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REFLECTIONS OF A FORMER OAKLAND PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENT

by JoNina M. Abron

(Editor's note: In the following article, former Black Scholar Managing Editor JoNina M. Abron shares her perspectives on the public school education that her daughter, Myshia received in the public schools of Oakland, California, and Kalamazoo, Michigan, between 1986 and 1996. The article begins with Abron's recollections of her work as a language arts teacher at the independent award-winning Oakland Community School (OCS) during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The school was founded in 1971 by the Black Panther Party,¹ to which Abron belonged for several years. Many of the school's predominantly African American students either dropped out of or transferred to OCS from Oakland public schools.)

PRE-SCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY AGE children attended Oakland Community School. At first, most of the students were the offspring of Black Panthers. In time, however, black parents who were not affiliated with the BPP, as well as Hispanic and low-income white parents, began to enroll their children at OCS. Some children who came to OCS had been expelled from Oakland public schools, or were labeled hopelessly incorrigible or uneducable by teachers and officials. In other cases, parents who were dissatisfied with the public school education their children were receiving came to OCS for help. Some BPP members who attended Oakland public schools had experienced problems similar to those of the children who came to OCS. In his autobiography, Black Panther co-founder Huey P. Newton, a 1959 graduate of Oakland Technical High School, recalled,

"By the time I reached my last year of high school, I was a functional illiterate...The school authorities told me not only that I was not college material... but also that I was not intelligent enough to do college work. ... I set out to prove them wrong. First, I had to learn to read." Overcoming a deep sense of personal shame, Newton taught himself to read.² In 1980, he earned a Ph.D. from the University of California at Santa Cruz.³

USING THE MOTTO "EACH ONE, TEACH ONE," Oakland Community School employed an innovative curriculum to teach the students. Instead of grades, OCS students were placed in levels according to their abilities, not by their ages. A student might be in a fourth-level mathematics class but in a first-level reading class. (With former OCS teacher Carol Granison, I wrote the school's language arts curriculum, which included literacy.) In addition to classes, OCS served at least two hot meals each school day, and buses picked the children up for medical appointments as well as for school. At one time, there were 400 children on the school's waiting list. Children at OCS excelled academically, so much so that in 1977, the California Legislature and Gov. Edmund "Jerry" G. Brown Jr. gave the school an award for "...having set the standard for the highest level of elementary education in the state."⁴

MY EXPERIENCES TEACHING former public school students at Oakland Community School were useful when I adopted my

daughter Myshia in March 1986, when she was 8 years old. She had been a foster child in Los Angeles for most of the previous five years. Frequently moved from one foster home to another, Myshia had fallen behind in school. In Oakland, I enrolled her in third grade at Franklin Year-Round School. Her teacher recommended a special education class during school and a tutor outside school in order to boost Myshia's reading and math skills.

To understand my daughter's initial experiences at Franklin School, it is important to note several things. First, Myshia did not like school. While this is a common feeling among many children, in Myshia's case it was exacerbated by the fact that her learning skills were below grade level, of which she was painfully aware. Sometimes, when Myshia did not understand what was going on in class and did not know how to ask for help — or could not get it — she would engage in disruptive behavior that got her suspended from school. Second, Myshia was new to Oakland and had to make friends. Third, she had a new mother, and she was afraid I might not keep her. This fear was warranted because of the failure of a brief, prior adoption in San Diego, which resulted in Myshia's return to foster care.

In Los Angeles, Myshia had been under the care of a child therapist. As I got to know my daughter, I realized that she continued to need therapy. I also needed professional help to deal with my insecurities as a new parent. Consequently, for several months after her adoption, Myshia and I made weekly visits to a child psychologist, who spent a half hour alone with each of us. I encouraged Myshia to use the sessions with the therapist to say anything about me or her new home that might be bothering her.

DESPITE MYSHIA'S DIFFICULTIES adjusting to her new life with me, I believed my daughter would get a good education at Franklin School. First, it was a year-round school, and I had read articles touting the success of year-round schools in improving the academic skills of children. Franklin was a year-round school out of necessity because of the large number of elementary-age children

who lived within the school's boundaries. As a result, Franklin students were divided into groups that were staggered into nine-week sessions, followed by three weeks of vacation. Under this arrangement, about half of the children were in school while the other half were on vacation. The frequent vacations proved to be problematic because of the child care arrangements that I had to make.

The second reason I liked Franklin was the racial and ethnic diversity of the students. They were white, African American, Chicano/Mexican, Hispanic, Asian American and Southeast Asian. Some of the Hispanic children came from Central American countries. Many of the Southeast Asian children, who made up the school's largest ethnic groups, came from families which had recently emigrated to Oakland from such countries as South Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. Consequently, English was not the primary language of many of the children at Franklin School. At meetings of the Parent-Teacher Association, there were typically five or six interpreters who translated the meeting discussions for those parents who did not speak or understand English. I was pleased that Myshia could attend a school that reflected the cultural diversity of U.S. society — an experience I believed was every bit as important as what Myshia learned in the classroom.

HOWEVER, IT SOON BECAME APPARENT that Franklin's cultural diversity would not be an entirely positive experience for my daughter. At the public schools she had attended in Los Angeles and San Diego, most of the students were black, white and Mexican. As a black child at Franklin School, Myshia for the first time found that she was in the minority, which made her uncomfortable. What she described as "negative body language" of the Asian children discouraged her from wanting to play with them.

Early on, Myshia complained that teacher assistants in her classes would spend more time helping the Southeast Asian children than the black children. Some of the assistants were also Southeast Asian or Asian American. "I raise my hand to get help, but they ignore me," Myshia would say. To her, the Asian teacher assistants were prejudiced

against black children. In one instance, all of the black children in Myshia's classroom got into an altercation with an Asian teacher's assistant. According to Myshia, it was a situation that called for black unity. While not condoning Myshia's misbehavior, I was pleased that despite her young age, my daughter was not afraid to protest what she regarded as racist treatment.

In this regard, I assumed that a school system as racially diverse as Oakland would be experienced at handling conflicts among students from different cultures. This viewpoint was based on the many years that I had spent working in various multiracial organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area. However, the conflict between the black children and the Asian assistant in Myshia's classroom prompted me to take my daughter's complaints more seriously that the black children in her class were being treated differently than the children of Asian descent. Myshia did not make this complaint about Chicano or Mexican children, most of whom spoke English.

THE STUDENTS for whom English was a second language deserved to have whatever help they needed. However, I became convinced that in the process of meeting the considerable educational needs of its large emigrant student population, Franklin School neglected its English-speaking students, some of whom, like Myshia, also needed extra help. To this day, I do not know if this problem only existed at Franklin, if teachers and administrators of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) did not understand the problem, or lacked the resources to handle it.

In all fairness, I must say that there were some teachers at Franklin School who did their best to help Myshia. For example, during one of her vacations, Myshia volunteered to assist the school librarian. As noted earlier, Myshia did not like school, and I was surprised that she would volunteer to go to school for three weeks when she didn't have to. The librarian had shown kindness and a personal interest in Myshia, who always responded well to this kind of attention.

Nevertheless, I was dissatisfied with the lack of progress that Myshia was making at

Franklin School. Perhaps I had expected too much too soon. At any rate, I requested that Myshia repeat third grade, a decision which she understandably did not like. My concern was that if my daughter was passed on to fourth grade without having significantly improved her academic skills, her frustration and dislike of school would grow.

IN THE SPRING OF 1988 near the end of Myshia's fourth grade year, I received a message from the school that Myshia should not return for the few remaining days of the school term. When I called Myshia's teacher for an explanation, she said, in essence, that Myshia was uneducable and that Franklin School did not know what to do with her. Hurt and angered, I recalled that this was what some of the parents who sent their children to Oakland Community School had been told.

At first, I considered taking legal action against OUSD. Franklin was the neighborhood school for Myshia and as such, was required to accept her as a student unless she committed a violation of school rules that would be grounds for her suspension or expulsion. The teacher mentioned no such violation. However, since Franklin did not seem to want Myshia as a student, or if, in fact, it could not properly educate her, it did not make sense for Myshia to return to the school. I also considered sending Myshia to a private school. However, as a single working mother, I could not afford private school tuition fees. Consequently, after some research, I applied for Myshia's transfer to Lakeview School, another Oakland public school. The request for the transfer was initially denied, I was told, because of lack of space at Lakeview.

I appealed the decision, and sought help from a newly formed coalition of African American activists and parents who were challenging the high rate of suspensions and expulsions and other problems experienced by black children in Oakland public schools. The coalition, whose leaders included Professor Oba T'Shaka of San Francisco State University, took Myshia's case to the black members of the Oakland School Board, with whom the coalition met regularly. As a result, Myshia was admitted to fifth grade at Lakeview School in September 1988. On the first

day of school, she was happy to see two black girls with whom she had been friends at Franklin School. One of the girl's mothers said that she had moved to the Lakeview area in order to get her daughter out of Franklin School. This information helped validate my decision to transfer Myshia to Lakeview.

MYSHIA'S TRANSFER TO LAKEVIEW proved to be a good move for several reasons. First, Lakeview had a traditional, nine-month calendar. Myshia never adjusted to the year-round system at Franklin. Second, a large number of Lakeview students were black. While Myshia still did not like school, she was happier having more black classmates. Third, her new special education teacher had the care and perseverance necessary to meet my daughter's special learning needs. Myshia had worn glasses for a time when she was a foster child, and the teacher suspected that Myshia's eyesight might be hindering her performance in school.

After determining that Myshia was not dyslexic, the teacher recommended that I take my daughter for testing at the School of Optometry at the University of California, Berkeley. The tests showed that in addition to having weak central vision in one eye, which had not been previously diagnosed, Myshia also had a visual perceptual problem. This difficulty caused her, for instance, to confuse the addition sign used in math (+) with the multiplication sign (x). Using this information, the Lakeview special education teacher designed a program for Myshia that significantly improved her math and reading skills. "She taught me something. I did actual work," Myshia said. This was in contrast to many of Myshia's special education classes at Franklin in which, she told me, "We just played monopoly and other games." In addition, at Lakeview, Myshia had strict but effective fifth and sixth grade teachers.

BY THE TIME MYSHIA GRADUATED from Lakeview School in June 1990, I had heard enough negative stories about Oakland's junior high schools to make me concerned about the quality of Myshia's future education in Oakland public schools. This concern was an important factor in my decision to

change jobs and move in August 1990 to Kalamazoo, Michigan, a community of some 80,000 people, located midway between Chicago and Detroit.

Myshia entered seventh grade at Hillside Middle School, one of three schools for seventh and eighth graders in the Kalamazoo Public School (KPS) system. For the second time in four years, Myshia, by then 13, was in a new place where she had to make friends. Her period of adjustment was difficult, all the more so because she was now an adolescent. Watching her unhappiness, I seriously questioned my decision to leave Oakland.

Help came from Hillside's principal, a black woman who visited Myshia at home after she refused to go to school for several days. In time, Myshia made friends and settled into her new school. She continued to need special education classes, and fortunately, Hillside had two good teachers in this area. In eighth grade, Myshia's math skills improved to the point that she was placed in a mainstream math class. For the first time, she made the honor roll, which bolstered her self-esteem considerably.

When I adopted Myshia in March 1986, reading was difficult for her. By fall 1992, when she started Kalamazoo Central High School, Myshia had become an avid reader.⁵ Also by this time, she was anxious to end her status as a special education student, to which a stigma is often unfairly attached. Some of her teachers were surprised to learn of Myshia's special education status, and Myshia was convinced that she no longer needed extra help in school. However, scores on statewide and classroom tests indicated that my daughter still needed help in certain academic areas, and I continued to assure her that it was all right to need help. During ninth and tenth grades, Myshia spent one hour each school day working with special education teachers on reading comprehension and whatever help she needed in her math, science and English classes. During eleventh and twelfth grades, the high school's special education department continued to monitor Myshia's progress. Myshia did not have assigned time in her schedule for special education classes, but help was available to her when she asked for it.

WHILE MYSHIA'S ATTITUDE toward school was more positive by the time she started high school, she was still basically bored and unchallenged at school. That is why I was delighted when she asked my permission near the end of tenth grade to enroll the following school year in a vocational education class in theater technology. The class was taught by staff members at Comstock Auditorium, and was recognized nationally for its excellence as a high school vocational education program. During her two years in the program, 1994-1996, Myshia spent the afternoons of her school days learning the key elements of stagecraft, including lighting, sound and how to create and "strike" a set.

Myshia soon put to use what she learned in theater technology class when she was chosen to be stage manager for her high school's fall 1994 production of Horton Foote's play, "A Young Lady of Property." In January 1995 during a regional competition in which "A Young Lady of Property" took part, Myshia became one of the only high school students ever to win an Excellence Award for stage management in the Michigan Interscholastic Forensic Festival. During her senior year, she was stage manager of a school production of the Greek tragedy, "Antigone." The Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo, Inc., named her an outstanding Young Artist of 1996 for her work in KPS high school theater arts.

After graduating from Kalamazoo Central High School in June 1996, Myshia attended Kalamazoo Valley Community College for a year. She was enrolled in a program designed to bolster the math, reading and English skills of students, many of whom transfer to four-year institutions like Western Michigan University (WMU) where I teach journalism classes in the department of English. In the future, Myshia plans to study film directing.

IN COMPARING MYSHIA'S EDUCATION in the public schools of Oakland and Kalamazoo, at least three important factors must be taken into consideration. First, Myshia completed primary school in Oakland and secondary school in Kalamazoo. There are some innate differences between primary and secondary education, including the

onset in the latter of the typically tumultuous adolescent years. Second, enrollment in Oakland public schools is nearly 52,000⁶ compared to 12,500 in Kalamazoo.⁷ Third, KPS students lack the racial diversity of OUSD students.⁸

It is worth noting that since 1973, KPS has been under a permanent federal court order to bus students in order to maintain racially balanced schools.⁹ Today, twenty-four years after the federal court order, KPS continues to struggle to maintain integrated schools. Blacks number less than 20 percent of Kalamazoo's population, but comprise 40 percent of the public school enrollment. Like Kalamazoo, Oakland has a high number of black students in the public schools, 53 percent. The black high school dropout rate in Oakland is 19 percent.¹⁰ Of the some 280 black students who started high school with Myshia in Kalamazoo in 1992, 25 percent had dropped out by graduation in June 1996.¹¹

IN CONCLUSION, the generally negative experience Myshia had at Franklin Year-Round School in contrast to the positive experience she had at Lakeview School is the primary reason for my mixed views about the quality of education she received in Oakland public schools. Overall, I believe that my daughter received a better education in Kalamazoo than she did in Oakland. Myshia, who will be twenty in August 1997, is staunchly critical of her entire public school education. "Public schools," she says, "make learning hard. It should be fun. If learning was fun, the [high school] drop-out rate wouldn't be so high." Concerning traditional, nine-month school sessions and year-round schools, she maintains that there was no difference in the amount of information she retained. Regarding the quality of public school teachers she had, Myshia says, "Teachers should be better educated about what they teach. They should take a test in the subjects they teach. People should teach who are suited for teaching, not just because they think they can teach."

The author is grateful to her daughter, Myshia Abron, for her help in preparing this article.

Notes

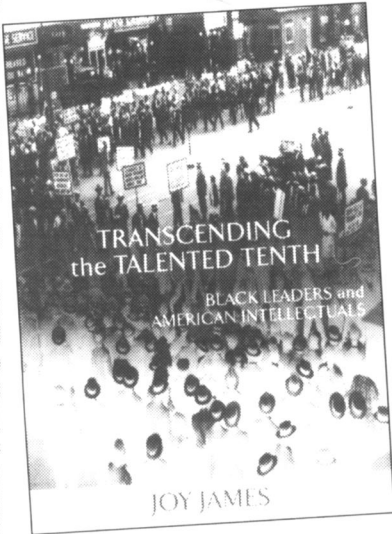
1. The initial name of the school was the Huey P. Newton Intercommunal Youth Institute. See "Huey P. Newton Intercommunal Youth Institute," *The Black Panther*, March 27, 1971, pp. D and E.
2. Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1995), reprint, 53-54, 58.
3. Newton's doctoral dissertation, "War Against The Panthers: A Study of Repression in America," was published in 1996 by Writers and Readers Publishing of New York, N.Y.
4. Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1992) pp. 391-394 and 439.
5. Her love of books has made Myshia an adept shopper at used book stores.
6. Patrick Worsnip, "Clinton administration denies Black English funds." *Daily Challenge* (New York City), Dec. 27-29, 1996, p. ??
7. Office of Administration, Kalamazoo Public Schools.
8. Ibid.
9. "How school desegregation came about." *Kalamazoo Gazette*, September 26, 1991, p. B1.

10. Carolyn M. Gettridge. "Oakland's standard is English," *Oakland Post*, December 29, 1996. p. 4.
11. "Kalamazoo Public Schools, Class of '96," graphic, *Kalamazoo Gazette*, June 1, 1997, p. A4.

CORRECTIONS:

In the last issue of **THE BLACKSCHOLAR**, Vol. 27 #1, "Ebonics," the name of contributing author John H. McWhorter was left off of the front cover. Our apologies to the author for that error.

An error also appeared in author Dennis Jackson's interview with journalist Chuck Stone, "The Outspoken Mr. Stone." On page 44 the first names of two Stone's acquaintances Ann Jordan and Hardy Williams were mentioned together, with the last name of Ann Jordan being omitted, thus creating the false impression that the two might be married. We regret creating such impression. — *The Editors*



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