

# A Talk to Teachers

*By: James Baldwin*



# Background

- 20<sup>th</sup> century African American essayist, novelist, and playwright
- Lived in Harlem ghettos as a child and eventually became advocate for civil rights
- This excerpt is derived from a speech given on October 16, 1963 to NYC teachers and was later printed in an edition of the *Saturday Review* under the title “A Talk to Teachers”



# Education versus Ignorance

- “The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated” (Baldwin, 1963).
- Education allows an individual to question the society he or she is learning in and about
- However, much of society seeks to suppress this questioning as someone who consistently questions and disobeys is seen as dangerous to national order
- However, Baldwin states that society’s only hope for change is through those individuals who question



# African American History

- Black child is disconnected from American ideals such as “liberty and justice for all”
- Under the American flag his or her ancestors were sold into slavery
- “It is impossible for any Negro child to discover anything about his actual history” (Baldwin, 1963) → lack of celebrated African American figures in education leads to a disconnect from individual and group identity



# Separation Between Black and White

- Church, government, politicians all aim to please white people
- Black child sees this separation but does not understand why
- School is where he ultimately realizes these differences
- Reaction is rage and hatred towards white people who have slammed the “doors of opportunity” (Baldwin, 1963) on his ambition
- Baldwin ideally desires that the child grows to use this rage for positive social change



# Lack of the American Dream

- America has perpetuated segregation to keep “the Negro in his place” (Baldwin, 1963).
- Fear of diminishing white power prevents the black man or woman from gaining a respected place of power in America
- No social mobility for African Americans: Baldwin states that even after slaves were freed, they were still at the bottom of the labor market and have remained there



# Implications for Education

- Addresses the teachers as educated peoples who have the ability to create social change through power in classroom
- America has created myth of own history to forget and hide from past → induces ignorance and falsity in American identity
- Baldwin desires teachers to teach truth and not the sugar-coated version of American history





# Suggestions for Future Educational Practices

- Include prominent figures in black history in curriculum to give the black child a sense of history and identity
- Show black child the “criminal conspiracy” (Baldwin, 1963) that white people have devised to keep him in his “place”
- Make peace with this conspiracy and use education as a weapon against the ignorance of others in order to incite change in American society





## ...Continued

- Feel a sense of ownership of actions and realize that he is his own self → he does not have to listen and blindly obey administrative policies
- Continuously question to discover what is best for self and society
- Teachers must foster these qualities so that a formerly oppressed black child can gain confidence as an educated individual and commence positive societal change



# References

- Schultz, F. (Ed.). (2001). *Sources: Notable Selections in Education* (3rd ed.). Guilford: McGraw-Hill/Dushkin.