

A SYSTEM OF DISEMPOWERMENT IN EDUCATION:
AN AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

The African's plight in America has been painstaking. They have experienced many climacteric stages that freed them enough to claim America as home. African Americans have come a long way, but there are still evidences of inequalities that plague America's many systems that continue to take wind from the sails of those seeking new horizons. The African American's endless and compendious scrutiny of these faulty systems has been brought on by many years of purposeful wrongs, and in many ways, there seems to be some resentment toward the African American for their chagrin and persistence – an indication that some would like to gloss over the seriousness of these matters. We cannot play down how big America is in her attempts to ameliorate, but we cannot think that she will do this unsupervised! Public education in America (in her richness), coupled with the African adage that “it takes a village to raise a child,” should be a vehicle relied upon to deliver all kids from one level (emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually) to a higher level in each of these categories so that they have a chance at economic success in life. This is not happening in the American systems of education, and in many cases, these systems implode on the heads of African America! Examining the experiences of the African in America and the history of America's systems of education side-by-side, we will find that there has been a subsystem of disempowerment installed and nourished in both of these institutions without urgency for an all-inclusive solution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This story can be gruesome and not very groundbreaking, but the story must be told until resolve. African American students are below grade levels in reading, math, and SAT scores. Only 56 percent graduate from high school at the age of 18, 27 percent earn their G.E.D. by the age of 25, and only 21 percent of those that graduate are able to take college level courses (Kunjufu 2004). These atrocities are seemingly endless. What will create the groundswell for motion in a positive direction?

The intent of this research is to act as some guide as we look at the systems of education in America ethnologically. It is important to note here that this exercise will not use the White student as the benchmark or barometer for where the African American student achievement level should be. The gap that we intend to bridge is the one between the African American student and systems of education that work for every student. First, we will start with a brief history of the African and the possible deficiencies created by the processes of Diaspora. Secondly, we will look at the history of education in America before the admittance of the African American, thirdly, we will look at the direct processes of disempowerment by the systems of education that continues to handicap, and lastly we will examine proposed solutions.

AFRICA

The nurturing nature of ancient African communities, as it relates to the development of the young, appears to have been an effective system. This system cultivated the young and empowered them to represent themselves, those preceding them, and those who followed them, yielding a strengthened community of one's self and

surroundings. Immeasurable is the power in knowing the thoughts and experiences of many generations. The tradition of story telling in Africa linked one family member to another, one neighbor to another and one community to another. This tradition links those of today's generation with earlier generations – thousands of years and countless beings. Religious ideals, ceremonies, and proverbs formulated laws that guarded the lives of individuals and their communities. This long line impressed and empowered community members with connectedness, purpose, and pride – pride expressed when one assigned to beat the drums in ceremony, did so in dignity because of his sense of connection with those assigned to beat the drums before him. This cultural connection defined and shaped the lives of the African child in society, and in return, that child contributed positively to the life of their community (Mbiti 1991).

An African's life journey was given meaning before his birth. As soon as the family realized a pregnancy, precautions were taken to assure a safe and healthy delivery. It is evident that childbearing was special and bordered sacred as there were religious ceremonies performed in approbation. Upon delivery, the newborn and mother were kept secluded to allow the mother time to recover and for the community to prepare for more ceremonies and festivals. These ceremonies were performed to purify the child, to give thanksgiving for the child, to introduce the child to the universe, and to commit the child to God for protection. It was believed that even the ancestors were in attendance of these festivities. Another ritual separated the mother from the newborn, giving the family and community time to take ownership of the child (Mbiti 1991).

The transition from childhood to adolescence for the child alone offered a plethora of physical, emotional, and psychological changes, but “initiation” in prescribed times of the child’s life brought challenges that *ensured* growth. For an example, in initiation of the young man, he would be taken into seclusion (in the woods) for a period that lasted days, weeks, or months, and taught the history, the traditions, and the beliefs of his family, his village, and his people (nation). Importantly, he learned the secrets and mysteries of marriage (a young man was not allowed to marry until he completed this phase of his development). The young (boy and girl) received education and/or traditional schooling in this manner – conditioning that prepared the child to overcome difficulties and pain, cultivate courage, endurance, perseverance and obedience. These processes helped bridge ignorance with knowledge, youth with adulthood, manhood with womanhood, and fatherhood with motherhood. They and their community were sealed (Mbiti 1991).

THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

The fecund structure of the African family/community life, their contribution in the development of the world’s basic survival tools, and their proud connection to this heritage melted away as they raced from those seeking them for pecuniary gain. They, and centuries of agriculture, medicine, astrology, worship, the arts, architecture, and political systems were poured onto this unfamiliar turf, into an unfamiliar social system, given unfamiliar (non-African) names, in unfamiliar ceremonies (Costen 1993). We have to acknowledge the many centuries of the African’s fruitful existence (and their dismantling) to feel the depth and breadth of the “damage” done to this precious cargo.

The beating of the drums stopped, and in this silence, they were forced to unlearn all that they knew – in their beatings, they were forced to learn what could not have made much sense to them.

This disempowerment continued as laws denied them freedoms of African religion, the sanctity of marriage, ownership of property, political rights, education, the right to assemble without supervision, and the right to use their own language. Their hope of freedom came through the Anglican Church, but was quickly derailed as laws were created and imposed relegating them to bondage (Costen 1993). If we were facing the ocean of degradation, we would find the African in America during those times nested in the hadal zone!

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN

Obviously, we can agree with the theories contending that the African American transitioned from the travails of slavery into indigenous and functional institutions with values that contribute to the survival of today's distinctive African American communities, but we may be stretching it a bit to claim that the African American fashioned this new culture "blend", if you will, from the mixture of distant African culture and binds of their American slavery as Thomas Webber (1978) claims. If this were true, there would be African American cotton tycoons *somewhere* passing on "Eli Whitney" wealth. He goes on to say that the systems of slavery controlled the African's body but not their minds (Webber 1978). Yes, the theme in the slave quarters centered on the ethos of sticking together against the "system," but if there were thoughts of

redemption as a result of unearned suffering, that thought *had* to be planted as some form of imposed ideological justification for their plight.

EARLY EDUCATION IN AMERICA

In the year 1630, English Puritans in Boston saw the need to teach their young to read. These early colonists were in pursuit of religious freedom, so they thought the young should be taught to read in order to understand religious and secular codes. This became the crux on which they built the early system of schooling – not education. Parents were responsible for making sure their children attended; however, many parents opted to educate them at home. This defiance was the motivation for the first law regarding education – the Massachusetts Education Law of 1642. This law held household heads responsible for teaching their dependents, apprentices, and servants to read. Still, because of a perceived negligence by the parents, the General Court passed another law requiring towns of 50 families or more to provide a schoolmaster to teach and towns of 100 families or more to provide a schoolmaster that would include Latin in the curriculum. Some towns would not allow girls to attend these schools (they attended The Dame School – what we might call a daycare center today). Some towns would not comply with the order to have a school – opting to pay the fine. These schools were not free or universal, and those who penned the law did not make attendance mandatory; therefore, poor children had to settle for what they could learn at home. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 guaranteed public education to all citizens (Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities 2006). Free indentured slaves did not qualify.

Slave holders agreed that thinking slaves were potential rebellious slaves, so teaching slaves became illegal. Upon their release from bondage, the yearning for learning became second to acquiring land. Reading, writing and *ciphering* made up the curriculum all over the south. The Freedman's Bureau opened approximately four thousand schools until they were shut down due to a lack of funding. This organization was established in the War Department by an act on March 3, 1865, to supervise all relief and educational activities relating to refugees and freed men (Young 2001).

Richard Kluger (1976) quotes Gunnar Myrdal from his amazing 1944 work, *An American Dilemma*, where he points out to the world that:

The whole system of discrimination in education in the [America] South is not only tremendously harmful to the Negroes, but it is flagrantly illegal and can easily be so proven in the courts. (P. 256)

By 1946, one-fourth of the entire African American population was functionally illiterate. Could it be that by now African Americans are seeing themselves as *only* subjects rather than citizens free to enjoy the benefits and achievements through the American educational system? After 316 years of existence (from 1630), this fine-tuned system of education has managed to stay localized and fixed on brutal exclusion and demoralization toward the African American.

AFTER BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION

American schools integrated long enough for those infected by it to migrate to where they could regroup or recover from it. As the African American immigrated, the other group would outmigrate, which was the trend in the early sixties. As the African American became more middle class, they outmigrated forcing the other group to outmigrate further. Here we begin to see the "slight-of-hand" in the system of education.

What America just got acquainted with (integration) was brief. It quickly became obvious that segregation and inequality in the education systems would need disguise. In the onset of integration, African Americans were matriculating in better facilities with better equipment but eventually, this migrating trend created shifts of funding, and what was once sufficient turned to dilapidation (Anderson 1994).

It is troubling that the *Brown* decision has not done much to bridge the gap of disadvantage for the African American in our systems of education. It is troubling, but the African American is better read today. There is much more to discover on these issues, but it is becoming clearer that for one group to impose so much pain on another is a sign that there may be underlying and unresolved issues obtained by the imposer long before they braved the journey to this land. After two hundred, seventy-seven years and a war that should have settled the score, this group sought the highest court in the land to decide that this brutality can and/or should continue (Foley 2004). The persistence of the supremacy delusion is astonishing! Could this have been some illness? This cloak of disenfranchisement must have been heartbreaking for the African American. Could this have created some illness? Foley (2004) writes that:

Black American citizens, orphaned by their own government, suffered the humiliation and deep disappointment of watching wave after wave of immigrants learn to negotiate the color line by distancing themselves from Blacks, and moved out of the ghettos. Always left behind, Blacks had few allies in either government or the private sector to defend African American interests. Since slavery, blacks were accustomed to looking after themselves, but it rankled nonetheless when immigrants, fresh off the boat, had opportunities that Blacks did not. (P.345)

This sounds eerily familiar.

Legalities

Congress does not have the authority to provide for education. That authority lies with the state; therefore, state legislature has absolute power to make laws governing that state's system of education which involves creating and redesigning school districts, raising revenue, and distributing funds. There are similarities in how the many states shape their systems of education, but there is no uniformity enforced by the federal government. The state has a board of education to juggle the minor details governing their respective school systems. Some boards are elected and some are appointed by the governor. Now, some states have systems of local control over education; hence, the local boards. They basically determine how their particular school is run. When the state uses a centralized system, the local boards have less flexibility – they must function within the framework of state legislature. The Supreme Court intervenes when necessary to make decisions on conduct in the schools and typically uphold decisions made by the state's boards unless they have violated legislative or constitutional mandates.

(McCarthy and Cambron 1981).

As of 2003, America has 14,465 public school districts and 95,615 public schools (United States Department of Education 2006a). There is some question of actuality regarding the relationship between the federal government and the states regarding the states' autonomy. There is a list that represents 40 separate issues under the control and responsibilities for state and local education agencies. Could this be the federal government dictating local control in its "No Child Left Behind" objectives (United States Department of Education 2006b)? Where there is concern for the health of our

nation's systems of education, why would there be cause to encourage and further disperse local control? It is encouraging to see that America has a freshly carved education agenda served, but my conjecture here is that this is just more of the same "slight of hand" methodology that will perpetuate the problems of a failing system.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Restored self

It is my hope that the foundation has been laid early on that there has been a form of nihilism in the history of, and aimed directly at, the African American. The symptoms are many – infant mortality, incarceration, teenaged pregnancies to name a few of the obvious ones. Thankfully, there are instances of economic well-being and political clout that shows some progress in the African American community, but there are other symptoms in this community that are dismal and less obvious. These border, if not breach, the depths of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. How do we treat this? Maybe we can't, but we can make some adjustments to assure that our children are not harmed! This should be cause for passion when we examine or break ground for education objectives.

Solutions for the development of today's African American child are found in knowledge that existed prior to the horrors of their African Diaspora (Akbar 1998). The young African American needs to connect with Africa *and* America without shame, doubt, or inferior feelings about themselves (Morris 1994). They must unlearn what has enslaved them (emotionally and mentally) and relearn a truth that frees them. They must be freed to embrace the concepts that classical literature includes works of Mbiti,

Aristophanes, and Woodson – classical music includes works of Masekela, Bach, and Monk – classical dance includes works of Adowa and Ailey (Asante 1998). Again, we must acknowledge the many centuries of the African’s fruitful existence (and their dismantling) to feel the depth and breadth of the “damage” done to this precious cargo.

We humans are born with the propensity to learn, and in America, there are systems and documents that give us that right! There is a right “to develop the knowledge, skill or character, by formal schooling” to accomplish what one wills (“Educate”). Over the years the African American has, with inordinate naiveté, taken for granted that the authors of these systems penned them with pontifical inclusiveness. These systems, as Carter G. Woodson (1933) proclaims, are antiquated – missing the mark – even for those for whom the systems were designed.

HOME SCHOOLING

Where is the question here? All children should be home schooled; nevertheless, there were approximately 1.1 million children home schooled according to the most recent statistics of the National Center for Education (United States Department of Education 2006a). Despite the early efforts at acculturating Africans in Diaspora, African Americans have managed to subscribe to and guard African traditions and value systems in the family structure. These traditions are serendipitously embedded in African Americans and are expressed in our connectedness, family pride and relational ties – we cling to each other (Carter 1997). Our young need to hear the stories of family history from the cradle in order to shape an image of self and of community. This prepares them to tell the stories one day (Akbar 1998, Turner 2002). This spirit of connectedness

solidifies the sense of responsibility to each other in family and in community, and upon this foundation; education in any form would be the desideratum that springboards our children into academic and/or economic readiness. The collectivistic nature of the African American needs to be embraced and nurtured – possibly considered as an agent for the resocialization of the American so that the scope of education as a whole changes.

Home schooling is nothing new – it existed as early as the 17th century. George Washington was home schooled. Some of the families choosing to home school then were wealthier and could afford tutors to educate their children, but majority of the children were educated by their parents (Houston and Toma 2003). In June of 2001, a Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll revealed that home schooling as we know it today (where the child stays at home with one of the parents for instruction) does not contribute to raising national academic standards but does promote good citizenship. African Americans are least likely to support home schooling as we know it (Paul 2002). Home schooling is an option that should be marketed, but when we look at the socioeconomic status of the typical African American family, the *institution* of home schooling is impractical, and should not be relied upon as our sole method of educating our young.

PRE SCHOOLING

The United States Secretary of Education, Rod Paiger, should be commended for the pursuit of The School Readiness Act of 2003. This legislation reauthorizes and improves the “Head Start” program in order to ensure school readiness where children have opportunities to enter school prepared, or as he states it, “on par with their more economically advantaged peers.” There are many advantages in providing preschoolers

vocabulary, letter knowledge, and phonological awareness. Studies have found that the major impacts are social and emotional. We can't ignore the economic implications with this opportunity. For the family that cannot afford to preschool their child at home, the head start system can assist in leveling the field (United States Department of Education 2006c).

PUBLIC SCHOOLING

There are three questions that fuel the ubiquitous debate on public education – What is the purpose of public education? Who is to receive the educational services provided by the public? How does government ensure the quality of these educational services (Roots in History 2001)? I propose that somewhere in the shuffle of political navel-gazing are children missing out on what they are constitutionally due! There is no derisive intent when I say that, what was once a simple desire to teach literacy, penmanship, arithmetic, and just “good manners,” has become grounds for raucous and implacable meddles. Once upon a time, power of the community was a driving force in education – farmers supplied the fuel to keep the schoolroom warm in the winter, parents built school desks and took turns cleaning the stables that housed the horses used to get the kids to and from school, and teachers often lived with the locals – rotating from household to household (Evolving Classroom 2001). Now, there is the power of market principles stoking fires of public educational politics that usually position that system to reserve educational resources for a small and elite group (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, and Murillo 2002).

PRIVATE SCHOOLING

To date, there are 27, 223 private schools in America (United States Department of Education 2006a). Private African American primary and college preparatory schools have existed for some time. Their importance to the African American community is similar to the characteristics previously stated about African American home schooling. I am a product of a rare and *extinct* African American college preparatory school. The story about these schools and the fact that most, if not all, are extinct is rich and calls me for future research. We need to introduce self determination to our young and characterize it as being in a state of autonomy – free to make choices based on his/her historical, cultural, and social contexts where these surroundings allow a child to pursue his/her dreams rather than seeing or hearing that these dreams are unobtainable due to unjust societal limits (Moses 2001). The child's empowerment relies on that same sense of connectedness – with those who are genuinely concerned about their young sails staying full wind. Other advantages of private education are small student : teacher ratios and the increase in probability that the child prepares for post high school education meritorious enough to acquire scholarship. Those in position to make such an investment in our society are middle- to upper-class (Brookins 1988). When we do the math, we find that there are a smaller number of African American families fortunate enough to make this investment.

Keeping the doors of the private school open is costly, and for the African American community, mostly unaffordable. Many of the celebrated private institutions are supported by their *rich* graduates (Dubois 1973). Needless to say, these institutions

are not African American! We have to remember that many private institutions were established to bypass the mandate of integration (Brookins 1988). Here, like home schooling, private schooling is an option that should be marketed, but primarily unaffordable for the typical African American family and should not be relied upon as our sole method of educating our young.

CHARTER SCHOOLING

I welcome the trend of charter schooling if it is left unhampered. To date, there are 2,996 of these schools. From the years 2000 – 2004, more than 1,000 new charter schools opened (United States Department of Education 2006a). This should continue to *enhance* the existing public school system. With its creation and organization over sought by teachers, parents, community leaders or community-based organizations, the spirit of connectedness has a chance to rule. In its birth, goals and operating procedures are agreed upon between the sponsoring board and the charter organizers – giving government less bureaucratic and/or regulatory red-tape micromanagement (Charter Schools 2003). A major objective of California’s charter school system is to give a community the opportunity to meet their needs. Learning increases – teaching methods stay innovative with special emphasis on expanded opportunities for students identified as low achievers academically (Billingsley, Bragato, Patterson, Rice, Riley and the Center for Education Reform 9).

The creation of charter schools do not come without opposition. The fact that a major roadblock would be the school board and unions that fear the competition and diversity of a charter school is astonishing. Charter petitions have even been

inappropriately denied. Another major concern is the ability to raise money for building facilities (Billingsley 13-14). These distractions seem minor to my untrained eye.

CONCLUSION

Who is sagacious enough to fully elaborate on the most effective methods at educating our young? As an African American, I have experienced methods in my own early education that often seemed awkward and, frankly, deflating. I am neither blessed nor cursed with hypermnesia, but these memories are vivid and healing took time! Today, however, it is great to pen my view on *change* as it relates to educating our young. My mother and father (in their college careers) could only pen dreams about this very issue. I thank God that they did. I honor their bellweather civil-rights stance through those strident times and tactics that besot us – oftentimes today.

As an aspiring sociologist, I am learning to massage the many concepts and theories on the processes of structuralizing social life, and the question has increasingly become whether this can be done without social inequalities. I have read and have listened to lectures on the inevitability and/or the essentiality of hierarchies and stratification – the best being this analogy, “These dominant males seem to take joy in violent displays of power” (Fein 37). I admit that this is not the best analogy to represent the functionalist-minded sociologist being that this paper focuses on the effects that the above-mentioned display of power has on subordinate groups! Nevertheless, it is apparent that this functionalist approach may have been the foundation on which America has chosen to build. Amazingly, I concur that social inequality supports the needs of society instead of the needs or desires of individuals. I am also inclined to agree that

members of a society have common interests and social relationships that stimulate advantages (or at least provides the platform from with these advantages/disadvantages can be viewed), consensus in a society creates social unity, and even the thought that human societies are social systems (Lenski 1966). It seems that even Lenski acknowledges variables that can modify systems of inequality, but how can we examine anything beyond those variables that modify these systems of inequality? Why not view these “variables” as glitches that would need addressing before the system could be trusted as seaworthy?

I have confidence in the fact that our leaders, and/or those ranked high in our hierarchical structure, are intelligent and worthy to be where they are. I don't have confidence in what I perceive to be convenient or selective displays of incompetence when there is a requirement to recognize and address these “variables,” especially when the resulting inequality can be deemed damned illegal!

Obviously, we can't expect for the systems of education to rush from fire to fire in order to accommodate each group that considers their migration to this fine land ascension. Their processes of assimilating (without abandoning ascribed cultural values) should include accepting the existing systems of education, and included in that curriculum should be an all inclusive honest depiction of our rich history and empowerment of all enrolled. This would mean that representatives of all enrolled would have major participatory roles in developing and implementing curriculum. Contrastingly, it appears that the framers of our various systems want to keep the not-so-appealing images of America and her processes of maturation locked up in the attic. This

is tragic! The dangers have been apparent and probably the ethos of this very paper. This system seems to be disempowering itself. Studies imply that the twenty-first century teacher will need to be versed on issues like “overpopulation, hunger, environmental rape and pollution, inadequate energy supplies, and urban decay” It goes on to elaborate on the roles and/or the need for education to feed business and industry with skilled workers! (Tatenbaum and Mulkeen 1986:623).

In our evaluation of home schooling, we find that as primary agents of socialization our families are educators and should be. As we look at the many collectivistic African traditions, we find that this “home school” process is an ascribed one for African Americans. The socioeconomic status of most African Americans puts the institution of home schooling (where a parent stays at home to instruct the child) out of reach.

Preschooling is a major component in the development of a child’s learning skills. After the “initiation” by the family, early interaction with others of the world in which we live allows the child to embrace their surroundings and their peers. The real picture of the world in which they live is imperative. The challenges must be sooner in our children’s lives to nurture self valuation. The Head Start program instigated by the present administration has dispersed control of this program, so the realization of its real value may never be universally met.

Private schooling would be an effective institution by which our young could receive close instruction from those that resemble that child (emotionally, physically, mentally, economically, and *yes*, spiritually). A child develops by empowerment that

couples the empowering forces from home enabling him/her to face the world eye-to-eye with accountability. The challenge for the family and the school itself in the African American community is an economic one. It is a great option for those who can afford it. Some would say that vouchers for private school tuition would be an answer to that “leave no child behind” theory, but there are too many political and economic aromas here. We’ve narrowed that gap (LaCour 2002). In this interstice, we should interpolate newer and innovative methods that work.

Yes, public schooling is bathing and has been for a long time, and yes the water is muddy, but as we seek to reform, let’s not toss the babies out with the muddy water. Public education is the institution that appears most available to the masses. It is good that there is a market for these other institutions (private and home school education), but for the African American, the availability of an institution that will deliver our young economically and adequately socialized is crucial. I make these observations and statements in concert – not in conflict with the spirit of this great country’s quest for a level playing field. Our representation in government (as we know it) is supposed to be by those who have the similar issues and/or at least sensitive to the issues of those represented. This system is turbid on her good days and diplopic on her bad ones. There are unique needs in the African American community and those who are representing must have clear vision. Those who are representing must be diligent through strident times in order to empower the community and her leaders to be major contributors in the processes of public education reform.

A consistent theme here seems to be parallel to the finding that there are variables modifying natural systems of inequality. All bets can and should be called off until that glitch is addressed, and if possible, repaired. The United States' system of education is broken up into too many subsystems of education. Based on the desires of the heads in these subsystems, these systems achieve what they will. This may not be compatible with the demands of society. We have become a great multi-group nation; however, we have not mastered a coupling of groups. We are a country at war in many countries, and at home! I propose that the heads and framers and maintainers of our many systems exhibit the skills that have taken them to the top.

The scary thought is that they may be.

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