CHAPTER 12

WORKING WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

An Interview with William Cross

“Because I was so steeped in the family, the neighbors, and the good people that were around us, I didn’t quite understand what they were angry about.”

—William Cross

Additional Interview Responses

William E. Cross, Jr., Ph.D., is an expert and originator in racial identity theory. Dr. Cross is a consultant to government, education, and industry on business and educational implications of America’s changing demographics. Please see the text for a fuller biography. The following questions and answers do not appear in the textbook.

Can you highlight for us key historical events, in a nutshell, what historical experience should educators be aware of in relationship to the African American community and African American students?

That’s a pretty tough one and the answer may surprise you in part. Let me start out with, that especially going from 1900 to 2000, the long-term effect of racism has been to shunt or slow down the rate in which African Americans could become part of the mainstream. And we have many, many African Americans who remain poor. When you ask me a question from that angle, then the key markers for our push toward modernity, our push toward dispersal into the society would be, of course, the movement from the Deep South to the North or the urban centers. We went from a very rural-based people, farming, to a more urban proletarian one.

World War I was a tremendous eye-opener for us because tens of thousands of our men and women went abroad and saw how race, in a manner of speaking, was socially constructed. That system of segregation in the United States was a system created by people, and it did not have to be accepted. And then, those coming back from the war, agitated and produced some of the first great, great social movements, one being artistic: the Harlem Renaissance, and the other the Marcus Garvey movement.

Both these movements would end up having bridges to things that were happening in the sixties. There you have your great explosion of African American culture, literature, music, poetry, with regard to the Renaissance. Not to say there wasn’t a Black tradition, but you have the codification of the Black aesthetic in the 1910s and 1920s. That’s when a corpus of work so voluminous presented itself, and you have a basis for, if you will, African American studies, in music, in art, in labor, and so on. We made great progress in that level, and while we had some people who criticized our movement, we were stunted with regard to our breakthrough and the union movement. And so, in the 1920s through the 1940s, we were locked into lower-wage jobs and so on. The next great tragedy for us would be the Depression. The Depression began to weaken us; we were pushed so hard down on the ground in the urban scene and in the rural scene, that some of the vitality of the culture that could keep us hopeful, positive, almost resistant to certain nefarious activities began to weaken. Though not to the point that it became as much of a problem as it is now.

Then with World War II, we had another interruption of the grinding, grinding, grinding poverty. And we began to see the emergence of protest again. And from about 1945 to the 1960s, this is my interpretation, would be the golden age of African American working-class life. We had the dispersal of tens of thousands of Whites out of the factories into White-collar jobs because of the G.I. Bill and so on. And even though some of us went to college, nonetheless, the jobs we could take were often in these factories. And for a while, people would go from Mississippi to Chicago or Detroit, to the Ford plant, and if you study our ghettos, our communities, between the 1940s and the 1960s, they weren’t nirvana, but they were very vibrant, healthy places. There was lots of money circulating,
Now, with this high employment in the working-class sector, we have vibrant but segregated
colleges; we began to produce people who developmentally were now college trained, exposed to
higher education along with this very healthy working-class strata. Our parents were often in this
working-class strata, we were kind of nudging up. And with the end of World War II, the defeat of
Nazis and so on, we began to slowly but surely have an agitation around our condition.

Then, finally in the 1950s, with Rosa Parks and so on, it was just inevitable that we would begin to
push toward a greater sense of freedom. But keep in mind that you have to ask the question, “Where
do those Black college kids come from and how do they come in such large numbers?” Well, they
came from those working-class parents, and that’s why I mentioned that. Then, we have just a series
of things that happen between ’55 and ’65: you have the great Supreme Court decision. Not great in
terms of its content, it can be critiqued, but it was the trigger that increased our expectations. That’s
why these Supreme Court decisions are important. The decision itself caused us as a people to
rapidly expand what we should expect of ourselves and of the nation.

At first we tried to express this new expectation in a most amazing way, and that would be
through a nonviolent movement, more in the tradition of Gandhi. The civil rights movement—the
movement of the common Black person for which King was the spokesperson—can’t be studied
enough. It has to be understood. It’s an amazing, amazing groundswell. Then of course, that spun off
into what we call the Black consciousness movement. I’m a product of the Black consciousness
movement, but my actual frame of reference is when we as a people began to shift from “Let us in, let
us just be Americans,” because there’s a very integrationist/assimilationist theme, to the civil rights
movement—to not only are you going to let us in, we’re going to force ourselves in, but you’re going
to have to change. That was the kind of dimension that happened with the Blackness phase.

Now, noticing at the same time that you have this explosive emergence of will and push for
insertion in the sixties and seventies, the American economy was going through a radical shift such
that many of the good-paying blue-collar jobs were being pushed out of the cities, offshore, what have
you. And people have to understand this, it took a long time for that to happen, but it began to have a
more immediate effect in the inner cities than it did in the suburban areas. So that, as early as 1955
people are able to trace how there was a sucking out of some of the good jobs that we as Black
people were then able to have with the moving on of Whites. So, you have this irony that between
1960 and 1980 you have this explosive emergence of middle-class Black people. Now wealthy and so
on, and a very hopeful sign of the society, and at the same time you have a large number of our
people who were literally going backwards. I have no doubt in my mind that if the economy had
maintained itself for at least another ten or twenty years, the proportion of Black people that would be
poor today would be very very manageable. It’s almost at times unmanageable.

But with the dropoff of the economic bridging into middle-class life, you have this irony that in
some cases the material conditions, and maybe even the spiritual conditions, of some Black people in
some hyperconcentrated poor arenas—and this causes some of my friends to get a little antsy—I’m
not so sure if it isn’t the same as, or worse than, slavery in the sense that the level of hope is so low. It
causes us to entertain solutions that you’re hard-pressed to find Black people entertaining these
solutions, such as the underground economy, in such large numbers in earlier periods of history.

That creates problems in its own right. People on the right and a few liberals even will start
blaming Blacks themselves, but we did not create our unemployment. And the unemployment is
sustained, and that has to do more with the larger society.

And then, more recently we have the attempt to roll back the progress that was made by African
Americans and the tensions that have been created in higher education. Here’s an interesting thing,
and my comment on this question was this: People tried to racialize affirmative action. But affirmative
action is a recurring thing in American history. There’s a bridge right near us called the Triboro Bridge,
in New York. The Triboro Bridge was a project designed in the context of affirmative action to give
preference to White male ethnic workers who were unemployed in the city of New York and figure out
what could we do with them. But rather than to have makeshift work, let’s create some projects that
would add value to society as a whole, but also would employ them, keep them from becoming
communists, keep them from rioting, keep them from making much mischief, political and otherwise. A
project that would end up with a product that would serve the needs of the society for years to come.
In a sense, we had to do such things earlier in times of poverty when most of the people were poor or working class, that would help them be transformed from working class to middle class.

The G.I. Bill in World War II is another example of transforming of a large group, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of White people who were poor, working class, and so on. Then repositioning them so they could, in a sense, become the new middle class. Now, these new middle-class Whites now have been around for two or three, sometime four, generations. And there’s a tendency that, not always, but often, that once you make the middle class, it is easier for you to replicate your status, as long as the schools cooperate and so on. So, the middle class among us, who still are dominated by Whites, and especially the powerful middle class and the wealthy, want the society to be friendly to their replicative needs. Since I’m an adult and I’m middle class I want the society to sustain my own status, but in regard to my children I want you to help me to help them replicate my status.

Now, what does that have to do with issues of race and culture? Well, if I am poor, I need institutions that are going to help me transform my status. I need projects like the Triboro Bridge; I need projects like the G.I. Bill. Those kinds of activities will help to identify those persons amongst the poor who really could do well in college, but might need a little bit of assistance—extra programs to study, extra help, and so on. So not only do you need to be admitted, but you need to have programs within the university that assist. There’s two ways. Even in admissions you can’t set the standards that are so biased toward the middle class that you would overlook my value. In fact what are called standards are really not standards. It’s simply a way of trying to give preference to those persons that are middle class. Because now, those people, the middle class, are so large in number that again, they want institutions that will be friendly to them. They cannot be serviced by private institutions, there’s just too many of them. So now they’ve turned their attentions to public institutions, such as the University of Michigan, and so on. And you see what people are saying? Well, “I should be allowed to come in based on my test scores.” Well, those test scores are inherently class-biased, and they’re inherently geared toward replication.

If you go into the actual charters of public higher education institutions, it says right there in the charter, it says right there in the mission statement, “We are to make education accessible. We are to make education affordable.” That is because when they were started, they were servicing the transformation of people who were not yet middle class. And now my long-winded discussion: You now are facing this battle between groups, because many of the people who are crying out for transformative operations on the society are People of Color. Some because they were immigrants, but with regard to African Americans it is this long-term negative result of their being stunted in their transformation to the mainstream. So they need flexible admissions so the institutions can identify quality within their ranks that are not identifiable by some of the markers of admissions that are useful for people that are already middle class. And yet when you see people like the fascist groups out of Maryland that call themselves “The Center for Equal Opportunity” or whatever, what they’re really trying to do is try to blunt the number of People of Color who make it to these institutions and keep them as White as they can.

It’s ironic that people say we want to have a race-neutral standard. Well the standards that they get actually increase the probability of having an all-White class. They claim it has nothing to do with race because they’re using standards, but that’s just bullshit. Anyone who knows the history of test measurements knows that what they’re asking for is a narrow range of definitions of excellence that increase the probability that Whites and middle class will get in.

Affirmative action is about the business of saying, “No, you are missing, you are missing quality.” And there are other ways than test scores and there’s much merit in people who are poor and who have to work thirty hours a week while in school and so on. And that if the state is to have a bias it should not be toward those who are already middle class, but should be toward those people that need education that’s accessible and affordable. It is just the opposite. But you have this tension between replicative status and transformed status.

**Could you present a short case that brings together the different issues and dynamics we discussed about working with African American students?**
Well, this may surprise you, but I see these issues even at the college level. I took on a new job recently. When I came in there were a couple of African American kids who were falling through the cracks. This was generally a positive environment but somehow they just weren't being pushed enough. I don't know that I'd done much different than to suggest to them that they really can make it, but it's not going to be easy, and that I have confidence in them, so let's go for it. And now I've got two of them on the cusp of getting their degrees. When I think back in my days at Cornell, we used to admit students that were being rejected by other higher level schools in the area of Black studies. You could see where they weren't high testers, but they were solid students. We felt like they were like us.

We created, not a grueling, but a really rigorous two-year program with a master's degree. The thesis really tested their ability to not only think, but to write as well as think. And when we got through with them, we not only grew as professors, but more importantly they were going off to Yale, they were going off to U-Penn.

It's hard to say to people, but it's a combination of first and foremost believing in people when they walk in the door, and then understanding that it's work, and that one has to constantly monitor whether or not you're really allowing for systems, creating systems that allow the students to share their world value and world competencies.

I'll give you one more example. We have a program where you're supposed to take a test after the first year of graduate studies. It's called the first doctoral examination. Well, we found out that when you give a test that's middle-class skewed, that the kids that are going to do the best on it will be middle class. Yet the kids who are equally as smart and equally as bright, the very mechanism of the test will likely overlook them. So we changed it to a take-home test. Made it more transparent, not necessarily easier. We find that the well-trained middle-class student still excels in this vehicle, but now we're able to see better the emergent competencies or the actual competencies of our working-class kids, White and Black. Sometimes we still have to work harder or work differently with the working-class kids. They come in with some rough edges in writing. Their ability to translate their thinking into writing often is more of a mystery to them. But as you see from the smile on my face, we keep the attitude that we have faith in the kids.

And we're going to examine our systems to see how they're working, to see how they might have a middle-class bias to them. There's nothing wrong with being middle class, its just that if you allow some middle-class biases to come in, you skip over talent that would display itself differently. Now ironically you could say we end up at the same place. Each writes a dissertation. This is a written document, usually there's intense, thick, qualitative material, or there's actual quantitative material, or both. So in a manner of speaking we take all the students and they arrive, in a manner of speaking, at the same place. But we don't assume they have to start in the same place.

And I think that's the challenge to educators. We want all the kids to come out competent, probably not the same, but within a range of competencies. Using words differently, seeing the world differently. But as a result of having those competencies they have choices. If the society would allow us to really transform these kids the way we talked about earlier, on a minimalist level you would hope that they would be provided with such choices that with their own developing consciousness, they can take advantage of such choices. Yet we have poor decisions such as one reported recently in the state of New York, where in an attempt to equalize funding, a judge stood and suggested that all we need provide for the average high school child what is tantamount to an eighth-grade education—and we know already that an eighth-grade education is a limitation of choice, not a creation of choice. Such decisions suggest that we have a system that will replicate poverty rather than transform.

But I don't want to end on a negative note—though I told you earlier that I'm not too optimistic that in my lifetime I'll see people change. Our society is right now wrong-headed with regard to its attitudes toward the poor. It probably is overlooking a critical mass of people who could help to further revitalize our economy, our arts, all aspects of our society. To pull out those qualities in our children is hard work; it has to go beyond the middle-class curriculum that tends to dominate the schools right now. It does mean we'll lose some teachers that may retire early. But in the long run, just as the incorporation of the Eastern European Jews did nothing but infuse and revitalize parts of our community, just as the poor Irish were transformed into the middle-class, I see the same thing happening with African Americans and African children, Native American children. It's hard because there are many people
that don’t have faith in them. And it looks to me like they’ve done such a good job of communicating that lack of faith that sometimes the kids themselves now are turning off to school. We’re losing them very early. I hope maybe this kind of book that you’re writing and the attitudes you and your coauthor have will make a difference in how we train teachers. And maybe as importantly, how we socialize and educate not just teachers, but administrator, principals, counselors, and so on.