Oneida Cockrell
Pioneer in the Field of Early Childhood Education

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When I began doctoral studies in 1977, I researched African Americans who had made contributions to the field of early childhood education. The first name I encountered was Oneida Cockrell. She was the founder and director of the Garden Apartments Nursery School and Kindergarten, located in the prestigious Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments building (commonly known as the Rosenwald Apartments) in Chicago’s West Hyde Park neighborhood. I lived a few blocks from the Rosenwald building at the time and was very familiar with the renowned development. It was built in 1929 by Julius Rosenwald for middle-class African American doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. Rosenwald also provided millions of dollars to support the education of African American children.

Cockrell’s life and her contributions to early childhood education are impressive. I am continually amazed at how she influenced so many early childhood educators, including Barbara Bowman, Jeane Core Simmons, Phyllis Jones Tilley, and Ethel Darden.

My research led me to Oneida Cockrell’s son and granddaughter, Alfred Cockrell and Jane Colleton. My interviews with them form the basis of this article.

Early life and education

Oneida Cockrell was born Oneida Clark on October 14, 1900. The youngest of three and the only girl, she spent her early life in Paducah, Kentucky, living with her parents and grandparents. Her grandfather, a carpenter, had built approximately one-third of the homes in Paducah. Her mother was a homemaker, and her father worked at a distillery. Cockrell was raised in a middle-class, segregated community where most people had jobs, the children went to segregated schools with black teachers, and two-thirds of the residents owned their own homes. (No one went hungry or without decent clothes.) Her mother was considered a socialite—she was always well dressed, and was very concerned about good manners. Oneida’s father was active in local politics. In election years, he attended politicians’ speeches and then lectured in saloons and other public places, telling neighbors and friends about candidates who were sensitive to the needs of African Americans. The example of courage he set as a political activist in the early 1900s played an important role in his daughter’s life.

When her family moved to Chicago in 1914, Oneida attended Wendell Phillips High School, located on the city’s South Side. She loved reading, dancing, and all types of music, from jazz to symphony orchestra. After high school, Oneida worked and earned her BA and MA degrees in early childhood education from Columbia College, with the encouragement and financial support of her husband, Feaster Moses Cockrell. They were married in the early 1920s. She continued her graduate studies at Roosevelt University and the University of Chicago. Oneida felt it was very important to obtain “that piece of paper” that could open doors and help break through the barriers of discrimination.

Career in early education

Oneida Cockrell began her professional career in 1920 as a volunteer at Olivet Baptist Church Day Care. She helped develop a new program for
young children and later became a teacher in the program. After becoming the director of the Goethe Public School Experimental Nursery School in 1928, she opened the Garden Apartments Nursery School the following year, which she would head until 1969. During those years, Oneida became known as an author, an educator, a humanitarian, and a socialite.

Cockrell held many professional positions in Chicago, including consultant for New York Life Insurance. Some of her activities include planning the Lake Meadows Nursery School, where she was program supervisor for three years; teaching nursery school at the University of Chicago; guest lecturing at Roosevelt University and Chicago Teachers College; and serving as parent educational consultant for Chicago’s Oakland Public School. She was affiliated with more than three dozen civic, religious, and educational groups, including the National Association for Nursery Education (now NAEYC), where she served on the Governing Board from 1952 to 1956. She worked also with the Association for Childhood Education (serving a two-year term as president of the Chicago chapter), the National Council of Negro Women, and the Phi Delta Kappa national teachers’ sorority. She helped establish Phi Delta Kappa and was extremely active in using the organization as a vehicle to promote early childhood education.

Oneida Cockrell was very well known in the field. Her program was of such high quality that colleges, universities, and other organizations preparing teachers used the Garden Apartments school as a training site. Cockrell published many articles guiding parents and professionals on the development of young children. She presented the paper “The Impact of War on Children and Families” at the 1948 International Congress on Mental Health in London. In the 1950s, she wrote the column “Chats with Parents” for the Chicago Defender newspaper. President Harry Truman, acknowledging Oneida’s expertise, invited her to participate in the 1950 Mid-Century White House Conference on Children and Youth.

Recognition and awards

Cockrell received many awards, honors, and recognitions. In 1964, the Association for Nursery Schools awarded her its first Life Membership Honorarium. More than 200 people gathered to honor Oneida for her contributions to the field of early childhood education. Maria Piers, cofounder of the Erikson Institute, was the principal speaker. Oneida demonstrated a great humanitarian spirit and foresight throughout her career. As director of the Garden Apartments Nursery School, she enrolled children with special needs and worked with them individually, showing respect for all young children. She kept families informed of children’s learning styles through the Nursery Newsletter. In 1960, Chicago hosted the American Psychological Association convention, and Cockrell and the nursery school’s teacher, Jeanne Core Simmons, provided a child care program for APA members’ children.

Oneida Cockrell’s legacy

Oneida worked in early childhood education for 49 years, from 1920 to 1969. She is a pioneer whom all early childhood educators should know about. She had many successes, but her greatest triumph was teaching and guiding young children through their early, formative years. One of the children whose lives she touched is Barbara Taylor Bowman, a nationally known early childhood educator from Chicago. Bowman lived in the Rosenwald apartments and attended the Garden Apartments Nursery School. While in graduate school, Bowman

Jeanne Core Simmons Remembers Oneida Cockrell and Her Innovative Ideas

“There were not many books on the learning abilities of Black children when I entered the field in 1948, but Oneida Cockrell had some innovative ideas about children’s learning abilities. Part of our program at the Rosenwald Nursery was in conjunction with the University of Chicago, and we did mainstreaming back in 1954. She also felt that self-identity for Black children was important, so she searched for a company that made Black dolls. It took a long time to find the company, but when she did, our children were able to play with Black and white dolls. This was important because we had an integrated enrollment. I don’t even recall any theories about the learning abilities of Black children being taught. All theory I learned referred to children, in general. But at the Rosenwald Nursery, we believed that the learning abilities of Black children were the same as those of white children. All children were introduced to the same concepts. Having an appreciation of family and community differences is one of the unique curriculum experiences that go into an early childhood education program for Black children” (Simpson 1981, 201).
worked as an assistant teacher at the preschool. She later became a cofounder and president of the Erikson Institute, is a past-president of NAEYC, and is still influencing the field today. Ethel Darden, in an interview with The HistoryMakers website, explained that the Howalton Day School (1947–1986) “was Chicago’s oldest African American, private, nonsectarian school” and “was an outgrowth of Cockrell’s pioneering preschool and kindergarten” efforts. The Oneida Cockrell Child Parent Center (now the Ross-Cockrell CPC Elementary School), built in 1975, is located at 61st and Wabash in Chicago, serving 100 preschool and kindergarten children.

**What Early Childhood Educators Can Learn from Oneida Cockrell**

- African Americans made significant contributions to the beginning of the early education field.
- It is important for teachers to treat all children with respect, regardless of their physical or mental challenges.
- The history of early education includes much more than what is written in textbooks.
- Searching for and recognizing contributions of others in the field is a rewarding endeavor.
- Children’s cultures should be reflected in the classroom materials, including dolls.

**References**


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