

The Struggle of African American Students in the Public Schools

By

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Abstract

The long road of slavery from generation to generation has left a legacy in the mind of African American students that has impacted their achievements in schools. In this project, the struggle of African American students in the public school education will be analyzed from the historical standpoint of view and its impact on their achievements. Throughout this writing, research based recommendations will be given in order to increase the morale of the African American students, and simultaneously determine the impact of slavery among the new generation.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, students of African descent have gone through struggle to get access to the mainstream of American education. As a tool used in the new world to integrate a person to a civilized society, education has been a struggle for African American students until today. The underachievement of African American students in the public schools constitutes a topic of debates among federal, state, local legislatures to the smallest American households. Massive research has been conducted to find the causes and simultaneously the remedies to the problem.

A careful analysis of research leads us to believe that the legacy of slavery might have its fingerprint in the struggle and achievement of African American students in schools. Although the specific cause of failure is still unknown, there are some indicators that direct this writing. To epitomize previous findings about the cause and effect, motivation to achieve is the core reasons for African American students' failure. The lack of motivation can only happen if there was an air of discouragement in their past.

To remedy the cause of motivation, a historical analysis of African American students would benefit the research for long and lasting solutions. Thus, the study of the legacy of slavery is a good starting point to learn how students of African descent come to their current situation.

Historical Overview of Public Schools

The genesis of struggle in the public education movement can be epitomized in the writing of Spring (2004): "The struggle over cultural domination in the United States began with the English invasion of North America in the sixteenth century and continues today in the debate over multiculturalism. One reason for the nineteenth-century

development of public schools was to ensure the dominance of Anglo-American values that were being challenged by Irish immigration, Native Americans, and African Americans. Public schools became defenders of Anglo-American values with each new wave of immigrants. In the twentieth century, the culture wars were characterized by Americanization programs, civil rights movements demanding representation of minority cultures in public schools, and the multicultural debate.”

Spring (2004) further stated that "the mixture of culture in the United States has resulted in the necessity of constantly asking: "How other cultures do perceive this event?" In the nineteenth century, many Irish Catholics believe the public schools were attempting to destroy the Catholic faith. In the twentieth century, many educators considered the development of separated curriculum tracks in high school a means of serving individual differences. In contrast, many African, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans considered separate curriculum tracks as another means of providing them with an inferior education.

Some African Americans do not experience with what Jefferson said, “Education contributes to the balance between freedom and order by providing all citizens with the basic tools of learning, knowledge of history, and the ability to work out their own happiness and morality.” Thus the common knowledge of education in bringing happiness is not a living reality to African American students. Furthermore, African American students are not experiencing the fruits of education and are led to explore and contemplate what is obvious in the mainstream. Hip-Hop culture, television media, and daily reality are some examples of what African American youth learn in contradiction to the school curricula.

As diverse as America has become, the lack of trust among one ethnic group to the others is intensified as schools struggle to educate future American leaders. The struggle is in the area of curriculum, leadership, who should teach, who should advise etc. As a panacea to the lack of trust, there are things that government officials, local businesses, school community, parents, school officials, and students have to do in order to reconcile the future generation. In this project, the manuscript highlights aspects that have direct correlation with schools and undermine what government has to do to close the social classes' gap.

Given the struggle the people of African descent have endured in order to be free, their experiences are transmitted generation to generation as stated earlier. And the hatred is amplified by what they are experiencing in the twenty-first century. It does not take a genius to see who is achieving in schools and who is in honors programs. Is the achievement gap an accident? Is the under-representation of minority students in honors programs a coincidence or something that is deliberately planned? The aforementioned questions would constitute the rest of this manuscript and relevant research based recommendations will be given.

Why Segregated Schools?

Segregated schools movement was due by the massive immigration from different parts of the world that came to America. European Americans believed in the deculturalization of immigrants through education. Spring (2004) argues that in the late nineteenth century, immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, together with industrialization, expanded urban areas and created a host of social problems, especially in cities (p.206). In addition, Spring argues that Americanization was the traditions of

common school by insisting on the creation of an Anglo-American culture. Also, the concept of Americanization changed the political goals of the school to include teaching against radical ideas, particularly socialism and communism. As the social center of the new urban America, schools became a bastion of Anglo-American culture and antiradicalism.

The frustrations of different non-Anglo-Saxons groups of America and the intentions of the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxons constituted the reasons for segregated schools. The curriculum was indeed the motive of separation in other words. “While immigrants were being Americanized, African, Mexican, Native, Asian, and Puerto Rican Americans were increasingly segregated or denied language and cultural rights in public schools.

Du Bois, a founder of NAACP and editor of the magazine *Crisis* became the leading opponent of Booker T. Washington’s southern compromise. Du Bois argues that compromising the education of people of color by offering them inferior education compared to white students. The main difference in segregated schools was that black schools were less founded with inadequate facilities. What is interesting during the segregated era is that the black schools were founded in part by taxpayers, donations from different sources, mainly raised by black citizens. In short the involvement of black parents, businesses, and community was almost hundred percent.

Despite the lack of financial equality between segregated schools, many schools serving black schools provided an excellent education. As Spring (2004) highlighted the work of Vanessa Siddle Walker study of segregated schools in Caswell County, North Carolina, in her conclusions, “Caring adults gave individual concern, personal time, and

so forth to help ensure a learning environment in which African American children would succeed. Despite the difficulties they faced and the poverty with which they had to work, it must be said that they experienced no poverty of spirit.”

It is interesting to see the massive of effort mobilized in the segregated era among African American community to educate their children that we do not see in our public schools today. What has changed? What should schools do in order to energize the African Americans community base? These are questions that still unanswered in most of our public schools. The answers to the above questions would lead our discussions in the closing of the achievement gaps in schools.

Why Desegregated Schools?

The desegregation of American schools was the result of over a half century of struggle by the African Americans and Hispano/Latino communities. Since its founding in the early part of the twentieth century, the NAACP had struggled to end discriminatory practices against minority groups. The school desegregation issue was finally decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Spring 2004, p.406).

The motive of integrating schools was due by the fact that minority groups felt that they were not supported financially in educating their children. As Spring would say that among the federal regulations resulted in the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, Title VI, the most important section, establishes the precedent for using disbursement of government money as a means of controlling educational policies. Spring further argues that President Kennedy merely proposed a requirement that institutions receiving federal

funds must end discriminatory practices. In its final form, Title VI required mandatory withholding of federal funds to institutions that did not comply with its mandates.

Desegregation in public schools has resolved on issue of financial support. The issue of integration of curriculum as advocated by multiculturalism curricula is still unresolved. Would not it be better to solve the financial issue and leave schools segregated? This question is not a part of this project; however, it is curious to see the movement of multiculturalism and the charter schools movements make us believe that that could be the better option.

Why the Achievement Gap in Public Schools?

There has been a serious discrepancy in the academic achievement of minority students which is documented by the large gap between standardized test result of white students and minority students; high rate of suspension and high rate of drop out among Black and Hispanic students. This underachievement of large and growing scale is nothing short of national crisis according to Kati Haycock in her research on closing the achievement gap, March 2001. According to Haycock, by the year 2010, Black and Hispanics will compromise approximately 50 percent of our population.

Given the fact that this is 50% of our future population that is not performing as desired, it is a national crisis that everyone should take seriously.

Closing the Achievement gaps of students of different backgrounds is one of the hot topics in public education. There are numerous literatures that deal with this topic. Even the focus of President Bush's administration in education revolves in the same topic.

In the *No child left behind act*, every child has to be measured up to the standard established. The reality of this mandate is that there are improvements in some schools and the majority of schools are still struggling to close the achievement gaps. Several schools provide additional instruction in the form of after-school programs that are consisted of more of the same instruction students have had during the day. In general, the majority of failures come from socio-economic disadvantaged students. Black students and Hispanic students are the most affected groups. What we know about under achievement of minority students is that most of the time parental involvement is rare and schools have to multiply strategies to effectively teach all students.

To close the achievement gap, the close look of historical perspective of African American students where they come from and where they are going is critical in finding appropriate remedy. For all the aforementioned analysis, the culture appropriateness curricula could be one of the solutions that public schools have yet figured out in teaching different ethnic groups. It is true that we cannot have multiple curricula in the same public schools; however, the integration and differentiation of instructional delivery would be a step forward to improvement.

According to Gardner (1983), the implication of the theory is that learning/teaching should focus on the particular intelligences of each person. For example, if an individual has strong spatial or musical intelligences, they should be encouraged to develop these abilities. Gardner points out that the difference intelligences represent not only different content domains but also learning modalities. A further implication of the theory is that assessment of abilities should measure all forms of intelligence, not just linguistic and logical–mathematical. It is a sad truth that most

assessments in public schools rely on the above two mentioned domains, noted: linguistic and logical-mathematical.

For schools that would like to make difference in teaching the twentieth century generation, multiple intelligences approach should be used in classroom. Recent studies show that cultural backgrounds may discourage some students from active participation in the classroom, and below are some stereotypes among the African American students:

Many African American students prefer more kinesthetic/tactile learning.

Many African American students prefer subdued lighting rather than bright light.

Many African American students rely heavily on visual input rather than auditory inputs.

Many African American students respond highly to cooperative learning.

Many African Americans' discussion style is simultaneous talk instead of alternating talk.

Another trait of African Americans' verbal communication is their use of colorful language.

Many African American students prefer to study while music or conversation occurs in the room

Many African American students, like other indigenous peoples, traditionally live in partnership with the land and property.

Many African Americans protect and care for the environment as overseers for higher power than abuse their holdings as sole owners.

Many African American values hold that there is unity among and between all things.

Many African Americans have an outer-directed rather than an egocentric focus.

Many African American students are more active and less active and less able to adjust to the sedentary learning environments of American schools.

Many African American students rely more on information from their surroundings.

Many African American students prefer and are interested in working with people.

Many African American students like to work in groups.

Many African American students are sensitive to and responsive to what others feel and think and consider how their actions may affect others.

Many African American students prefer to maintain close proximity to other students.

Many African American students react intensely to being praised or criticized.

Many African American students function better under cooperative conditions.

Many African American students respond better to rewards such as praise, smiles, pats on the back, and the like.

Many African American students learn much better when the curriculum is humanized, attributes human characteristics to concepts and principals.

Many African American students avert their eyes while being confronted about their behavior. Teachers may misinterpret their lack of eye contact as indicating insincerity and guilt.

According to Nieto (1992), a considerable measure of academic peril for these students is created by teachers' diverse cultural ineptness, improper attitudes, and

differential behaviors toward African American students. Where educators are aware and have tried to remedy the situation, results are amazing.

Another aspect in closing the achievement gap is the parental involvement. From historical perspective, African American parents have been so active in schools and contributed for that endeavor in spite of their poverty. Today's schools situations are different. Lack of involvement is translated as lack of interest.

Black and white parents bring different concerns and fears to discussions of the public schools, but share a common agenda for their children's learning. In fact, every American is very concerned about getting their children to school in preparation for their future (successful future). As far as the African Americans are concerned, they have come to view public institutions with suspicions because of the historical nature of racism in American society. Also the legacy of slavery and poverty has a negative impact on the African American's mind. These strains are so strong that they are passed on through centuries to the younger generation. Considering all the indicators for failure and stereotypes listed above, the future for the improvement of the situation seems to be really cloudy. Drop outs, absenteeism, detention, disruptive behavior among African American are still skyrocketing. But, the good news is that they are struggling to redefine their identity so a good integration and support will unleash the full potential they possess and foster good grades. The ball is in the educators' court since they are the ones who will have to come up with methods, techniques and strategies that will enable them to bridge the education gap. Parental involvement and support is also necessary to a certain extent, so they need to team together with the teachers to make the learning endeavor fun. In order for this change of paradigm to happen, an appropriate training

must be given to teachers in order to impact them with the awareness and knowledge of the situations so they can be able to help the students. This can not be achieved without the understanding of the way in which African American students have come to their current position, the ways they view the world, and the aspirations, intentions and agendas they bring to the school system with them from various communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Now that what to expect of the African American students is unveiled, the remaining part is the role parents, teachers, counselors and administrators have to play in order to make learning possible. When parents or educators notice that a student has an odd behavior that will definitely lead to failure, they do not need to step out and let the student figure out what is the right direction to take and take responsibility for his or her learning. This attitude will only complicate the matter instead of helping the students.

The twenty first century leadership recommended by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) in consideration with the historical struggle of African American students should be taken into account in order to make a breakthrough in education of students of African descent.

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