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Vanessa Siddle Walker: Honoring Keepers of Knowledge by Using Their Stories to Improve Education

Melissa Holmes
Kansas State University, Manhattan, melissa@ksu.edu

Eileen Wertzberger
Kansas State University, Manhattan, ejm7777@ksu.edu

Kay Ann Taylor
Kansas State University, Manhattan, ktaylor@ksu.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Melissa Holmes, Eileen Wertzberger, Kay Ann Taylor, and Lori Goodson

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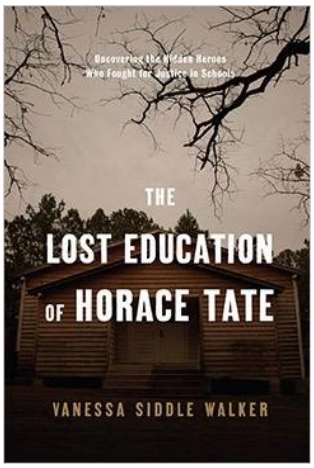
This issue of *Educational Considerations*, "Intersectionality and the History of Education," urges educators to consider the complexities that have marked our past, influence our present, and have the potential to inform change for a better future. We had the privilege to discuss these issues in an interview with Dr. Vanessa Siddle Walker, a renowned historical researcher in the field of education. Walker is a leading voice in the history of school desegregation in the United States, positioning black educators as significant agents of change in the collective narrative of schools, and highlighting how their organized action and strategic advocacy has led to social justice and equity for black students. Her research informs how our schools have worked in the past, and how lessons from our past can serve to mobilize resources for the equitable education of all children today.

Walker is the Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of African American and Educational Studies at Emory University. She has received numerous awards for her work, including the Grawmeyer Award for Education and the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Early Career Award. She also has received awards from the Conference of Southern Graduate Schools, the American Education Studies Association, and three AERA awards in the categories of Best New Female Scholar, Best New Book, and Outstanding Book. She has authored several books about on segregated schools, including *The Lost Education of Horace Tate: Uncovering the Hidden Heroes who Fought for Justice in Schools*, *Hello Professor: A Black Principal and Professional Leadership in the Segregated South*, and *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*.

Throughout her career, Walker has highlighted the power of relationships, collaboration, and professional networking. As the current president of the AERA, she encourages collaborative efforts by researchers and organizational stakeholders to meet the challenge of harnessing

educational research and theory in order to address current realities and inequalities in our nation's schools. By reconnecting with those who know local needs best, we bring our united force to bear on the country's most historically engrained and structurally reinforced injustices. Educators are key to forward movement.

While much has been written about desegregation, Walker's latest book, *The Lost Education of Horace Tate*, examines it from the perspective of black educators. When we asked why she chose that perspective, Walker explained:



> I don't know that I chose that perspective as much as the perspective chose me. By that I mean that sometimes we make deliberate choices to engage in research agendas because we read an article that's compelling, we are influenced by a mentor and the work he or she is doing, or we see suggestions for future research at the end of an article. And those are important ways to explore new ideas… But I have found that some of my best ideas have come because I listened to community voices.

Her research has allowed her to delve deeper into the silences of the past, as she is led to a more thorough understanding by those who know a different side of history. Taking a closer look at the lenses that informed her various books, Walker highlighted how inquiry formed the basis of her journey:

> At each stage along the way, it was the community voice that drew my attention. When I began *Their Highest Potential,* the idea came from a community member saying, "But we had a good school." I did not know what that meant because it did not fit with how we thought at the time about segregated black schools. With *Hello Professor,* I couldn't figure out what this principal was talking about when he kept saying he went to all these professional meetings. He was doing the same things Mr. Dillard did at his schools in *Their Highest Potential*. Yet, the two did not know each other. Their schools were in different states. They lived in different professional eras. So what was he talking about?
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> With *Lost Education,* when Dr. Tate started talking about himself as a principal of a segregated school on dark roads going to get somebody to help with school bus transportation and meeting Thurgood Marshall, I was completely dumbfounded. His stories did not fit either of the activities of the other principals. I was like, "What? I thought you were a principal!"
>
> I am simply saying that what I did throughout was simply listen to counter voices—the people who had not been written into history. By staying closely connected to the community and taking seriously what they were saying, I could immediately hear when a voice was different than how we tended to think about it in the research.

For Walker, writing *The Lost Education* was about listening, and giving credence to, voices that had long been ignored by historians. It also meant taking the lead from the community

as to which narratives still needed to be researched and told. In this excerpt, Walker shares how she followed that path into unchartered territories:

> With regard to *The Lost Education of Horace Tate*, the back story is that people kept saying in the years after I finished *Their Highest Potential:* "You have to talk to Horace Tate." I had never had a conversation with him at all, and to be honest, I didn't know why I needed to talk to the former executive director of the Georgia Teachers and Education Association. He seemed liked an organizational administrator and far afield from my interests. So for a long time I just did not listen.
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> When I finally did decide to try to reach out to him—mostly because I didn't want to tell the person again that I hadn't contacted him—I was driving on 85, going into downtown Atlanta and dialed his number. The man retired as a state Senator, so I'm assuming I'm going to get a secretary. When he said "Hello," I was so surprised and realized I did not have anything else to say. I just had not planned a script.
>
> I did everything in my entrée with him that I used to tell my doctoral students *not* to do. The cell phone call dropped because of the bad service on the interstate, and I had to call him back and apologize. When I went to meet him, I ran out of tapes to record the conversation. I was also late and had to spend the first few minutes apologizing—trying to explain I was the mother of a young child and had problems that morning. I don't even want to say all the things I did wrong. But this gentleman listened intently as I told him during this first meeting why I was interested in segregated schools and what I knew about them, and he responded with a half-smile: "Hmmmmmm. . . you've got part of the story."
>
> Then *he* began to talk, and I listened. After a number of meetings at the building that formally belonged to the black educators' association, he finally said: "I want you to come to the basement of my house." Well, I knew that many of the materials of black schools had been destroyed with desegregation, and I was already excited by the things he had shown me at the building. When he and his wife allowed me into their basement, I was in research heaven. There were four file cabinets and books and other materials. I was so excited.
>
> Honestly, I thought I had nailed it in obtaining the archival materials I needed for the story. But the more I visited his home, the more he unveiled materials previously concealed. Eventually he showed me the room across the hall from where I had been working. It had all kinds of stuff I did not know about, including a closet with almost 300 hours of audio files of meetings. Once when I teased him about how long it took him to show me everything, he looked at me quizzically and said "Come here." Then he led me down the hall pointing. "I have stuff here and here and here . . ." I just nodded. Silenced.
>
> Not until the waning days of his life did he begin to say, "Have you been back to the building?" I would say, "No, but I will go back." But, in my mind I was thinking, "I don't need to go there. We met there for the first year. I have been in the basement for almost a

> year. What could possibly be back at the building?" So I didn't go back until after he died.
>
> When I went, I asked his daughter, who was at the building, what the materials were her dad wanted me to see. I told her I did not know what he meant. And she said very matter of factly, "He meant the stuff from the attic." I just stared at her. "The attic?" All this time. Who knew there was an attic?

After winding her way alone through Tate's office, going through a convoluted collection of various doors, ascending wobbly steps with no working lights to guide her way, Walker stepped across a final threshold to find the original files of the Georgia Teachers of Education Association, dating back to the 1920s and 30s. In this excerpt, Walker reflects on both the physical and metaphorical journey of researching Dr. Tate's legacy, and ultimately of the trust that must exist between researcher and participant in historical research:

> It still would take another 16 years after Dr. Tate's death to go through all of those files and then to publish *Lost Education*. The project chose me. I did not know when I met this man that he was actually interviewing me; I thought I was interviewing him, but that assumption was wrong, the truth was reversed. The IRB gives us access to people; it does not allow us, as I wrote years ago, to really get access to what they think, feel, see, and believe. The people themselves—the informants—often make that decision. And in this particular case, when I thought I was interviewing him, he was deciding whether or not I would be given these documents. And that's why he gave a little bit at a time. He was deciding, "What's she going to do with them? Could she be trusted with the story?" I didn't know that. And, then on his deathbed, was when he finally decided that I could [be trusted] and [he] set me on the route where I would *really* find all the materials. I thought I'd found them when I was in the basement, but he really had hidden everything up in the attic.

As a historical researcher, Walker acknowledged that she was the trusted liaison between those in academia and those in the community who knew additional, rich layers of our nation's history. She also emphasized the humility, respect, and trust that must exist between researchers and the individuals they are hoping will shed light on topics of interest pivotal to moving the education agenda forward:

> I've listened to the voices of old black people, whether it was *Their Highest Potential*, or *Hello Professor*, or *Lost Education*. And in every case, what they were saying was something that was contrary to the research I knew—for most, not all, but most of the research I knew and the dominant story we accepted. I decided to follow their leads. They were the keepers of the knowledge, and they were kind enough to share what they knew with me. …
>
> We have to seek those people [insiders] at their cultural level of comfort. We have to be willing to go to them, not as the Dr. this and Dr. that, but as a person who genuinely seeks to understand what they know. This is the opening to get a story. But I don't think

> our research responsibility ends there because then we would be behaving more like journalists telling other people's stories. And that's good, but that doesn't necessarily help the research community. We also have a responsibility to hear what they're saying, figure out how it relates or it doesn't relate to the existing knowledge base, and then think about how to tell the story in such a way that there is integrity for the person who shares the work but that we're also pushing the field forward. That takes a long time, and it's hard. I would never try to pretend I do it the best; I just know juxtaposing community knowledge with the state of the field has to be the standard.
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> For me, when an informant reads the work and learns something about himself or herself, that's when I feel like I've done my job. If they both recognize themselves in the story and they learn something about themselves they didn't know, that's when I sit back and say, 'OK, all right, I did my job as a researcher.' [. . .] I believe I have the responsibility to create the interpretive lens.

Walker emphasized that it is her job, as the researcher, "to answer the questions the informant might not always be able to fully explicate. For them, it's just life; they're just living. It's our job to bring to bear the research base—the archival materials we have, the other interviews, etc., and try to understand what motivates someone and how the person situates with other people and other stories."

By listening to those in her community, Walker's research depicts a counter narrative to the traditional history of desegregation. Focusing on Dr. Tate's experience allowed Walker to reveal effects of desegregation that previously were unrecognized or underrecognized:

> If you take seriously black educators as players in the desegregation story, if we go past the notion that they were just victims and they lost their jobs—though they were victims and they did lose their jobs—but if we go past that, if we go past the sense that, well, black schools didn't really have anything to offer, nothing good really happened for black children until we get to desegregation, we completely ignore the context of who the children were before they were desegregated. They *were* mistreated, but what happens if you make their educators, the activities and perspectives of their educational association, central in the story? If you make them central in the story, then it reconfigures our understanding of desegregation.
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> At desegregation, we *did* assume that they [black teachers and administrators] were just fired and that was too bad, and there were some nice black teachers, but the kids got to go to white schools and so we just need to get more black kids in white schools and then that's good enough, right? If you write black educators out of the story, then the integration of 1970 is fine; we just try to continue to integrate and move forward. But if you write them *in* the story, it fundamentally changes conceptually your understanding of the story.

In better understanding the complexities of desegregation, Walker discussed the three As central to our understanding of desegregation's counter narrative: Access, Aspiration, and Advocacy. These values fueled the work of black educators fighting for a socially just and

equitable school system for all students. Walker's three As support our understanding of what was gained and lost through desegregation:

> We have to begin by understanding the black educators had an *additive* model for desegregation. By this, they meant they would be able to keep the things they had been able to build during segregation and add to these things the components they had been denied. So, let's consider what they already had.
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> First, they understood and operationalized in their schools the power of *aspiration.* They knew how to create school climates where their black children would aspire to achieve. They had figured this out—not withstanding all the negativity of segregation. And if you think about it, they should have created generations of children who were ready to burn everything down, right?—when you think about how the kids were being mistreated—but they didn't. They created literally generations of black children who aspired to achieve, who wanted to see America's democracy work and who wanted to be part of it. They figured out how to reconstruct the negative messages that the kids got in the society and literally reconfigured them so that within the schools, rather than absorbing the negativity, the children aspired to achieve. They weren't reduced by what society said about who they were. They aspired. And the teachers and principals did it with their teaching, they did it with the curriculum…they had really sophisticated pedagogical and curricular ways to help these children learn to aspire. So black educators had figured that out. So they already had *aspiration*—'A' No. 1: We can teach children to believe in themselves, to want to achieve.
>
> But what else did the educators have? Well, they had their organization. The organization created *advocacy*—the second 'A.' So as an individual, the teacher couldn't go and fuss with the school board. He or she would just get fired. But through the organizational structures, they figured out how to intervene in black education to try to make it better while also protecting the individual. It's a brilliant strategy, if you really think about it. On one hand, we're inside the schools teaching the children how to navigate in these poor circumstances that they are being forced to contend with, even as American citizens. But on the other hand, through the organizational structure, they are trying to tear down the systems that are mistreating the children. So, they've got within the schools this push to understand about how to get children to aspire, and outside the school, they've got this powerful organization through which they can send almost seamless advocacy messaging.
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> What did they want in desegregation? They wanted *access*. That was the desire. Access to facilities, equipment, books, materials—this is what they desired. So, in the additive model, children would have school climates where they would aspire to achieve, there would be advocacy groups that made sure that school boards and the federal government and state government were actually giving all children the resources they needed, and they would have access. That was the vision of black educators.
>
> But that's not what happened. What happened in real time, as we know, black educators, particularly principals, were also fired, and they decimated the black teaching population.

Depending upon the statistics you look at, anywhere between 30,000 to 50,000 black teachers were fired and maybe more. That doesn't count those who chose to retire or who were demoted. The problem is that if you get rid of the people who understand how to create these school climates and you assume that only white educators can determine what children need, then you lose a whole, almost hundred years of pedagogical and curricular knowledge about how to help children not be reduced by society, but really believe in themselves and believe they can achieve. Thus, the capacity to create aspiration was reduced.

Advocacy was reduced when desegregation actually had to be accomplished, after the 1968 Pitt County Court Case, NEA needed the black and white education organizations to merge. That's the bottom line. It needed them to merge because NEA wants the federal money and it can't get the federal money as long as it's running parallel to segregated organizations. But the black and white educators in the South had not been meeting together, and they don't get along particularly well. What happens in real time is that NEA is able to force the merger, but you do not see the same level of advocacy for black education and black children that existed with the black organizations in the new desegregated organization. So, the advocacy structure that had existed since Reconstruction in most of these southern states to protect the educational needs of black children is destroyed.

What we were given in 1970 was *some* access, never complete access, often one-way access. So, in real time, when you write black educators into the story, [. . .] the desegregation that was accomplished was not their vision. They argued, as early as 1970—really before—that if you put children together without adequately mixing the teaching force, the leadership force, the principals, without a full two-way integration—not a one-way where just black children go to white schools, but a real integrated world where we draw the best from both—they argued then that it's not going to work well. 'Who was going to teach these young black children they could be anything they want to be?' they said before they merged with the white organization. And of the workers in their organization, Tate said [in the 1960s], [. . .] 'In another couple of decades, people won't even know we existed.' And he's right.

When you write black educators into the history, it forces you to rethink conceptually what happened in desegregation. Instead of an *additive* model, desegregation created an *exchange* model. We exchange caring school climates and powerful advocacy structures for the promise of access. Unfortunately, we did not get full access in 1970, and we have even less of it now as the country retreats from its 1970 stance.

So, for me, Dr. Tate's lost education fundamentally shifts how to understand what we need to do with desegregation as we move forward. Yes, we need access for all children—absolutely. But, I believe the problem is bigger than access. We also need to think about how to recreate aspiration in schools. We need to think about advocacy structures that will protect the interests of children in schools. The combination—the additive model—was their vision for integration, and I think we would be wise to reconsider it.

Walker discussed Dr. Tate's fears of what would happen after desegregation if an access model of two-way integration was not achieved. Walker also reflected on what Dr. Tate's message would be for us all today:

> Dr. Tate in 1970 talked about it as a second-class integration. He said the kind of integration that was being put forth, where black teachers were being fired, where black principals were being fired or demoted, … Dr. Tate looked at all the data on this, and he said, 'What we're getting is a second-class integration.' He said, 'I have fought against segregation my entire life and did everything I could to eradicate it.' He said, 'But in getting rid of segregation, we must never accept a second-class integration because a second-class integration is evil, no matter who says otherwise.'
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> By second class, he meant children being placed in schools with teachers who didn't care about them, who didn't desire to see them succeed, where there was no aspiration. He meant getting rid of the powerful advocacy organizations that had existed and/or not having the agenda of those organizations picked up in the new integrated organization. He was concerned that to succeed, black children needed all of the above. They needed the … curriculum and teachers and leadership and parents and community and advocacy—all the things [. . . of] the access model.
>
> Clearly, we need to fight for access. We cannot let it be okay that justices are put into our court system today who question whether or not *Brown v. Board of Education* was the right decision. And that's happening in this climate. Their words remind me a great deal of the …literature we heard a great deal of immediately after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The white South questioned the decision even then and made some pretty awful observations about the children, the schools, and what they would do if forced to desegregate."
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> So, the idea that we could be Americans 65 years after the case was decided and still question whether or not we need to push for a desegregated democracy, to me, is problematic. It's problematic because, despite the wonderful things that black teachers and principals were able to do across the South in the midst of segregation, that does not make segregation right. It means that they were doing what white educators didn't have to do. They had to take on another whole layer of trying to convince America to be the democracy that it purports to be. So, for us now to sit idly by and allow the courts to decide that children of all hues should not be able to be educated together is problematic. And we must, I believe, galvanize our collective beliefs about the possibilities of American democracy and be certain that we do not lose ground-breaking cases like *Brown* that push us closer to the vision of who we say we are.
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> We as citizens need to be very intentional thinking about federal money and where it goes. We can't be duped by the language of equality that also accompanies federal money [. . .] by failing to pay attention to how that money filters into states and then into schools. Inevitably, historically, when federal money came in to Southern spaces, it was used to forward the education of some children and to thwart the education of other

children. So, it's not what we say federally about, 'Oh, we have this money available for xyz'—it's what's actually happening on the ground. And historically, the infusion of federal money did not mean equality.

We see DuBois and many other black educators pushing back actually against federal money in earlier decades, and their argument was, 'If you put this money in the South and you don't pay attention to how it's being used, it will be used to further perpetuate inequality. And that simple understanding, that there's a difference between the language and the availability of federal money and what actually happens on the ground within states and schools—we need to think very carefully about that. Otherwise, we applaud ourselves for what we're doing federally and don't understand that what we're doing locally is actually contradictory to the federal statement.

We need to be paying attention to how federal money supports private education. In the South, public money supported private education before there was a public school system. The academies that existed, for example, in Georgia—state money went into those academies. And I can assure you the black children and the slaves were not in the academies. So when we think now about, 'Oh, well, let's just disperse federal money outside public education and public commitment,' we are replaying a historic script that created inequality. We need to pay attention when we see things happening today: notwithstanding how much we might want to applaud for the language, we need to pay attention differently as citizens when we see policies being implemented that we know historically have created inequality, and I think we have a responsibility to that. We elect people, and we have a responsibility, especially as educators, to understand this history and to be able to say, 'No, this is what happened last time, and exactly how is it going to be different this time?'

In many respects, the struggle for a socially just system of education continues today. Walker affirmed the pivotal role that schools of education play in the fight for equality:

I understand that there are schemes alive to try to discount schools of education, but schools of education are critical to educate another generation of teachers, of principals, of professional leadership who really understand how to work with children comprehensively—how to get a child who doesn't believe he or she can succeed [. . . and] actually convince them to succeed [. . .] We can do that.

In our schools of education, we have the body of people who have the capacity to teach aspiration to help children understand how to get beyond inequality. We have all of this at our disposal. And I do not believe that [as] schools of education, we should simply conform to the federal prescriptions for what we should or should not be doing. I think we need to be the ones to make decisions about what the next generation of educators needs to know.

If we're going to fulfill the historic purpose of public education in this country, which is to create an educated citizenship so that a democracy can function—I want to see us become visionary as we lay the foundation for another generation of American citizens.

Walker underscored the need for collaboration in the collective struggle to build a more prosperous, equitable future:

> We also have to talk to each other across constituent groups. When we see change happen historically in black education, it does not happen because one group pushes something; it happens because there is collaboration. It doesn't mean people always get along well, but they do figure out how to work together toward the common end. I think working in silos today is problematic. Lawyers can't figure out how to get us the access we need; schools of education can't work without conversations/consultations with communities; we can't get citizens to know how to pay attention to who the judges are, and who's getting elected, and what policies are in place at the state and federal level unless we are connected and interconnected. And historically, that's what we see. I think we've got to do that today if we are going to put a network in place that is powerful enough to make a difference for another generation. I think if we could [. . .] just kind of grab onto that conceptually, really imagine [that] another generation of educators created collaborations that worked then and could work again, we would be well on our way.

In discussing the role of higher educational institutions, Walker reflected upon the role of a researcher committed to social justice. Researchers, too, must be more interconnected with the rest of the educational community, with a united vision for the kind of changes we are seeking to achieve. Walker also shared what has kept her personally energized in the fight for equity:

> I will say this—I think that higher ed. and school educators need to have a more coordinated agenda. I do think we [as researchers] do need overall a greater sense of connectivity to people, to schools and communities. I think [developing these connections] will enhance not only the growth of the community, but our capacity to do good research.
>
> I think at the end of the day, the reason I have not yet retired is because there are some things that are right and there are some things that are wrong. There are things that are just and there are things that are unjust. And we all have a responsibility to do what we can to address what's wrong.
>
> Am I personally tired? Yes. Left to my own devices, I would be jumping waves today. But is there is a piece of the puzzle that I can supply that might make things better for another generation—for the children to come? I don't own all the pieces of the puzzle. But maybe I have a piece. And if you have a piece that can make life better for, to use Lisa Delpit's term, 'other people's children,' then don't you have a responsibility to do that?"
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> I remind myself that life is about more than me—that life is bigger than my personal desires. And I try to learn how to stay replenished. Because, if you take on the inequality, the years of oppression, the bigness of what we face now, it is so easy to just be discouraged. And I try not to take it all on as [though] it's my responsibility to fix

> everything. I try to think about it as, 'What can I do today that might contribute to the problem being addressed over time?' I pray and do the things that build my spirit and keep me committed and then, let me do what I can do today. Period.

Building toward a more socially just system of education requires not only the work of researchers, educators, and community members working towards a common goal; it also requires the mentorship of new generations of researchers and academics that are committed to the cause. Walker discussed how she has found fulfillment in mentoring and building relationships with graduate students over the years, emphasizing the need to pay attention to the whole person:

> I adore my graduate students. They bring absolute joy. And I think a large part of how I interact with my graduate students has been greatly influenced by these absentee mentors—these people I've written about over the last 30 years, collectively. …
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> That means taking some time to help a student believe he or she can do more than he or she thinks they can do.
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> There have been many times when doc [doctoral] students have, in my office, behind closed doors, raised the question of, 'I don't know if I want to do this anyway.' And I will laughingly say, 'You asked to do this—I didn't go out looking for you.' And so we joke about it, but on the other side of the joke was always the serious conversation about what do we do, why do we do it, why does it matter, what can you contribute?
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> The piece of addressing the whole student and not just the writing/researching side of the student, but the whole person, means addressing self-confidence when there's a self-confidence crisis, and I have yet to know a doctoral student who didn't question, 'Why am I doing this?' at some point along the way. And I think we have to be honest. 'Yeah, I had that too, but [just] because you feel that now, doesn't mean you have to stay there.'
>
> Attending to the whole person also means seeking, not just about the research issue at hand, but writing style. I had to learn different writing styles. In my career, I have gone from initially TAing a quantitative class—a stat [statistics] class when I was a doctoral student at Harvard—to moving into qualitative research and then historical research. Those are different writing styles. And even with *Lost Education*, because I decided I wanted people beyond the academy to be able to read it and understand what happened, that meant learning how to write as a storyteller, and I didn't know how to do that."
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> So, the whole notion that there are writing styles and people have to be mentored into appropriate styles for where you are trying to go and what works is another whole conversation. That's what you have over tea. That's when you talk about all kinds of style issues or access issues: What does it mean to get the data that you actually want to be able to get? I need to talk to you about it—not just sign off on your IRB.
>
> If you knew how to write a dissertation, you would already have a Ph.D., and you wouldn't be applying for the program. Just because people are smart doesn't necessarily

mean they know how to do what they set out to do—or how to think about the job market when they finish. So, I think there has to be an attention to the whole student, much as my black educators worried about the whole child.

People can become who we can imagine they can be, even when their own imagination might not be as great as your imagination for them. They can rise to that, and I have countless real examples of people who have done that. It has been my joy to just watch them do all the great stuff they're doing—and my joy to just have a little part of it. But I think I saw that modeled by my mentor, Jackie Irvine, and I learned its importance as I wrote about the black educators.

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