

Are We Building Up Our Black Children to be Young, Gifted and Black?

By Shawnta S. Barnes - February 8, 2018

“Though it be a thrilling and marvelous thing to be merely young and gifted in such times, it is doubly so, doubly dynamic, to be young, gifted and black.”

Lorraine Hansberry

This is one of my favorite quotes from Black playwright Lorraine Hansberry author of the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. This quote is from a speech she delivered to winners of a United Negro College Fund contest in 1964. During Black History Month and throughout the year, it's important for us to introduce children to various types of artistic impressions that tell stories with historical Black content. That's why I decided to take my students from Crispus Attucks Medical Magnet High School on a field trip to see Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*.

I thought they would be excited.

They weren't. They were shocked because as one student said, "We are the dumb kids; we don't get to go on field trips." I was floored. And saddened. I teach two sections of English/Language Arts Lab. It's a class for students who did not pass the English/Language Arts portion of the I-STEP+ exam, which is a graduation requirement. These students are taking this course to improve their literacy skills so they can pass the exam.

However, this student's reaction made me realize that either someone has told these students they weren't great or somewhere along their educational line, they adopted the belief the test is the sole indicator of their intelligence. I disagree.

Not passing an exam doesn't make you dumb; it just means you either have test anxiety or you have skill gaps and both issues can be addressed. When I look at my students, I see their potential. I see gifts and talents that haven't been unearthed yet and my goal is to help them find their core learning potential while they are on their journey to adulthood to become productive citizens.

As I prepared them for the play, I finally won most of them over, but many of them didn't think the play would have any relevance to their lives or that they would learn anything meaningful. Below are some statements to show how their views evolved.

"At first, I thought it would be lame, but the play had more going on than I thought it would. It was interesting and funny at times."

"I really liked the play because it taught me a little bit more about black history."

"The play made you understand that no matter what bad things happen in life, that in the end, you'll have good things happen in your life too."

"I liked reading a play about black people even though the words used in the story are different than the words we use today."

“The more we continued reading the play, the more I liked reading it. I really looked forward to reading it each day.”

As I spoke to students, they shared how much they could relate to the family struggles of the Youngers even though the storyline of the play took place sometime after War World II. I am happy that I was able to be a part of exposing these students to another genre of entertainment that resonated with them. I hope seeing this play and reading and analyzing the work is the spark they need to continue to work towards passing the exam. It’s hard on a person when you can’t seem to pass the test. Imagine being a teenager and watching your peers move on from the English Lab class because they passed and you failed for the second time. It can be defeating. That’s why I intentionally tell them I see the talents in them and I try to build them up each day. All of the students in my Lab Class are minorities except for one and because of that, I believe I have an even stronger reason to build up the youth I teach.

As I reflect upon this Black History Month, I wonder what difference I am making in history. Many times, when we as black people think about Black history, we think about people who have come before and not about being part of Black history ourselves. When I think about the Black History legacy I want to leave, even if it is a minor role, I want that legacy to include helping black children see themselves as young, gifted and black.