

# HEQA - Ashley Dennis

[00:00:00] **Jack Schneider:** Welcome to *HEQ&A*, the podcast of the *History of Education Quarterly*. I'm your host, *HEQ* co-editor Jack Schneider. Every few weeks, we'll dive into recent work from the journal, asking authors how their projects challenge or extend what we know about a topic, exploring what's interesting and surprising about it, and then taking a step back to consider broader implications. In the second half of the show, we turn our sights to teaching. So, if you're an educator, make sure to stick around until the end. And now let's hear from one of our authors.

[00:00:49] **Ashley Dennis:** My name is Ashley Dennis, PhD candidate in African American Studies at Northwestern University. I'm the winner of the 2021 Barnard Prize from the History of Education Society and the author of "The Intellectual Emancipation of the Negro: Madeline Morgan and the Mandatory Black History Curriculum in Chicago during World War II."

[00:01:10] My article is about the first mandatory Black history curriculum in a US public school system, and the Black women who've helped make it possible. The curriculum was implemented in Chicago Public Schools between 1942 and 1945. It was officially called "The Supplemental Units for a Course of Study in Social Studies," because it was meant to supplement existing social studies lessons for grades one through eight. The curriculum covered African life, as well as African American contributions to all areas of US society. This included education, literature, music, science, warfare, and art. The Black history curriculum was impressive, especially given the location and time period. Chicago Public Schools for black children in the 1940s were segregated, overcrowded, and underfunded. And there were also a lot of reports of teachers, particularly White teachers, who didn't seem to care about Black students' success.

[00:02:08] So one of my main research questions is how did a Black teacher named Madeline Morgan win approval for the curriculum? I argue that there was an alignment of interest in this historical moment. Morgan and her network of Black women educators had a commitment to what Morgan called "intellectual emancipation." they wanted to boost Black children's self-esteem by challenging lies in social studies textbooks. These textbooks suggested that Black people did not have a history and were insignificant and inferior to White people. Morgan also asserted that the curriculum would help reduce prejudice

in White students. Now this converged with White school teachers and administrators' interests in promoting interracial tolerance in the US during World War II. For example, the superintendent of Chicago Public Schools saw the curriculum as a useful tool for strengthening democratic ideals and fostering unity among Black and White students.

[00:03:09] My work extends what we currently know about Black women educators by uncovering their intellectual production. There's been a lot of scholarship on Black women teachers' activism and leadership. For example, in terms of leadership, I'm thinking specifically about their important role in founding schools. You have women like Mary McLeod Bethune and Nannie Helen Burroughs and Charlotte Hawkins Brown. However, the category of intellectual is largely racialized as white and gendered as male.

[00:03:41] My article highlights Morgan's thoughts behind her educational initiatives and these thoughts were related to how ideas on the causes and solutions to racism in the US. I discuss the research that went into designing the Black history curriculum, members of her intellectual milieu and that she became a scholar of the curriculum by writing about it in professional journals, interviewing for newspaper article profiles, and giving speeches.

[00:04:11] The most surprising aspect of my work is definitely the time period. The fact that Chicago Public Schools instituted a mandatory Black history curriculum over a decade before the Brown decision and long before demands for Black Studies during the Black power era, usually shock people when I share this project with them. The curriculum's mandatory status in the 1940s is also very interesting and inspiring considering that Black people today are still fighting to see themselves in history, curricula, and literature.

[00:04:46] People could read my article and think that it's a local story, but I actually show that it is a national story with international implications. Morgan and her network of educators were thinking about the African diaspora. It was how they understood and taught Black history during the early Black history movement, combating racial stereotypes through this Black history curriculum was about uplifting Black people around the world. Furthermore, it's the global context of the war that make the institutionalization of the project even possible. Also, the curriculum was distributed far beyond Chicago. In the article, I talk about how school districts around the country requested copies of the unit. Uh, Morgan received letters from South America, Africa, and Europe that praised the work and expressed eagerness to learn more about it.

[00:05:37] I think these requests demonstrate a widespread interest in this era in eliminating racial prejudice through education. And it also illuminates that there was very little information on Black people geared to youth in the mid twentieth century.

[00:05:57] **Jack Schneider:** The second half of the show is dedicated to thinking about teaching. We ask authors to put on their guest lecturer hats and take students into the weeds. What should they pay attention to, methodologically speaking? What else should they be reading if they want to take a deep dive into the historiography? And where are there opportunities for further research?

[00:06:18] **Ashley Dennis:** In regards to methodology, the students will find that many of my primary sources are articles that Morgan authored or her autobiographical sketch and a speech she gave in 1975. These are indispensable archival sources to examine her ideas. I quote from them as much as possible to make sure her voice comes through in my article.

[00:06:41] Morgan wrote herself into history--and I mean this quite literally. In addition to her writings about the curriculum, she included her own accomplishments within the mandatory Black history curriculum. And I, I think this is very interesting and students could use as many primary sources by the person they are researching as possible because of what they can uncover about their ideas and their life.

[00:07:07] If students want to take a deep dive into the historiography on the history of Black education, I recommend they start with classics in the field. This includes *The Education of Blacks in the South* by James D. Anderson, *Their Highest Potential* by Vanessa Siddle Walker, and *Self-Taught* by Heather A. Williams. Jarvis Givens has an excellent new book, called *Fugitive Pedagogy*, which build on these texts. I also recommend scholarship by LaGarrett King, Russell Rickford, Andrew Zimmerman and Zoë Burkholder. In my article. I mentioned that Morgan met with members of her education sorority, Phi Delta Kappa, to discuss her ideas for a Black history curriculum in Chicago. There are opportunities for further research on the role of sororities and fraternities in promoting Black history education. There's also an opportunity to research Black history curricula in other cities during the 1940s and 1950s.

[00:08:08] **Jack Schneider:** Check out *History of Education Quarterly* online. The journal is published by Cambridge University Press and it's carried by most

academic libraries. You should also be sure to follow *HEQ* Twitter handle: @histedquarterly, which regularly sends out free read-only versions of articles, and the show's Twitter handle @HEQandA. And don't forget, subscribe to the show so you don't miss forthcoming episodes. We're available on iTunes, Stitcher, and wherever you get your podcasts. HEQ&A is produced at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Our producer is Jennifer Berkshire and our theme music is by Ryan Shaw. I'm Jack Schneider. Thanks for joining us.