

The Context of African American Educational Performance

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There has been persisting and on-going debate and discussion regarding the educational performance of urban (meaning African-American and Latino) youth. From the (George W.)Bush Administration's educational initiative nicknamed "No child left behind" to a plethora of local, state and even community initiated programs, efforts abound in the attempt to identify the source and eliminate the significant disparities in "minority" academic achievement. The methods for identifying the nature of these disparities as well as speculations about their origin have been superficial at best and grossly inadequate at worst, leading to very little improvement in the educational problems faced by African Americans in the public education systems.

For the most part, the issue of educational performance has been reduced to an issue of "evaluation," based on the dependency on various dubious tools of alleged mental measurement. Dr. R. Grann Lloyd former editor of the "Negro Educational Review" in a volume reissued some years ago in a book edited by Dr. Asa Hilliard entitled *Testing African American Students* (Hilliard, 1991) observed:

(... the confusion about the central purpose of education and the basic function of America's public schools) ... seems to have spawned and fostered the notion that the salvation of our nation and our schools requires that we concentrate on testing school children rather than on teaching them; on blaming and embarrassing school children for low test scores instead of teaching and nourishing them; on decapitating prospective teachers professionally by holding them up to public ridicule and scorn, before they can even begin their teaching careers, because of their test scores rather than encouraging them and teaching them how to teach children. (p.35)

Dr. Lloyd's comments which were meaningful in the early 90's when they were penned were almost prophetic in predicting the expansion of educational policy that continues to build on the faulty assumptions that the solution to the educational problem rests in the expansion of evaluation, assessment and testing. In the early days of the first administration of President George W. Bush, the dubious use of testing reached the level of national policy as the hallmark of an educational policy intended to insure that "no child would be left behind" educationally. This policy was not based on any process of systemic educational change, but instead focused on identifying and assessing evidence of disparities in educational achievement. Diagnosis has grown to be sufficient without any strategies for intervention, except to expand the diagnostic process.

As is typical in western scientific thought, information that is most highly valued is reduced to some form of quantification and the numbers are labeled as if the number and label was sufficient as an intervention to change the implications of the numbers. In other words, test scores and educational performance have been made synonymous and the assumption is that the improvement of test scores of (dubious validity) is a measure of improvement in the educational process.

Historical Context of Black Education

The major assumption that guides European American educational systems is the idea that the educational process entails the demonstrated internalization of a selected body of information. The well-educated or high performing students are assumed to be capable of mastering significantly more of that body of information than the low performing or less well educated group. Those who demonstrate less ability to internalize this body of information are considered to be inferior to those who do manifest high internalization and the lesser are ultimately suspected of having limited endowment with mental ability. The logical leap from poor school performance to evaluations for special education to the ultimate conclusion of deficient mental capacity is a common pattern that emerges. There have been recurring cycles in the evaluation of learning abilities when the conclusion that the disparate school performance and relatively disparate performance of Black students was indicative of inferior intelligence as a consequence of race.

Public school education is a system. It entails curricular content, social interactions, policy, economics and a context of social cultural arrangements and assumptions. Education is not a sterile isolated body of information that is infused into the passive and receptive brains of young students. Education is a dynamic and multifaceted system that occurs within the broad context of all of the variables noted above. That means that the educational system is not a simple input-output arrangement as is implied by the evaluation model described above where input is measured by sampling amounts of the pool of information that has been internalized.

In this discussion, I want to suggest that education must be understood within the broader context that surrounds the instructional process. In the specific instance of understanding the education of African American children, there are some very important historical variables that must be considered in order to understand the problems posed by the educational system in its current form. One of the conclusions that has been reached from the Western concept of education and evaluation is that the reason for the relatively poor performance of African American students is that these young people for a variety of social, cognitive, economic and even genetic reasons are somehow ill-suited for formal education. The conclusion has been reached repeatedly that there is some deficiency in these children and seldom if ever has the question been raised of the possible deficiencies of the educational system.

It is important to recognize that African American children in this dawning of the 21st century represent the continuation of an historical process that has been in place since the 1619 entrance of the earliest Africans brought as captives to America. Though this nearly four (4) century old date sounds too remote to be relevant, it sets a very unique and brutally relevant context for understanding 21st century education in America. The first factor that is mandated by the designation of this historical context is the incomparability of the African American educational experience. No other racial or national group in America began their educational experience under the conditions of America's system of chattel slavery. For the first 2 ½ centuries of African presence in America, education was not only unavailable but even more significantly, it was prohibited. The prohibition was not simply in regards to attendance at educational centers but any evidence of Africans acquiring information that would equip them with literacy or computational skills was a crime punishable by brutal executions of justice such as beatings or mutilations. In other words, "book learning" was not permissible for the African (slaves). Only those skills that furthered the objectives and economic well-being of the plantation owner and his objectives were taught to the captured Africans.

Reading skills and possession of books became contraband for the slaves and there were few infractions more serious (especially in the deep South) than slaves teaching each other how to read. Even compassionate whites who were found to teach the Africans some rudimentary skills of literacy were viewed as serious violators of the social (and in some instances the legal) code. Frederick Douglass (1845) in his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*, observes:

When I went back to the Eastern Shore, and was at the house of Master Thomas, I was neither allowed to teach, nor to be taught. The whole community –with but a small exception , among the whites—frowned on everything like imparting instruction either to slaves or to free colored persons...At our second meeting , I learned there was some objection to the existence of the Sabbath school; and sure enough, we had scarcely got at work—*good work*, simply teaching a few colored children how to read the gospel of the Son of God—when in rushed a mob, headed by Mr. Wright Fairbanks and Mr. Garrison West—two class leaders and Master Thomas; who armed with sticks and other missiles, drove us off, and commanded us never to meet for such a purpose again. (pp.155-156).

Needless to say, the earliest African experience with American education was its strict prohibition.

Many of the Africans captured and brought to America were from highly literate and academically advanced African societies such as the country of Mali, the home of the Ancient University of Jenne' and Timbuktu. Despite the prohibitions against learning, many of these Africans maintained a memory and strong desire to cultivate the skills that they had been introduced to in their native lands. In addition, the idea that education was contraband and viewed as a potential leveler in the social "disorder" that had placed the Africans at the oppressive feet of whites who so jealously protected their rights to literacy made the access to education even more appealing. In spite of this aspiration to learn, most of the first three centuries that Africans spent in captivity in America was in a context where education was clearly prohibited to the African. Just the acquisition of literacy alone was a punishable offense.

Part 1 of a 4 Part Series

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