead as a racial group. This should mean neither the advocacy of nor the acceptance of segregation. Our students should be inspired to fight against it with all their hearts, their souls and their minds, as an un-American doctrine and as a practice unworthy of a nation which calls itself the land of the free and the home of the brave. It is obvious however, that Negroes have made good use of their segregated life and this should find a place in our description of society, but these opportunities should never find us the champions of closed opportunities for people of color in American life. Our students need to face these facts and views and to know the World of Reality which they are preparing to enter and to have a part in molding. There should be some one course which would present the Negro's status in American life and civilization to the students who must soon become a part of this life.

A second guiding principle which should relate itself to our teaching of the social sciences is the value of the inculcation of racial pride and group esteem. Teaching Negro students something about their history and the achievements of their predecessors and their contributions especially to American civilization should be of major importance to teachers of the social sciences in Negro schools. Pride of origin has been the touchstone of destiny for races and peoples

through the ages of history. The African background can and should take its place in historical instruction and sociological study just as we give place to the European background of our history. Japan, China, and India, along with the Near East have come into the social sciences as topics of study. With the facts which are coming to light concerning African history and African social institutions, the traditions of the past must fade and Africa too must receive a place in curriculum of the social studies. America's past when studied without bias shows the presence and activities of Negro-Americans as they relate themselves, in spite of obstacles, to the best in American life.

This guiding principle throws a distinct responsibility upon the teachers of the social sciences, because the average school histories and social sciences texts contain few if any mentions of an inspiring nature for a racial group once enslaved. It is not strange that there are Negro college graduates who are ashamed of themselves, who prefer not to use the term "Negro" in relation to themselves, who would prefer to make their escape into the masses of the American people as "John Doe" rather than a person of color and who admit their indifferences to the life and history of the racial group of persons among whom they live and work. This weakness in knowledge and in viewpoint can be corrected if we as teachers devote a part of our time to instruction in the Negro historical background and in the contributions to civilization made by Negroes.

This instruction may be imparted either in specific courses in Negro life or in extra-course activity in the classroom. Teachers must be prepared to go outside of the textbook in order to meet this deficiency in the tools of education. In this same connection, it is entirely desirable that some of us begin to prepare textbooks for our schools. A history of Europe should be

written by some one or more of the teachers in our schools with Africa given its rightful place both in the Ancient World, Middle Ages and the Modern World. A history of the United States should be written with the history of the Negro people interwoven with other facts, so that the Negro becomes a part of the nation. But are we ready for this type of instruction? Can we agree to such a proposal so that a market can be furnished for such books? Until these books are prepared, reading lists and syllabi should be suggested to teachers in our schools. This is one among a number of concrete developments which can come from this conference.

The teacher of the social sciences in Negro colleges has also a responsibility to the community in connection with the dissemination of this type of instruction. It should be possible through the lecture system to reach the adult population, both white and colored as well as the youths, for mental pictures, stereotypes, of the Negro have been developed in the American mind through the years, and education is the one dependable remedy. A type of lecture course could be established in our several colleges and the members of this conference could be used for this purpose, as well as others who can bring the scholarly approach to the social sciences.

One of our definite aims should be to present the facts of Negro achievement to youth so that propaganda and neglect of the race may be avoided. Studies of Negro life and history have been published and can furnish us with materials for instruction. The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, founded by Dr. C. G. Woodson, and now in its twentieth year has pioneered the way. Let us today take up the torch now lighted and extend it in the field of formal education, so that by our teachings the Negroes in America can arrive at the place where they may regard themselves as just

as good as other Americans, although the faces of others may be fairer. As teachers we can take the leadership in this movement to create an informed and racially proud people of color. In this effort, we must be careful not to overstate the facts and develop a false pride, for then we would be as guilty as others of the adoption and the encouragement of a racial pride which vaunts itself unseemly. We can prove, however, to the satisfaction of our students and to the readers and hearers of our racial group that the Negro has a record in Africa and America of which his racial descendents may be reasonably proud and of which he need never be ashamed. Upon this basis Negroes may build a worthy present and future. For a number of years I have been gathering material for a college text descriptive of the Negro's contribution to American history and civilization. This text should be published within a short period.

A third guiding principle closely related to this is to aim to contribute in our teaching to the improvement of the relations of nations and races. The teachings of the social sciences have been based upon a narrow patriotism and a feeling of national and racial superiority. This type of teaching has aided the disparagement of other peoples, the exaltation of one's own people and the evaluation of one's race and civilization as superior to those of others. This habit spread over the years has led to distrust, aversion and dislike for peoples of other races and nationalities and through these the bases have been laid for war. Economic self-interest as an aspect of Nationalism has also contributed to international misunderstanding and potential friction between groups.

From the point of view of scientific investigation, students of social science know that there is no basis for the idea of race superiority. We also know that this idea is used only as a defense mechanism for

repressive action towards the so-called inferior races. A purposeful effort on the part of social science teaching to reveal the fallacies in the racial assumptions which have made peace difficult in our world will cause the development of attitudes productive of international and racial understanding. White men and black men in the labor world who have faced the facts and not the theories of the social sciences have learned to cooperate and to forget color as a wall of separation. Radical social philosophies have apparently broken down some of the superficial barriers of race. Constructive direct action through the social sciences may take a longer time to accomplish the desired results but in the long run educative influences may serve as the bases for more extensive interracial endeavors in other life spheres. The formation of interracial committees among the adults and of international peace pacts among nations may be approaches to this problem but the more fundamental approach is by way of the school and the college.

When a student takes the social science courses for study, he will learn that civilizations are composite and that there are factors far beyond those of race or nationality which explain superior civilizations. In the face of these explanations, the student may look at his own racial and national behavior objectively and unconsciously discover that he has become liberalized by his education. It is in the classroom with the social sciences that cultural contacts, race relations and international good-will may be seen in their proper perspectives. The classroom, nevertheless, should not be used as a direct clearing-house for propaganda or for interracial or international good-will or ill-will, but as the occasion arises in the course of study and instruction, there can be thoughtful and rational discussions by the teacher and student of these problems. When the youth of today take over the responsibilities of race and

world problems, they may thus be freed from the prejudices which have prevented the building of civilizations without national wars and race hatreds.

The third group of principles concern our students, as well as ourselves as teachers, and that is, to develop a leadership in Negro life capable of service in the old paths of life and of exploring new areas in our life. Prior to the Civil War and the rise of colleges and universities for Negroes, leadership among Negroes was taken by personally aggressive self-made men who had separated themselves from the masses by the power of their native abilities. Today we are passing from the self-made leadership to a trained one. The formation of a new civilization demands a new leadership, one with the adaptability, the vision and the courage to lead toward co-operative endeavors in the interest of the many rather than the few, and of the social well-being of all rather than profits for the few. Students who sit in our social science classes should know not only the processes of the past but anticipating changes in social life they should carry with them a flexibility of mind which is willing to make fundamental adjustments for itself and others. Students who pass through our courses should know not only the subject-matter of these courses but should be willing to accept the responsibility for carrying on the work for an interdependent society.

However, as we think of our students as products of the social sciences, perhaps it would be well for us not to expect too much of the results. For many years in America we have had a naive belief in the power of education to remove the abuses of society. This has not been the result in practice. College men and women seem willing to live in the idealism of thought within the college for several years and then to spend the rest of their years of action in pursuit of a selfish materialism. Men of college edu-

cation have believed in straight thinking, intellectual honesty and co-operative effort while in college, and then later have become cowards, when faced with national interests, economic trends, race and class pressure. College men and women have taken social science courses and yet so many have had warped views or have adopted a conspiracy of silence on such issues as the Mooney case, the Sacco-Vanzetti case and the Scottsboro case! Neither a college nor college men can hold themselves aloof from what is going on about them and expect the world to go on just the same.

Let us bring the vital problems of the world and of the race before our students and we will be making a real contribution to contemporary life so that ultimately these students or some one of them may become active in the leadership of currents of life in their communities. It is certain that the masses are now seeking for the leadership which will guide in thought and action in the construction of a new social order. This leadership should know something especially of anthropology, economics, history, political science, education and sociology. It may go forth from the college walls to lead in the organization of Negro life in education, religion, business, medicine, law, the technical world and all life's activity, so that our teaching may through them bear fruit.

It is our responsibility to teach with words, oral and written, and if possible to act. It will be theirs to act, not so much with words as with deeds. The sufficiency of their actions will depend largely upon the efficiency of our teaching.

There are guiding principles which relate themselves to the teacher: (1) he must know the social sciences and for this there is no substitute; (2) he must realize that these sciences are one and he should encourage their co-operation; (3) he should adopt a philosophy of personal thinking in relation to society. What to teach is followed by how to teach. There are therefore guiding principles which manifest themselves in the teaching process: (1) to teach as if we live in a World of Reality and not in a World of Abstractions; (2) to teach so that racial pride and group esteem may be encouraged, and (3) to teach so that we shall contribute to better race relations and international relations. The final development in principles demands that we seek to create a leadership which will be adequate for the demands of present day society. The practice of these principles by teachers of the social sciences will lead both to an expansive development of the individual personality of the teacher and to a stimulating service to the students who will be influenced by our teaching.