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Profiles in Early Education Leadership Series

This is the first in a series of profiles spotlighting the contributions of teacher leaders, especially Black women, to the history of early childhood education in the United States.

Haydee B. Campbell

Expanding Education for Black Children and Opportunities for Black Women

By Rachel E. Williams and Marcy Whitebook

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The Life and Career of Haydee B. Campbell

In the late 1800s, the groundbreaking yet segregated public kindergartens of St. Louis, Missouri, included separate leadership and teacher training for Black women, with Haydee B. Campbell as the Superintendent of Black Kindergartens in St. Louis. While the history of early education in the city often focuses on well-known White leaders like Susan Blow and William Torrey Harris, the contributions of Black women have been erased and ignored for too long. By turning the spotlight on Haydee B. Campbell, we make visible not only Black women's leadership as teachers, trainers, and pedagogical leaders, but the contributions of Black women's clubs to the kindergarten movement in which Campbell worked as the supervisor of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC) Kindergarten Department. Centering Campbell provides a different view of history, where a win for public kindergartens meant incorporation into racially segregated school systems, often with disparate access by race (fewer Black kindergartens than White), disparate funding (less funding allocated to Black kindergartens), and segregated training schools for Black teachers (fewer locations where Black women could be trained).¹

One consequence of devaluing Black women's contribution to the kindergarten movement is their scant presence in the archives. We are only beginning our work of searching for the historical "dots" we hope to connect into a more fully developed understanding of the kindergarten movement from marginalized perspectives. This profile pulls together the fragmentary information we have on Haydee B. Campbell's career in the context of a city considered "the sun of our kindergarten system,"² her contributions to the kindergarten movement, and her role within the NACWC's national efforts to establish kindergartens for Black children.

Haydee B. Campbell was a native of Texas, born in 1866. We have no information about her early life, but we know that she began her university studies at Oberlin College in Cleveland, Ohio, although she did not graduate (Majors, M.A., 1893; Find a Grave, n.d.). When or why Campbell moved to St. Louis is not clear, however she was trained by Susan Blow in 1882 and began to teach in the city's only Black kindergarten (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979; Rogers, 2020). It was here Campbell would make her mark.

After several years as a kindergarten teacher, Haydee B. Campbell went before the school board of St. Louis as an applicant for a "principal or instructress" position for the kindergarten department and "distinguished herself" by "leaping the obstacle of white applicants, who for so many years have stood in the way" (Majors, 1893). She achieved the highest score ever recorded in St. Louis on the examination administered to applicants, "to the surprise of the board of examiners, the white applicants and the city of St. Louis" (Majors, 1893). Her excellence placed her on the path from teacher to

trainer to national leader. In 1889, she became the Superintendent of Black Kindergartens (Rogers, 2020).

By the time Campbell arrived in St. Louis, the demand from St. Louis families drove kindergarten growth from a single classroom with one paid assistant in 1873 to 53 classes and 131 paid teachers by 1879. In addition, there were numerous unpaid or minimally paid but skilled assistants, many of whom participated in Susan Blow's training school, which had been in operation since the second year of public kindergartens (Ross, 1976). The year 1879 also saw the establishment of the first Black kindergarten, initially run in the Dumas School by two White women, Laura Fisher and Ida Pavey, with two Black women as volunteers, Mrs. Brown McLean and Mrs. Hopson (Abbott-Sayre, 1902; Association for Childhood Education International, 1938, p. 40).

White kindergartens grew to more than 50 classes by 1879, yet there was a seven-year gap between the establishment of the first White kindergarten (1872) and first Black kindergarten (1879) and a ten-year delay to add a second Black kindergarten by 1889 (Ross, 1976; Abbott-Sayre, 1902). It took nearly 50 years to establish 31 Black kindergartens by 1938 (Ross, 1976; Abbott-Sayre, 1902; Association for Childhood Education International, 1938). These figures reveal vastly unequal growth trajectories for White and Black public kindergartens in St. Louis, which were on parallel but separate systems, resulting in disparate access by race.

Public Kindergarten in the U.S.

In 2021, the kindergarten through 12th grade system is taken for granted as the organization of the public education system in the United States. However, kindergarten's inclusion in our publicly funded school system is the result of a long history of women's activism to universalize a radically different educational program for young learners starting in the 1870s and extending well into the second half of the 20th century. Kindergarten began as a stratified system of private kindergartens for wealthy and charity or "free" kindergartens for poor children (Allen, 2017; Beatty, 1995; Ross, 1976; Vandewalker, 1908). Advocates sought public investment for the program, which originally served learners from three to six years old.³

"For more than a decade, St. Louis remained the sole city which had public kindergartens, and in later years, people working to establish public kindergartens in other cities would refer to the St. Louis experiment as the model for all others." (Ross, 1976)

As Superintendent of Black Kindergartens, Campbell's responsibilities included training Black kindergarten teachers, assistants, and volunteers. A 1902 newspaper article illuminates the impact of her training on the kindergarten movement. Black women she trained went on to establish and lead Black kindergartens throughout the country: "We have today a training class for colored students under the supervision of a woman of the race, Mrs. Haydee Campbell. These colored students receive exactly the same training as the white students. We have sent two young ladies from this training class out to establish this work in Kansas City – Miss Lelia Warwick and Miss Ida Abbott. Another graduate of this class, Miss Nellie Grant, has taken charge of the kindergarten department of Tuskegee Institute of Alabama" (Abbott-Sayre, 1902).

St. Louis Public Kindergartens: Inspiration or Cautionary Tale?

St. Louis, Missouri, was the first city to successfully incorporate kindergartens into the public education system in 1873, serving as a model and inspiration for advocates and educational reformers throughout the country. But early on within the St. Louis school district and later the state legislature, resistance to kindergartens arose related to the cost and funding source and the legality of serving three- to five-year-olds, as well as how kindergarten pedagogy aligned with early grades and its place in the school system hierarchy.



St. Louis Black kindergarten group, 1900

Not long after kindergarten champion Superintendent William Torrey Harris left St. Louis in 1880 to assume the role of U.S. Commissioner of Education, new leadership cut costs by raising the age for kindergarten to five and instituting a fee for families and also curtailed the independence of the kindergarten department and curriculum. Soon after, the legislature passed preemptive laws to restrict Missouri cities from establishing and funding kindergartens for younger children. Many pioneering teachers of the St. Louis public kindergartens resigned in protest, relocating to continue their efforts in more favorable climates. But these objections surfaced again and again in many states and communities over the decades and often echo today in relation to public preschool (Snyder, 1972, pp. 59-85; International Kindergarten Union, Committee of Nineteen, 1924, pp. 187-203).

By 1902, the number of Black women volunteers had expanded from two to more than “fifty earnest and sincere women, who are now engaged in this work for their own race” (Abbott-Sayre, 1902). Reports from later years describing the growth of early education in St. Louis indicate the kindergartens for Black children were directed by Black women who were “graduates of the St. Louis Kindergarten Normal” (Association for Childhood Education International, 1938, p. 40). Campbell also trained Black women beyond St. Louis as a leader of kindergarten work with the Tuskegee Summer Institute for Teachers (Race gleanings, 1903, p. 11).

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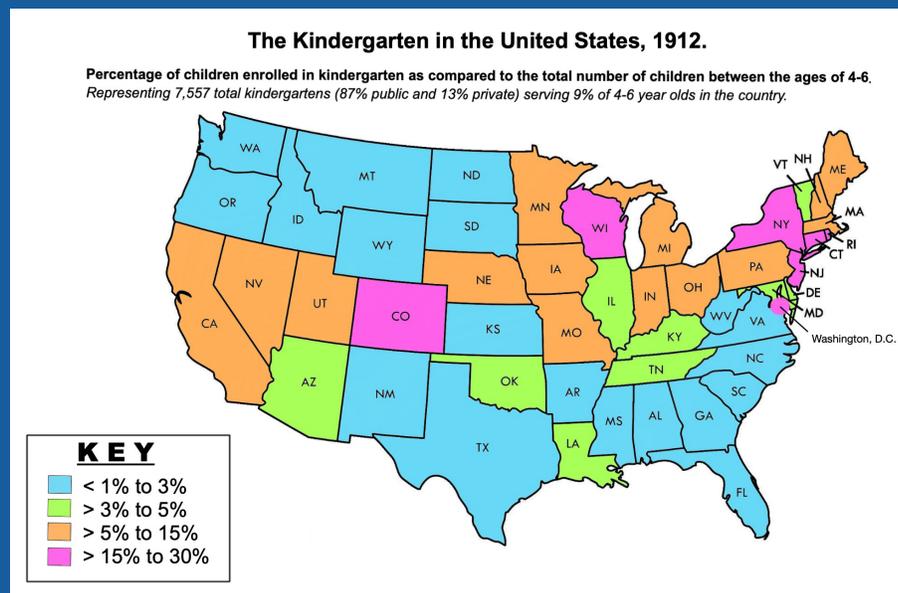
Campbell was also active in the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC), the oldest existing national Black organization that was not religious or church based. The NACWC advocated for the establishment of day nurseries and kindergartens for Black children and families across the country (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979; Robbins, 2011). Their federated model of local clubs under the banner of a national organizing structure provided the infrastructure for coordinated efforts across the United States. Scholarship on the first two NACWC presidents – Mary Church Terrell and Josephine Silone Yates – makes visible how kindergarten’s appeal to Black women was situated in a belief in the power of education to address racial inequality in a post-emancipation context (Robbins, 2011). Speeches reveal that the establishment of kindergartens was a high priority for the NACWC, despite limited discussion of the organization’s contribution in influential histories of the kindergarten movement (Robbins, 2011). Kindergarten was viewed by the NACWC as a tool for organizing, fundraising, and consolidating the power of Black women.

Campbell contributed to this cause as the supervisor of the NACWC Kindergarten Department, where she assisted local clubs in setting up kindergartens. As a plenary speaker during NACWC annual meetings, Campbell urged the membership to commit to kindergartens. One of her key speeches in 1899 was titled “Why the National Association of Colored Women Should Devise Means for Establishing Kindergartens” (Rogers, 2020; Haydee Campbell, n.d.). Various sources report that Campbell served in this role as early as 1896 and remained active in the NACWC throughout her life (Robbins, 2011). Campbell was one of four Black women from St. Louis and Kansas City who were

appointed by NACWC President Josephine Yates to national leadership positions within the organization, suggesting that the city was also a center for Black women’s leadership (Places for colored women, 1903). Additionally, Campbell participated in efforts to share insights from the St. Louis kindergarten experiment at the 14th annual meeting of the International Kindergarten Union. She traveled to New York along with a group of 16 St. Louis kindergarten teachers led by Susan Blow and Mary McCulloch (St. Louis sends work, 1907). This excursion was one of many examples of opportunities in which she shared the importance of kindergarten with audiences across the country (Rogers, 2020).

During World War I, towards the end of her professional career, she provided services to Black soldiers in the War Camp Community Service in Manhattan, Kansas (Haydee Campbell, n.d.) Haydee demonstrated a lifelong commitment to social justice by expanding educational opportunities for Black children through early childhood education and expanding educational training and employment opportunities for Black women. She passed away in 1921 (Find a Grave, n.d.), after the death of her husband in 1909, leaving her only daughter and a legacy of excellence in leadership for Black early educators.

Kindergarten Expansion in the U.S.



Source: *The United States Bureau of Education, Department of the Interior (1914).*

Public kindergartens rolled out at the local level as local ordinances and state legislation slowly allowed public funding to be utilized for kindergartens specifically or allocated to children under age six due to successful organizing and advocacy efforts.⁴ However, expansion was uneven across the country with slower growth in the South, where most Black children were living, and the less-populated Northwest regions.

Notes

1. According to the Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City of St. Louis for the year ending June 30, 1886, in the fall quarter of the 1895-96 academic year, only 376 Black children (compared to 5,500 White children) were listed as attending kindergarten (St. Louis Board of Education, 1886). Racial disparities in access to private kindergartens were documented nationally in a survey prepared for the 1930 White House Conference on Child Health Protection, showing that only 8.2 percent of African American children under age five attended kindergarten, as compared to almost 30 percent of White children. See also Anderson, 1931; Allen, 2017, pp. 143-144.
2. Personal letter from Elizabeth P. Peabody to William T. Harris, April 19, 1877, cited in Ross, 1976, p.15, footnote 30.
3. Current understanding of the term “kindergarten” in the United States refers to the first year of public schooling for children; age eligibility is set at five years of age by the beginning of the academic year in almost all states (Education Commission of the States, 2020). Preschool is commonly understood to reference early education programs for children younger than five, typically three- and four-year-olds. In many other parts of the world, kindergarten encompasses early care and education experiences for children younger than five up to the age of formal schooling, more closely resembling kindergartens as practiced first in Germany and in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century (Kindergarten systems, n.d.).
4. According to a 1908 study, only Connecticut, Wisconsin, and Oregon had a school age of four years which did not require a change in law for children younger than six to be educated at public expense, and only Massachusetts and Rhode Island faced no legal obstacle because state law did not specify an age limit for entering schools (Vandewalker, 1908).

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