Perspectives and Possibilities from a Black Veteran Educator: An Understanding of Agency

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Introduction

This article presents the life history of a Black veteran teacher leader, Dr. Nettie Webb, who dedicated thirty-seven years of professional life to work in schools. Prior to her retirement in 2003, Dr. Webb spent an entire career in Greenburgh, New York, as a teacher, language arts coordinator, union member, and building principal. She continues to work on school board committees and is an active community member. Webb has earned two masters degrees, one in elementary and early childhood education and another in educational administration and supervision. In 1990 she received a doctorate in education from Syracuse University, with a focus on language arts teaching and curriculum.

As a Black woman who has earned a doctorate, Dr. Webb is unique. In March 2001, the United States census reported a total of 177 million Americans over the age of twenty-five. From this total population, 1.2% attained doctoral degrees. Among persons in Dr. Webb’s age range (fifty to fifty-nine years old), a total of 525,000 earned the doctorate. Only 143,000 were earned by females, and only 20,000 were earned by Blacks. The numbers provide a context in which to understand Dr. Webb’s achievements.

Life narratives such as Dr. Webb’s can provide insight into factors that foster and sustain teachers and teacher leaders. They are “powerful instruments in maintaining or transforming practice” in that they allow teachers to “transport to another place” and “imagine something different.” The specific focus of this article is Dr. Webb’s agency—a term that evokes the