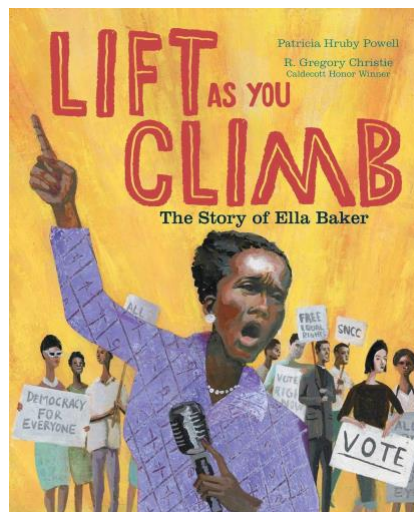


Second Reaction: Lift as You Climb: The Story of Ella Baker

Powell, Patricia Hruby and Chistie, R. Gregory. *Lift as You Climb: The Story of Ella Baker*. Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2020.

Michelle C.S. Greene



Freedom Schools lean heavily on a concept Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) coined as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. This is evident in their intentionally curated selection of culturally relevant and affirming books and instructional materials. The goal is to promote literacy developing by providing texts with which scholars can make personally relevant connections.

Lift as You Climb, a picture-based, biographical account of Ella Baker's life of service and dedication to Black Americans' civil rights, is one of several books selected by the Children's Defense Fund and the National Office for Freedom Schools to be used as part of a daily, morning literacy curriculum routine called "Integrated Reading Curriculum" (IRC).

As a participant-observer within a Freedom School site, my interests focused on learning about and supporting college-aged interns as they facilitated conversations with young scholars during IRC. During a lesson where the intern presented *Lift as You Climb*, two significant

interactions occurred with a 10-year-old scholar named Michael (pseudonym), one during and another after the reading.

The teacher intern began by inviting her scholars to take turns reading aloud. Several scholars raised their hands eagerly and, as one volunteer began reading, Michael assumed what had become his usual posture during reading time – lying on the floor with his head cradled in his arms, forehead down to cover his eyes. Despite the teacher intern’s previous attempts to engage him in IRC activities with positivity, enthusiasm and encouragement, Michael was not interested. During this reading time, however, a shift occurred. About a quarter of the way through the book, the following lines were read aloud:

Negroes needed jobs.

White shop owners needed Negroes to buy from their shops or they’d close.

Without jobs – without money – Negroes couldn’t buy from white shops.

(Powell, 2020, pg. 12)

Michael briefly lifted his head and interjected, “Man, why we gotta read this book? They be usin’ derogatory words, callin’ Black people ‘Negroes’. It ain’t right.”

At this, the teacher intern looked at me with apprehension, wondering how or if she ought to respond. Michael quickly returned to his resting position, as if resigned to an unjust circumstance, but continued mumbling into his arm-cave. Meanwhile, the reader had continued her job, unfazed by Michael’s comments.

Observing all of this, I said, “Hmmm, can we all pause for a moment to hear what Michael is saying because I think it’s an important point. Michael, can you say more about that?”

At first, Michael didn’t respond, perhaps trying to determine the sincerity of my request. I offered, “You heard the book use the word ‘Negroes’,” and then addressed the whole class, “what do you all think of when you hear that word?”

Most scholars looked around the room to one another, hesitant to speak, but Michael piped up, “That’s a nasty word that puts Black people down. We’re not supposed to use put-downs.”

“Ah,” I said, “you’re noticing something important about language and how words are used. We don’t hear that word used very often today. And I hear you saying that you’ve heard it used in ways that are meant to harm Black people.... This story about Ella Baker is a kind of history book -- it’s telling us how Ella helped Black people to earn civil rights in this country, but when she was growing up, there wasn’t a negative attachment to that word. Black people referred to themselves as ‘Negroes’ in the same way that they call themselves ‘African American’ or ‘Black’ today. In fact, you’ll see that word in the book, painted on some of the protest signs they made. Words and how they are used and the meaning they have...that can change over time.”

Michael shifted his head and nodded slightly. Then, for the remainder of the reading, though he continued lying on the floor, he adjusted his posture to turn his eyes outward and in the direction of the reader.

Later, as the teacher intern was leading the scholars in a reflective discussion, Michael noticed the protest signs pictured on the front and back covers of the book (Christie, 2020). Together, they read some of the signs: “Democracy for Everyone”, “Free Equal Rights”, “Hire Negroes”. While discussion ensued, Michael approached me and privately questioned, “So when they were holding those signs, is that like Black Lives Matter?” This opened up the opportunity to acknowledge and validate the connections he was making with the current and ongoing battle for civil rights.

I share this snapshot of teaching-learning as one example of a lesson that could have taken an entirely different trajectory. That initial moment of apprehension that the teacher intern experienced undoubtedly led her to wonder whether she should interrupt the scholar who was already engaged with the book, only to give attention to another scholar who could have been interpreted as acting disruptive and/or disrespectful. But, by pausing the planned reading and inviting Michael to share his natural response to the text, his contribution was regarded not only as legitimate, but as *valuable* to the lesson. Instead of ignoring or dismissing Michael’s behaviors and comments, he provided poignant inquiries about the history of language and made personal

connections to current events in relation to the BLM Movement. His contributions helped the whole class recognize the significant roles they have and could play within the larger, ongoing movement for Civil Rights.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Michelle C.S. Greene, Ph. D., is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Urban Teacher Education at Indiana University Indianapolis. She served on the leadership team of a Freedom School at St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana.