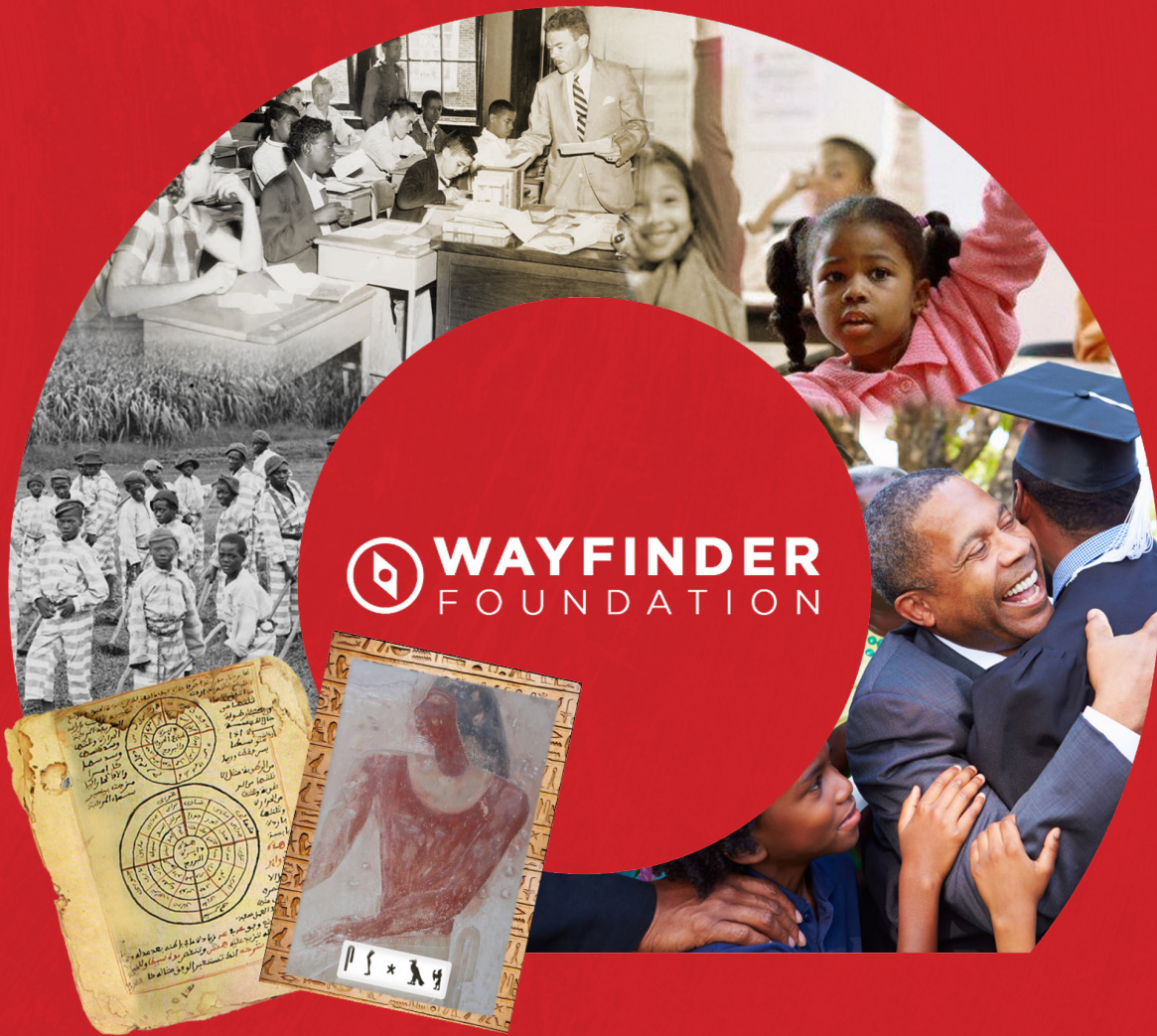


Dismantling the Pre-School to Prison Pipeline

Through Black Literacy and Education for Transformation:
Recommendations for School Leaders, Parents, & Policymakers



A Study Prepared by Chike Akua, Ph.D. For the Wayfinder Foundation

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**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
SCHOOL LEADERS, PARENTS AND
POLICYMAKERS**

A STUDY PREPARED BY CHIKE AKUA, PH.D. ©2023

FOR THE WAYFINDER FOUNDATION



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Executive Summary

Literacy has been weaponized against Black families and children since the first Europeans began kidnapping Africans for the purposes of enriching themselves through chattel slavery. This study is an examination of how that weaponization of literacy has evolved, manifesting in our contemporary world as a system of interlocking oppressions that we shorthand here as the “Pre-School to Prison Pipeline.”

While the challenges we identify, document, and analyze in this paper are ancient, we propose realistic solutions, all of which revolve around the need for increased effectiveness and investment in literacy and educational opportunity for Black children.

The African continent and the many peoples who live in its diaspora have always enjoyed rich literary traditions. While those traditions were upended by enslavement, obfuscated by the plantation, constrained by Jim Crow, and further marginalized by an ever-expanding system of mass incarceration, there has never been a moment in that history when the candle of our great literacy traditions was extinguished.

This paper examines the various tools that oppressors have used to suppress Black literacy; the ways in which Black families have resisted that suppression; and the policies, practices, changes, and investments that we need now to ensure that our children, and their children, can thrive, no matter what the future holds.

On the Cover

The cover of this report shows an African cultural motif inside of which is a circular literacy timeline beginning with a picture of Ptahhotep, an ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) philosopher, scribe and advisor to the king, who wrote the oldest complete text in the world (Hilliard, 1987). It is followed by an image of a Timbuktu manuscript, emblematic of a rich and extensive literary tradition in West Africa. The circular timeline commences with Black boys in a prison camp in post-Emancipation America, images of segregated schooling leading to contemporary images of schooling, instruction and achievement for Black girls and boys.

On the Back Cover

The symbol on the back is an Adinkra symbol called Nsaa. It means “excellence and authenticity.”



The Wayfinder Foundation acknowledges the generous support from and collaboration with *Racial Justice NOW* which is dedicated to eradicating institutional and systemic anti-Black racism.



Intersections of Illiteracy, Incarceration, Access and Opportunity Gaps

The crisis in Black literacy and education, further fueled by a robust pre-school to prison pipeline, constitutes a national security issue that presents a clear and present danger to the well-being of the nation. This study provides an historical background to contextualize the origins of the problem, current and contemporary occurrences that exacerbate the problem along with research-based solutions and recommendations for school leaders, parents and policymakers.

One of the most daunting challenges that America has faced, with special attention in recent years, is improving the academic achievement of African American students. Educational research today is replete with negative statistics about Black children, achievement gaps, deficit-based theories and erroneous notions that these problems are intractable and unsolvable. Little attention is given to acts of agency and self-determination African Americans have consistently demonstrated to empower themselves despite unrelenting, perennial attempts by White power brokers to maintain suppressive and oppressive policies and practices to perpetuate domination. Moreover, not enough attention is given to intentional, structured and systemic access and opportunity gaps that Blacks face. Additionally, very often, culture as a factor in achievement is not properly taken into account. But educational research and practice demonstrates that culture is the key—the critical mediating factor in increasing student achievement for African American students (Akua, 2012).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is known as “The Nation’s Report Card.” According to the NAEP, overall, only “Thirty-five percent of fourth-grade students performed at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level on the reading assessment in 2019.”¹ Of course, this was before the Covid-19

1. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4>

“Dysconsciousness is an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given.”

— Joyce E. King

global pandemic which disrupted schooling for millions of students across the nation and led to significant learning loss. In 2022, Black students had an average score that was 28 points lower than that for White students (and White student performance was mediocre, at best). This performance gap was not significantly different from that in 1998 (31 points). How has this gap persisted, remaining virtually unchanged in two and a half decades, when we know what increases and improves reading achievement?

According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, “Children in every demographic group have been affected, but Black and Hispanic children, as well as those from low-income families, those with disabilities and those who are not fluent in English, have fallen the furthest behind.”² Further, it is known that “Poor readers are more likely to drop out of high school, earn less money as adults and become involved in the criminal justice system.”³

As a matter of fact, “The Literacy Project Foundation found that three out of five people in U.S. prisons can’t read and 85 percent of juvenile offenders have trouble reading. Other research has estimated that illiteracy rates in prisons are as high as 75 percent of the prison population.”⁴ In addition, according to The Sentencing Project (2017), one in three Black males born after the year 2001 will spend time in prison at some point in his life.

While the term “achievement gap” has been around since the 1960s, it has been a heavily circulated buzzword in education for the past two decades (Ladson-Billings, 2006). It was said to be the gap between Black student performance and White student performance. But as Hilliard observed, “Framing the problem in this way is itself problematic. Importantly, it establishes European average achievement as the universal norm, no matter what the quality of achievement may be, even if it is mediocre” (Hilliard, 2003, p. 137). Hilliard goes on to explain why conceptually, the problem should be contextualized in a way that more clearly explains the problem and solution: “This gap, however, should not be thought of as a gap between Black and White students. *It should be thought of as a gap between the current performance of African [Black] students and levels of excellence [italics mine]*” (Hilliard, 2003, p. 138). Asian students are said to routinely outperform White students, but this achievement gap is rarely, if ever, addressed.

Joyce King recognized a phenomenon in education that she called dysconsciousness or dysconscious racism. It is “an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (King, 1991, p. 135). It is a cognitive impairment resulting from miseducation. It is this dysconsciousness that informs most of the constructed narratives around the so-called “achievement gap.” It is often accepted uncritically and seen as normal as it is posed as a seemingly intractable problem. It is rarely properly contextualized from

2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/08/us/pandemic-schools-reading-crisis.html>

3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/08/us/pandemic-schools-reading-crisis.html>

4. <https://observer.com/2017/07/prison-illiteracy-criminal-justice-reform/>

a solution-centered standpoint. Here, it is important to note the words of Sizemore: “[W]e are no closer to the elimination of the “achievement gap” in public schools. In fact, *those who know how to do it [close it] and have done so, have risked their careers and receive no respect [italics mine]* . . . (Sizemore, 2008, p. 305).

So when the term “achievement gap” began to receive broad circulation, many Black scholars began to call into question the context of how it was presented. Hilliard noted the “quality of service gap”, because “the quality of instruction is the key element in success or failure” (Hilliard, 2003, p. 132) Additionally, he notes, “. . . the gap is unacceptable, given what we know about what good teaching can do, and given what we know about the genius of our children” (Hilliard, 2003, p. 139). In addition, he cited numerous examples of educators and educational leaders that he called “gap closers” (Hilliard, 2003, p. 142)—those who had a consistent record of producing what he termed, “excellence without excuses” (Hilliard, 2003).

Milner (2012) argued that volumes are devoted to discussions of the “achievement gap” without a clear understanding or explanation of how these gaps were intentionally created and supported. Little attention is given to the *opportunity gap*—the accumulated barriers in access to key educational resources that create and perpetuate the achievement gap. Ladson-Billings (2006) demonstrated that what people are calling the “achievement gap” is really an “education debt,” the accumulated debt accrued by America through active resistance to educational equity for Black children and children of color and the benign neglect of issues involving equity and accountability in education.



These access and opportunity gaps led predictably to seemingly intractable achievement gaps. This cannot be effectively dealt with without an understanding of how systemic racism and the ideology of White supremacy operates. But when systemic racism is discussed, it too is often posed as intractable. However, these

systems are made up of *people* who perpetuate racist policies, practices and perspectives which maintains current power relations wherein Whites maintain control.

For Black children, “there is a belief system and a behavior system in education, and the supporting academic disciplines, that provide the rationale for the continuation of brutal pessimism with respect to African [Black] students (Hilliard, 2003, p. 141). But for those who know the historical context, Black underachievement is a relatively recent phenomenon that is not in alignment with historical, academic and cultural excellence, which Africans and African Americans have demonstrated throughout millennia.

The Legacy of Ancient African Education and Literacy

African Americans are the descendants of Africans. “In cultural terms, African people did not cease being African once brought to America in chains, though there have been consistent attempts to erase this cultural legacy” (Akua, 2019, p. 3). There has never been a time when education and literacy was not sacred to African people, though the literary innovation and excellence of African people (prior to, during, and after enslavement) is rarely, if ever, discussed in most public school reading or literature texts. It has been demonstrated time and again that African people introduced the world to reading, writing, language, literature, architecture, engineering, agriculture, astronomy, mathematics, medicine,

science and technology (Diop, 1986; Hilliard, 1997; Finch, 1998). In addition, people from all over Europe and Asia flocked to the African fountains of knowledge at the University of *Ipet Isut* (Karnak) in Kemet (Egypt), University of Sankore at Timbuktu, University of Gao, University of Walata (in West Africa) (Robinson, 1987; Hilliard, 1995; Maiga, 2009).

“There has never been a time when education and literacy was not sacred to African people.”

The innovation of African education, science and technology required millennia of meticulous documentation and record-keeping. High-tech ancient African Nile Valley civilizations required “armies of educated people” (Hilliard, 1995, p. 122). In ancient Kemet, for example, such record-keeping was so critical that it required a functionary as early as the 6th Dynasty (circa 2345 B.C.E.) to be appointed Governor of the House of Books (Hilliard, 1995). So sacred was literacy and literature in West Africa from the 1300-1600s that virtually every home had a library. As much revenue was generated from the sale of books as from the sale of the most prized natural resources of gold, salt and iron (Windsor, 1969; Robinson, 1987; Maiga, 2009). Literacy was life—it was the scientific documentation of all that was necessary to function at the highest level as a human. Literacy as life was the documentation of virtues, spiritual and character development, scientific methods, observation of nature and its relationship to human functioning,

In addition, not only did the Moors of North and West Africa preserve ancient African scientific knowledge, they also deeply influenced literacy and education throughout Europe and helped lift Europe out of the Dark Ages (Van Sertima, 2001; Pimienta-Bey, 2002). Both in East and West Africa from ancient times,

there was free, public education for males and females and myriad examples of educational excellence “from the Nile to the Niger” (Hilliard, 1995). African Americans are the recipients and descendants of this legacy of excellence. Slaves were not taken out of Africa. *Africans* were taken out of Africa—Africans who were educated, cultured and advanced. Africans were enslaved; and once emancipated, subject to a continuous system of White terrorism, intentional miseducation and a schooling process that prepared them for perpetual servitude and did not prepare them to meet needs and solve problems in their own communities (Akua, 2019). Additionally, it was not in the interest of the former captors who wanted to maintain dominance to educate newly emancipated Africans.

Literacy and Education on the Plantation: Cultivating a Covert Curriculum

What is now called the pre-school to prison pipeline is better understood at its genesis—the Plantation to Prison Pipeline. The plantation-to-prison pipeline coincides with the genesis of policing and incarceration of Black youth and adults.

Often the narrative that an ignorant, uneducated, uncultured and uncivilized brute was taken out of Africa is unconsciously accepted by many. School curricula has been complicit in circulating and promoting this narrative. But in fact, the exact opposite was true. Africans contributed seminally and significantly to the scientific knowledge Europeans held (Diop, 1986; Hilliard, 1995; Finch, 1998). African knowledge was diffused to Asia, Europe and the Americas. But the narrative of ignorant, uneducated, uncultured and uncivilized Africans had to persist in order to somehow justify their enslavement and domination by Whites.

Africans didn’t cease being Africans, and didn’t cease being educated, insightful and scientific upon their enslavement. But they did have to be wise in not revealing how knowledgeable they were to their enslavers. At a time when Black literacy was punishable by mutilation or even death, Africans had to continue their educational pursuits under cover of darkness. “Between 1800 and 1835, most of the southern states enacted/ legislation making it a crime to teach enslaved children to read or write” (Anderson, 1988, p. 2). In Africa, literacy was life. In America, Black literacy was against the law. On the plantation, it was a matter of life and death.

Such dire circumstances required the cultivation of a covert curriculum that provided instruction of organization, survival, code-switching, knowledge of nature and terrain, knowledge of current events and political trends, knowledge of astronomy for those seeking to escape, knowledge and application of practical self-defense and much more (Webber, 1976). To even *seem* to be more knowledgeable than an African should be under a White supremacist regime of slavery was to be in even deeper danger than the acquiescent captive.

“Literate slaves read newspapers and pamphlets and kept themselves and the slave community informed about the antislavery movement. Denmark Vesey, David Walker, Nat Turner and other literate slaves led rebellions and wrote pamphlets and tracts denouncing and exposing the slave system” (Perry, 2003, p. 14).

Shortly after the rebellion of Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia in

1831, the Virginia House of Delegates met to discuss the matter, looming threats of abolition and the threat that it posed to the system of slavery's lucrative economy. Forced ignorance and education suppression was the rule of the day. That same year, Henry Berry argued before the Virginia House of Delegates:

Sir, we have as far as possible closed *every avenue by which light may enter their [captive African] mind*; we have only to go one step further—to *extinguish the capacity to see the light*, and our work would be completed; *they would then be reduced to the level of the beasts of the field, and we should be safe* [italics mine] (Berry, “The Abolition of Slavery,” Virginia House of Delegates, 1831, 1859).

What is most remarkable here and must be underscored is the *intentionality* behind perpetuating Black ignorance. Black ignorance was White safety. Black illiteracy was necessary for White democracy. Black ignorance has been systematized and weaponized through the enslavement process. The unrelenting, daily terrorism and trauma of enslavement robbed African people of their history, culture, education and family ties. Under penalty of death, mutilation or family separation, it sought complete cultural erasure of all things noble associated with Blackness and replaced it with narratives of depravity and inferiority. And yet Africans persisted in their quest for education and literacy.

Just thirty-five years after Emancipation, the Black literacy rate jumped “from five percent to nearly fifty percent in one generation in one of the most remarkable expressions of literacy in the world” (Asante, 2013, p. 12). As Hilliard points out, “Africans [African Americans] excelled wherever literacy training was offered. The fear was not that Africans could not learn, the fear then and later was that they would” (Hilliard, 1997, p. 36).

The Plantation to Prison Pipeline

Amos Wilson provides a context for understanding what Akua has termed “the Plantation to Prison Pipeline” of the 1800s and the pre-school to prison pipeline of today. He suggested that if you want to understand any problem in America, you need to focus on who profits from the problem and not who suffers from the problem. (Wilson, 2001). Plantations, prisons, forced Black ignorance and illiteracy were and are pipelines to *big* money while helping to maintain White dominance.

An understanding of the judicial and legislative apparatus that undergirded the Plantation to Prison Pipeline is necessary. When the system of chattel slavery was ostensibly abolished, with the end of the Civil War and the passing of the 13th Amendment, White landowners were left with a significant labor problem that affected their wealth production, accumulation and protection. They sought to resolve this problem through the creation of for-profit prisons. Most have been taught that the 13th Amendment abolished slavery. This is not incorrect, but it is woefully incomplete. The 13th Amendment reads, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime* whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” [italics and

emphasis mine]⁵. This basically means that if one is convicted of a crime (whether innocent or guilty), they are ripe and eligible to be enslaved.

In 1866, one year after the 13th Amendment was ratified, Alabama, Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, Tennessee, and South Carolina began to lease out Black convicts for labor. This made the business of arresting Blacks very lucrative; which is presumably why hundreds of White men were hired by these states as police officers. Their primary responsibility was to search out and arrest Blacks who were in violation of Black Codes. Black Codes were laws designed to limit the freedoms of Blacks after Emancipation. An example is Vagrancy, an “offense of a person not being able to prove at a given moment that he or she is employed” (Blackmon, 2008, p. 1).

Blackmon explained, “The desire of White farmers to recapture their former slaves through new civil laws was transparent. In the immediate wake of Emancipation, the Alabama legislature swiftly passed a measure under which orphans of freed slaves, or the children of Blacks deemed inadequate parents, were to be ‘apprenticed’ to their former masters” (Blackmon, 2008, p. 53). This was done to fund ruined southern state and local government economies. “Beginning in the late 1860s, and accelerating after the return of White political control in 1877, every southern state enacted an array of interlocking laws essentially intended to criminalize black life” (Blackmon, 2008, p. 53).

“If you want to understand any problem in America, you need to focus on who profits from the problem and not who suffers from the problem.”

— Amos Wilson



Once arrested, these men, women and children would be leased to plantations where they would harvest cotton, tobacco and sugar cane. Or they would be leased to work at coal mines, or railroad companies. The owners of these

5. <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendment/amendment-xiii>

businesses would pay the state for every prisoner who worked for them. After the passage of the 13th Amendment, more than 800,000 Blacks were part of a system of re-enslavement through the prison system that lasted until around 1940 (Blackmon, 2008).

Little has changed about the dynamics of this system, even today. Today, prisons are known to boost local economies (Meiners, 2007; Alexander, 2010). The prison industrial complex is known to be “a growth industry in the context of deindustrialization; the production, marketing, and sales of technology and security required to maintain and expand the state of incarceration” is racialized, privatized and commercialized as big business” (Meiners 2007, p. 2). America is known to have the highest rate of incarceration for any industrialized western nation. “The United States has 5% of the world’s total population yet possesses 25% of the world’s incarcerated” (Meiners, 2007, p. 2).

During the period directly following emancipation, White farmers’ land was decimated due to war and their captives were set free, causing massive economic depression. Similarly, today “the demise of small family farms due to the rise of corporate agribusiness and the loss of U.S.-based manufacturing industries and

jobs created geographic and economic problems for the nation that the development of a rural prison industry appeared to address” (Meiners, 2007, p. 3). In this context, prison guards are akin to plantation overseers. Just as there were poor White and Black overseers on the plantation, so it is today with poor White and Black guards in prisons. They are exploited in a larger system of exploitation.

Perhaps an even deeper concern is that both teachers’ unions and university pension funds have been used to invest in prisons—again a racialized reality which represents a clear conflict of interest—creating pathways of incarceration for those who should receive education. *Prison Legal News* (2019) reported that pension funds for public

school teachers were to be divested from private prisons after an appeal from the American Federation of Teachers, the second largest union for educators in America. Five billion dollars had been invested in CoreCivic and GeoGroup, the top two private prison corporations, through hedge funds.

So it is apparent “. . . the development of our incarceration-nation clearly impacts education. When California, Illinois, and other states build more prisons than schools or colleges, this shapes academic options for youth” (Meiners, 2007, p. 3). This creates highly racialized realities for African American youth. The rabbit hole is deep. In California, the Afrikan Black Coalition, a college student group, protested against the elite University of California system for investing upwards of \$25 million in pension, endowment and other funds in for-profit, private prisons. Again, CoreCivic and GeoGroup were part of the investment portfolio. *Reuters*

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reported that the UC system divested from these corporations once it was made public and protested against by the Afrikan Black Coalition.⁶

A special report by the ACLU entitled, *A Tale of Two Countries: Racially Targeted Arrests in an Era of Marijuana Reform* (2020), found that “extreme racial disparities in marijuana possession arrests persist throughout the country and have not improved since 2010. And how is it that the same marijuana that Black men are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated for possession and trafficking is the same marijuana that makes White males the new multi-millionaires through the cannabis industry? To be clear, this is not a value judgment on those who use or sell cannabis. It is, however, a value judgment on a criminal justice system that punishes Black people more harshly for the same things that Whites do with little to no punishment.

“According to *Forbes*, the cannabis industry is one of the country’s fastest-growing industries. Last year, legal sales reached \$17.5 billion. By 2030, annual sales across the U.S. will reach \$100 billion, according to Cowen.”⁷

The Vagrancy Laws of the 1800s have been replaced with the “War on Drugs,” “three strikes and you’re out” and tropes of “super-predators” (Alexander, 2011; Toldson, 2019). The buying and selling of slaves has arguably been replaced with the arrest, conviction and incarceration of disproportionate numbers of Black people. Once arrested, the victim is thrust into a labyrinth of litigation and incarceration in the prison industrial complex where every person (s)he sees from the courthouse to the jailhouse gets paid to keep said system afloat. There has always been a pathological fear in America of what would happen if African Americans were ever truly educated and empowered with equitable access to opportunities. Clarke contended, “The powerful will never educate the powerless to take their power from them” (Clarke, 1991, p. 18).

Just as skillful business moguls utilize vertical integration, the process of controlling the creation of a product from the raw materials to the finished product, along with its marketing, sales and distribution (Anderson, 2001), so too, the prison profiteers found it necessary to create a pipeline to prison to guarantee their continuous flow of abundant capital. Thus the pre-school to prison pipeline was birthed. The “kids for cash” scandal in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania is an example in which two judges, Michael Conahan and Mark Ciavarella, were convicted for accepting money to provide harsh sentences for minor offenses to juveniles in for-profit detention centers.⁸

And how is it that the same marijuana that Black men are disproportionately arrested and incarcerated for possession and trafficking is the same marijuana that makes White males the new multi-millionaires through the cannabis industry?

6. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-california-university/university-of-california-drops-prison-investments-amid-student-demands-idUSKBN0U202020151219>

7. <https://biopharmajournal.com/2022/03/16/why-cannabis-stocks-stand-out-as-speculative-opportunity-for-new-growth-investment-flows-sndl-sgmd-vff-tcnf-grwg-iipr-try-mj-akan/#:~:text=According%20to%20Forbes%2C%20the%20cannabis,%24100%20billion%2C%20according%20to%20Cowen>

8. <https://jlc.org/luzerne-kids-cash-scandal>

“When crime continues unabated in a society or community, that society or community is crimogenic. In gist, it gives birth to criminality by virtue of its structural characteristics . . .”

— Amos Wilson

Zakiya Sankara Jabar and her husband, Hashim Jabar’s work with Racial Justice Now! (RJN) re-centered the narrative from “school to prison pipeline” to “pre-school-to-prison pipeline” when they explained the struggle that they and other Black parents had in preventing their son and other Black boys from being suspended from pre-school. Hashim Jabar asserted, “One study from the Schott Foundation showed that 100 percent of pre-K students suspended in the state of Ohio were black boys.”⁹ Sankara-Jabar was able to demonstrate that her son’s treatment was not an isolated incident, but part of a larger systemic problem of targeting young Black males as young as three-years-old (Sankra, Jabar, 2018). RJN was instrumental in the passing of a House Bill 318, a law which prohibits suspension of Pre-K-3rd grade students.¹⁰

For those who assumed integration was the answer, in *Bad Boys*, Ferguson demonstrated that, even in integrated schools, Black males were heavily surveilled and targeted for harsher disciplinary actions compared to their White classmates (Ferguson, 2001). Further, “. . . it became clear that school labeling practices and the exercise of rules operated as part of a hidden curriculum to marginalize and isolate Black male youth in disciplinary spaces and brand them as criminally inclined” (Ferguson, 2001, p. 2). Additionally, in *Push Out*, Monique Morris documents the persistent criminalization of Black girls. “Black girls are disproportionately represented among those who experience the type of discipline that renders children vulnerable to delinquency and future incarceration (Morris, 2018, p. 13). These types of practices prepare Black boys and girls to be harassed, surveilled, stigmatized and incarcerated later in life. Indeed, Powell (2008) clearly identified the similarities between prisons and schools in appearance and procedures.

Wilson unmask and deconstructs criminal justice reform thusly,:

Reform is what reform does. If the institution of reform measures do not help to liberate the oppressed, and furthermore, actually worsens oppression, then such measures functionally serve the power status quo. Criminal reformism which does not make its objective the eradication of the criminogenic, politicoeconomic system is designed to put a benign face on racist, ruling class oppression; to make oppression palliative to the oppressed . . . When crime continues unabated in a society or community, that society or community is *criminogenic*. In gist, it gives birth to criminality by virtue of its structural characteristics . . .” (Wilson, 1990, 2020, p. 13-14)

9. <https://rjnohio.org/laws-will-change-ohio-school-safety-behavior-suspensions/>

10. <https://rjnohio.org/laws-will-change-ohio-school-safety-behavior-suspensions/>

Black Literacy and Education Post-Emancipation

Formerly enslaved Africans had an unquenchable thirst for education and desire for literacy. Booker T. Washington observed, “Few people who were not right in the midst of the scene can form an exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for education. It was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young and none were too old, to make the attempt to learn” (Anderson, 1988, p. 5). For the newly emancipated Africans, literacy was more than an individual pursuit. It was a communal pursuit hearkening back to the African concept of Ubuntu, “I am because we are; because we are, therefore I am.” The community came together in churches and night schools making every effort at every turn to make everyone literate. It was seen as a duty and an obligation one had to the community and the race. “They viewed literacy and formal education as a means to liberation and freedom” (Anderson, 1988, p. 17).

In Africa, literacy was life. In America, on the plantation, literacy was a matter of life and death. In America, post-Emancipation, education and literacy was tied to liberation. Blacks pursued literacy and education to equip themselves to advocate on behalf of their people. One could not effectively advocate for their people if they could not read, comprehend and think critically, analytically and reflectively.

Just thirty-five years after Emancipation, the Black literacy rate jumped “from five percent to nearly fifty percent in one generation in one of the most remarkable expressions of literacy in the world” (Asante, 2013, p. 12). As Hilliard explained, “Africans [Blacks] excelled wherever literacy training was offered. The fear was not that Africans could not learn, the fear then and later was that they *would*” (Hilliard, 1997, p. 36). The purpose of literacy and education was the pursuit of freedom. Perry observed, “. . . the philosophy of education—freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship and leadership—over the years has been encoded in the African American narrative tradition” (Perry, 2003, p. 10). This shaped the identity of African Americans. Perry further observed, “The task of achievement is fundamentally shaped by the very identity of African Americans *as* African Americans” (Perry, 2003, p. 3). Their culture, identity and achievement was shaped around an incessant struggle for literacy and education for uplift.

Funding Disparities

There has never been a time in America’s history where Black schools or schools that serve a predominantly Black student body were equitably and appropriately funded. The policies, practices, actions and outcomes that produced this reality were very intentional. Again, at no time in US history have Black schools writ large been properly funded for books, materials, buildings, renovations, or

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There has never been a time in America's history where Black schools or schools that serve a predominantly Black student body were equitably and appropriately funded.

salaries for teachers and principals. Yet survival and a cultural standard of excellence required the dogged determination and resilience of African Americans to swim upstream against a steady tide of White terrorism, cultural genocide, economic exploitation and miseducation.

The consistent inequitable funding and de-funding of Black schools began shortly after the Civil War. Upon Emancipation (and even before), Blacks pursued education passionately (Webber, 1976). In fact, as DuBois notes, “public education for all at public expense was, in the South, a Negro idea” (DuBois, 1938, p. 638). Blacks understood that education was a human right that no one should be denied. The African quest for free, public education for males and females is several millennia old and can be seen as an extension of African systems of public education

from the Nile to the Niger in Africa where free public education for male and females was standard prior to European colonization (Hilliard, 1997; Akua, 2016).

Interestingly, at the end of the Civil War, appropriations were made to begin the process of educating newly emancipated Blacks by way of the Freedmen’s Bureau. However, the Freedmen’s Bureau was more interested in control than quality and in many cases slowed and even halted the Black pursuit of education by providing inadequate funding, making access to funding a very slow process, withholding and even withdrawing funding. Nonetheless, Blacks persisted. “After the Bureau withdrew its support, the freedmen took control of the educational system and transformed federal schools into local free schools” (Anderson, 1988, p. 10).

Anderson observed:

The corruption of the Freedmen’s Bureau redirected nearly all of the limited resources and land into the hands of the same plantation owners from those whom the Union had taken them. The plantation owners, Southern citizens and Confederate soldiers received nearly all of the Freedmen’s Bureau money . . .” (Anderson, 2017, p. 145).

All of the above notwithstanding, in the end, the Freedmen’s Bureau was really only concerned with schooling for the maintenance of a servant class (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In the active ideology of White supremacy, “Schools do not now, nor did they ever, fail in what they were designed to do for Black children: create a labor class in service to White society” (Anderson, 2001, p. 95).

The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* established the notion that separate facilities for Blacks could be equal to the access that Whites enjoyed. The purpose of the *Plessy* decision was to ensure that Blacks had no social interaction with Whites and to maintain the illusion of White supremacy and Black inferiority. The problem was that separate facilities for Blacks were always underfunded. The segregated school systems of America paid Black teachers “60 percent or less of White teachers’ salaries” (Darrity & Mullen, 2019, p. 230). Such

striking inequity served to fix “an eternal educational gap between Blacks and Whites” (Darrity & Mullen, 2020, p. 231).

This type of inequitable funding in teacher pay and per pupil expenditures lasted for over a century after the Civil War and still persists to this day. *What is the cumulative effect of such inequities over time on the teachers, principals, students and schools?* Fenwick (2022) asserts:

On the economic front, the lowest estimates calculated the financial loss to be about \$250 million for elimination of 30,000 Black educator jobs. The numbers grew through the years to at least 100,000 Black principals and teachers shunted off payrolls. Over time, desegregation left southern Black educators nearly \$1 billion poorer (Fenwick, 2022, p. 131).

**Black schools were only
“unequal when they were
unequally supported.”**

— Claude Anderson



In addition to this devastating attack on Black leadership and the Black teacher workforce, a fact few know is that Black principals and teachers, then and today, are the most credentialed educators in America (Fenwick 2022). Nonetheless, African Americans produced a number of schools during the segregation era that routinely outperformed Whites in academic achievement such as the famed

Busing Black children to White schools was posed as a solution rather than busing more money to Black schools.

Dunbar High School in Washington, DC (Stewart, 2013), the historic Sumner High School in Kansas City, KS (Bonner et al, 2010), Huntington High School in Newport News, VA (Smith, 1989) and Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta, GA to name a few. “These schools were not anomalies or outliers. In many cases, they were not at all unusual, despite segregated conditions with inequitable funding and secondhand materials” (Akua, 2019). In fact, the aforementioned schools were only emblematic of hundreds of Black schools with quality teachers, leaders, parents, and student achievement who only lacked equitable funding. The nature of being Black in America required them to do more with less.

Additionally Anderson notes, Black schools were only “unequal when they were unequally supported” (Anderson, 2001, p. 97). Busing Black children to White schools was posed as a solution rather than busing more money to Black schools. “The demand . . . was for our fair share of the financial resources to enable our educators to offer a high quality education, and for the authority to control our schools” (Hilliard, 1997, p. 50). But in the end, what was termed “integration” was really the *disintegration* of Black schools (Hilliard, 1997).

Fast forward over 100 years after Emancipation and Kozol’s study of inequitable funding was so striking, he referred to it as *Savage Inequalities* (1994); savage in stark contrast to what a civilized nation should provide its citizens. His study of schools in major urban areas like East St. Louis, Chicago, New York City, Camden, Cincinnati and Washington D.C. revealed a pattern of gross, intentional underfunding, understaffing and overcrowded conditions with limited and outdated materials necessary for a quality education in predominantly Black schools. Kozol’s findings were not new or startling to Black people. The details of his study, however, were new to a number of Whites who may have been unaware of just how dramatic the inequitable funding structure was in America’s racist public schooling systems. In addition, his findings gained broad circulation and left little room for feigned ignorance on the part of educational leaders and policymakers.

To make matters worse, in 2019, *The Washington Post* reported, “Overwhelmingly White school districts received \$23 billion more than predominantly non-White school districts in state and local funding in 2016, despite serving roughly the same number of children” per year.¹¹ *What is the cumulative effect of a \$23 billion racial funding gap, year-after-year on teachers, principals, students and communities?* Further, the funding gap is tied to intentional housing inequities and wealth disparities (Coates, 2018). *The Washington Post* also observed:

The funding gap is largely the result of the reliance on property taxes as a primary source of funding for schools. Communities in overwhelmingly White areas tend to be wealthier, and school districts’ ability to raise money depends on the value of local property and the ability of residents to pay higher taxes.¹²

11. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/report-finds-23-billion-racial-funding-gap-for-schools/2019/02/25/d562b704-3915-11e9-a06c-3ec8ed509d15_story.html

12. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/report-finds-23-billion-racial-funding-gap-for-schools/2019/02/25/d562b704-3915-11e9-a06c-3ec8ed509d15_story.html

Coates (2018) demonstrated how Blacks were intentionally excluded from home ownership and exploited by White realtors. Many Blacks bought homes ‘on contract’, “a predatory agreement that combined all the responsibilities of home ownership with all the disadvantages of renting—while offering the benefits of neither” (Coates, 2018, p. 168). Of course, public school funding (which will be discussed later) is tied to property taxes. What happens to public school funding for Black schools when Blacks are kept from home ownership and perpetual poverty?

Fenwick observed, “These resources are still controlled by White male economic elites. Additionally, Black elected local officials, by necessity, must interact with state and national officials. The overwhelming majority of these officials are White males who often enact policies and create funding streams benefiting their interests and not the local Black community’s interests [italics mine] (Fenwick, 2013). Fenwick recommended, “Elected officials must advocate for equalizing state funding formulas so that urban school districts garner more financial resources to hire credentialed and committed teachers and stabilize principal and superintendent leadership. Funding makes a difference” (Fenwick, 2013). What is clear here is a multi-century pattern of educational suppression and intentional under-funding for the purpose of maintaining current power relations.

“These resources are still controlled by White male economic elites. Additionally, Black elected local officials, by necessity, must interact with state and national officials. The overwhelming majority of these officials are White males who often enact policies and create funding streams benefiting their interests and not the local Black community’s interests.”

— Leslie T. Fenwick

Questions and Lessons From the Detroit Literacy Lawsuit

A current case study in the persistence of savage inequalities is the 2016 Detroit Literacy Lawsuit. *However, prior to the lawsuit, what must be examined and thoroughly understood is the systematic dismantling of high-performing community-driven public schools in an overwhelmingly Black district with Black leadership.* Detroit is home to America’s first African-centered public schools. Established in the early 1990s, these schools centered students in academic *and* cultural excellence with the understanding that you could not have one without the other. Academic excellence has a cultural foundation and cultural excellence requires academic expression.

But Detroit’s African-centered public schools were beset with a barrage of consistent, vitriolic attacks from their inception. The schools began as all-boys academies, given the dismal data at the time on Black boys. National Organization of Women (NOW) attacked these academies claiming that they violated the civil rights of girls in public schools. Robinson observed, “however, it is striking that there were no such conversations on the education of White children” (Robinson, 2008, p. 88). Thus the schools were mandated to accept girls and they did. The

AFL-CIO also accused Detroit Public Schools (DPS) of segregating Black children from White children by proposing culturally based educational programs. Robinson further observed, “The recognition of sovereignty granted to suburban Whites opposed to their children being integrated into Detroit Public Schools was not granted to Blacks seeking alternatives to educating their children within the City” (Robinson, 2008, p. 89).

The money generated by and in the control of Black city leaders and the majority Black school board in Detroit became hotly contested. In 1993,

“The recognition of sovereignty granted to suburban Whites opposed to their children being integrated into Detroit Public Schools was not granted to Blacks seeking alternatives to educating their children within the City.”

— Jeffery D. Robinson

Detroit voters (to the dismay of many suburban and outstate Whites) surprisingly passed a 1.5 billion dollar bond initiative for infrastructure and capital improvements to the District. Even though most Whites were no longer residents of the City, there was considerable White interest in how the bond money would be expended to accomplish its intended goals. After a series of failed attempts to steer the majority Black School Board to hire specially designated State contractors, charges of financial mis-management were again hurled at the District. So intense was concern about the allocation of the bond monies that in 1996 then- Governor John Engler froze all bond funds until “stability” could be achieved in the District’s finances (Robinson, 2008, p. 90; Detroit Board of Education Papers, 2001).

This then led to the state takeover of Detroit Public Schools in 1999 when Governor John Engler instituted legislation that removed the locally elected, majority Black Detroit School Board and replaced it with a Board appointed by him and Detroit’s Mayor at the time, Dennis Archer. This strongarm tactic to control Black tax dollars in the hands of Black political leadership and Black educational leadership resulted in a devastating blow to Detroit’s African-centered schools (which were performing above state norms) and all of its schools. Some years later, Detroit Public Schools would go bankrupt and later re-emerge as Detroit Public Schools Community District.

Fast-forward to the Detroit Literacy Lawsuit in 2016 and we find that seven African American students from Detroit Public Schools Community District brought the lawsuit against the state of Michigan because the state plays such a critical role of oversight in Detroit’s public schools. According to court documents, the Plaintiff’s alleged that they had been “denied a basic minimum education, and thus have been deprived of access to literacy” (p. 3).

The core of the Plaintiff’s complaint is that the conditions in their schools

are so bad—due to the absence of qualified teachers, crumbling facilities, and insufficient materials—that those schools fail to provide access to literacy. ‘Plaintiffs sit in classrooms where not even the pretense of education takes place, in schools that are functionally incapable of delivering access to literacy . . . They wholly lack the capacity to deliver basic access to literacy, functionally delivering no education at all’ (p. 7)



Further complaints included the fact that:

“some teachers were absent as many as 50 days in one year; classes are covered by non-certificated paraprofessionals, substitutes, or misassigned teachers who lack any expertise or knowledge in the subject-matter of the course; an eighth grade student was put in charge of teaching seventh and eighth grade classes for a month because no teacher was available; classroom temperatures regularly exceed 90 degrees during both the summer and winter due to malfunctioning furnaces and at other times during the winter, it is frequently so cold that students and teachers can see their breath and must wear layers of winter clothing indoors; mice, cockroaches, and other vermin regularly inhabit Plaintiff’s classrooms and the first thing some teachers do each morning is attempt to clean up rodent feces before their students arrive; the drinking water in some of the Plaintiff’s schools is hot, contaminated and undrinkable (p. 8-10).

In fact, “The City of Detroit admitted that during the 2015-2016 academic year, none of the school district’s buildings were in compliance with city health and safety codes . . .” (p. 9). It should be noted here that if the 1.5 billion dollar bond initiative mentioned earlier had not been disrupted, hijacked, and taken out of the hands of Detroit’s Black educational leadership and had been allocated

for the stated purposes of infrastructure and capital improvements, then none of these problems in school facilities would have been an issue for a lawsuit.

Additionally, there were complaints of “overcrowding within their classrooms with as many as fifty students in a single classroom and insufficient desks and chairs requiring students to stand or sit on the floor” (p. 10). The materials provided to students were also *below* substandard: “Plaintiffs allege that their schools lack the books and materials needed to plausibly provide literacy; where they are provided, they are often long out of date, torn and beyond repair, or marked up to be unreadable in places” (P. 11).

If this were not enough, “Achievement data reveal that in the Plaintiff’s schools, illiteracy is the norm. The proficiency rates in Plaintiff’s schools hover *near zero* in *nearly all* subject areas” (p. 11). A review of all the complaints lodged by the plaintiffs would make one think that the lawsuit was filed in the early to mid 1900s. However, the case was argued in 2019 and a decision was rendered in 2020.

The legal battle lasted almost four years. *The Detroit News* reported, a historic settlement reached between the state and Detroit students calls for \$94.5 million in future literacy funding, a \$280,000 payout among seven plaintiffs and the creation of two Detroit task forces to help ensure a quality education for students.¹³

The most pressing question in this lawsuit is how could such egregious deficiencies exist and persist in a school district for such a long time? How were students and teachers able to persist in such substandard, dehumanizing conditions for so long? What were central office administrators who controlled budgets and who knew of these conditions doing to improve the situation? Was there no oversight? What are the long-term effects of this lack of access to proper education on the hundreds of thousands of students who experienced it over the course of decades?

The overarching lesson is that where deficiencies exist and persist, “power concedes nothing without a demand” in the words of Frederick Douglass (Akua, 2020). It is only where a core group of the concerned conscious community is organized and mobilized that such attention and redress can be brought to bear upon such urban school districts. And to be sure, Detroit is not necessarily an outlier in urban school districts. A case study and even litigation could have and has been raised in a number of other urban districts revealing very similar findings.

13. <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2020/05/14/whitmer-announces-late-night-settlement-detroit-right-literacy-case/5189089002/>

Power & Possibility in Policy and Practice: Education for Transformation

“We are living in a time of maximum, sophisticated confusion.”

— Neely Fuller

“Whose knowledge is worth knowing?”

— Joyce E. King

In a nation that has cultivated and relied heavily on forced Black ignorance and education suppression to maintain current power relations, there is a constant need for weapons of mass deception and weapons of mass distraction (Akua, 2015). Such weapons were deployed in the form of a moral panic against Critical Race Theory (CRT) and notions that it was being taught in America’s public schools. The entire moral panic was based on a false premise and states began banning the teaching of CRT as if it was already actually being taught in PK-12 schools. CRT is an advanced legal theory that is taught at the masters and doctoral level of graduate schools, not PK-12 schools. But as of March, 2022,

A total of 35 states so far have signed into law or proposed legislation banning or restricting the teaching of critical race theory [in PK-12 schools]. A total of 16 states so far have signed into law bills restricting education on race in classrooms or state agencies. There are currently 19 states that are considering bills or policies that restrict race education in schools or state agencies.”¹⁴

Fueling these legislative and media attacks are White numerical inadequacy, perceived loss of political and economic power and control by Whites and the need for conservatives to expand their power base. In addition, these attacks act as a cover and smoke screen to detract attention from the outrage that conscientious Americans have expressed over failed and oppressive policies and practices.

But the state resolutions banning CRT actually caused conceptual confusion (Hilliard, 1995) and created political blocks against any progressive, equity-based curricula, policy or funding that focused on sociopolitical consciousness, criticality or redress, like that espoused by Ladson-Billings (2014) and Muhammad (2020). It cultivated deception and created distractions that blocked attempts at clear, research-based equity. Indeed, as Fuller noted, “we are living in a time of maximum, sophisticated confusion” (Fuller, 1971).

There have been policies in place for decades that, if properly enforced, could increase literacy and educational outcomes for African American children. One such progressive policy is Florida Statute 1003.42(h), commonly referred to as the African American History Legislation. It was passed in 1994 and requires that teachers teach “. . . the history of African Americans, including the history of African peoples before the political conflicts that led to the development of

14. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/map-anti-critical-race-theory-efforts-reached/story?id=83619715>

“Selective Memory Manipulation is “strategically limiting or eliminating certain cultural memories in a people for the purpose of domination and steering African people away from emancipatory thinking and activity.”

slavery, the passage to America, the enslavement experience, abolition, and the contributions of African American society [*italics mine*] (<http://www.afroamfl.org>). But laws are only as good as those who enforce them (Wilson, 2001) and teachers cannot teach what they do not know. Presently, only eleven of the sixty-seven school districts (16%) in Florida have met the criteria for being designated as an exemplary school district in compliance with the Florida African American History Legislation. Leaders and teachers are not likely to live up to standards that they are not evaluated on or held accountable for.

Other states such as New York, New Jersey, South Carolina and Illinois have legislation surrounding the teaching of Black History. However, of all the states that have legislation requiring the teaching of information about African Americans, Florida’s law is the most comprehensive. While the New Jersey, New York and Illinois Black History laws are commendable, they are incomplete in that they deal primarily with the European slave trade and history courses. Connecticut’s Public Act

19-12 , passed in 2020, directs all regional and local boards of education “to include an elective course of studies at the high school level that provides students with a better understanding of the African-American, Black, Puerto Rican, and Latino contributions to United States history, society, economy, and culture.”¹⁵ This is very good, but is only for high schools, does not necessarily connect African culture to African American culture and history and is not necessarily interdisciplinary. The Florida legislation deals with the African and African American contribution to all disciplines, pre-K through twelfth grade. But teachers cannot teach what they do not know and teachers are not apt to teach what they are not being evaluated on.

Some states have legislation that refers to cultural relevance and responsiveness but does not directly and specifically mention African Americans. Often policies are written in generalities when cultural assaults are levied in particularities. For example, California Assembly Bill No. 2353, introduced in 2016, states that “culture is essential to learning.” It also indicates that “culturally responsive teaching:

“recognizes the importance of including pupils’ cultural references in all aspects of learning, builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school, uses a wide variety of instructional strategies connected to learning styles, incorporates multicultural information, books and other educational resources, develops the social consciousness of pupils to better handle the world of prejudice and racism”.¹⁶

15. <https://portal.ct.gov/Office-of-the-Governor/News/Press-Releases/2020/12-2020/Governor-Lamont-Announces-Connecticut-Becomes-First-To-Require-Courses-on-Black-and-Latino-Studies>

16. https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160AB2353



All of this is good and useful. However, since the educational, cultural assaults, under-funding and de-funding of Black literacy and education were intentional and specific to African Americans, then remedies, repair and equitable funding to make up for past inequity must be specific to African Americans.

Education for Transformation is the process of recapturing and practicing the ancient African and African American tradition of educational excellence (Akua, 2012). And “those who think Black children cannot be reached have never seen a Master Teacher teach” (Akua, 2022). However, due to miseducation and Selective Memory Manipulation (Akua, 2016), most know nothing about this tradition of excellence. In the minds of many educators, leaders and students, such memories have all but been erased. Selective Memory Manipulation is “strategically limiting or eliminating certain cultural memories in a people for the purpose of domination and steering African people away from emancipatory thinking and activity” (Akua, 2016, p. 118). Wilson observed, “. . . if there were not a direct relationship between history and money . . . history and power . . . history and rulership, history and domination, then why is it that the European rewrote history?” (Wilson, 1993, p. 15). The same sentiment could be said of literacy and education: if there were not a direct relationship between literacy, education and money, power, rulership and domination, why has this nation denied access, opportunity and equitable funding for literacy and education to African Americans?

Cultural Identity Restoration and the Role of Culture in Education

Here, it is necessary to provide a framework for understanding culture, a word that is used very often, yet rarely defined. Culture is different things to different people. For the purposes of this study, culture, “provides a general design

“Culture provides a general design for living and patterns for interpreting reality. Culture is like the electricity that illuminates the light bulb. Culture gives meaning to reality.”

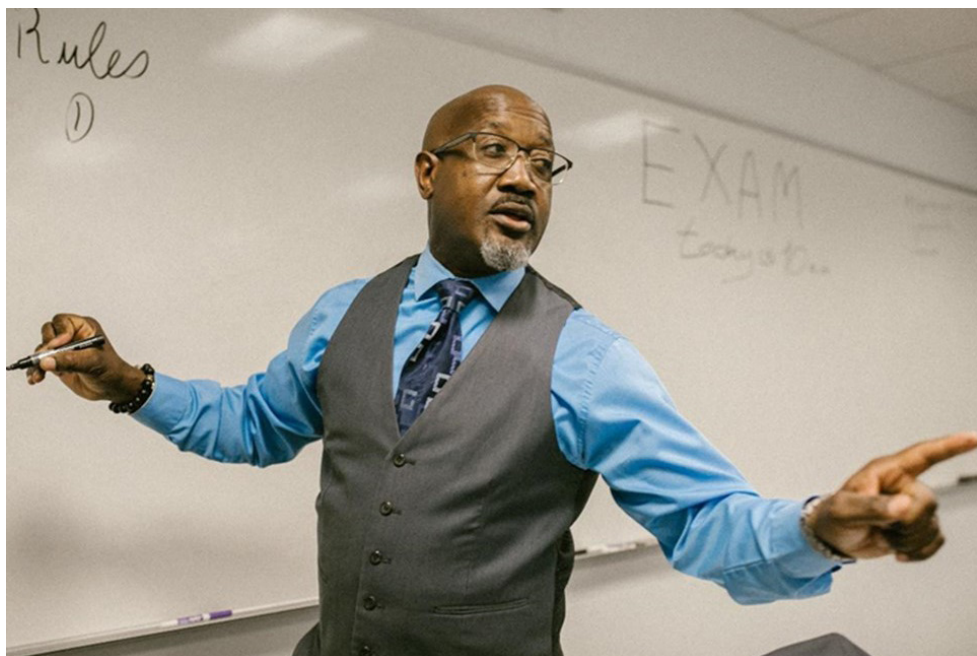
— **Wade Nobles**

for living and patterns for interpreting reality. Culture is like the electricity that illuminates the light bulb” (Nobles, 2006, p. 164). Nobles goes on to explain that, “Culture gives meaning to reality . . . culture has the power to compel behavior.” And finally, “culture is the invisible medium in which all human functioning occurs.

It is, in fact, important to note that nothing happens outside of culture” (Nobles, 2006, p. 164).

King argues that Heritage Knowledge helps students *re-member* their culture and history of self-determination, resilience and excellence. In a word, Heritage Knowledge is group memory; “a repository or heritable legacy that makes a feeling of belonging to one’s people possible” (King & Swartz, 2016, p. 4). It must be re-membered because it has been *dis-membered* through miseducation and oppression. For African American children who have experienced Cultural Identity Theft, this is not optional, but essential. Cultural Identity Theft is the

process of stealing a people’s story and history of accomplishments while replacing it with a narrative of pathology and criminality (Akua, 2012). So authentic education for African American students then, is a form of Cultural Identity Restoration (CIR).



Barfield’s study (Barfield, 2022) found that Cultural Identity Restoration (CIR) practices resulted in increased motivation to achieve, increased academic performance, increased self-efficacy and pursuit of success. She concluded that all African American students who attend public K-12 schools would benefit greatly from participating in asset-based programs that are culturally responsive and that

“leaders within the K-12 system must advocate for the development and funding of asset-based programs at their school sites. In addition, CIR practices should be offered to African American students at the elementary level as well as the secondary level (Barfield, 2020, p. 95). CIR practices help to develop a positive self-concept, to increase student self-efficacy, to empower them to chase after their dreams, and to achieve success.

As a response to the increasing need for Cultural Identity Restoration among African Americans students and as a means of providing resources for parents and urban school districts, Akua created Reading Revolution Online (RRO) (www.ReadingRevolution.org). Often during professional development, teachers and leaders would confide in Akua that they agreed with the need for culturally relevant and responsive teaching methods and materials but that they didn’t know much about African and African American culture and history and didn’t have the needed curriculum resources. Akua sought to create a resource that would allow teachers and leaders to go on the journey to cultural competence *with* their students as they learned together.

Reading Revolution Online (RRO) is an online, interactive, academic and instructional support tool that parents and teachers can use with students to increase and improve reading comprehension, vocabulary development, grammar and writing skills, cultural competency and character development. The online portal contains 90 brief reading selections, 90 captioned videos of the reading selections, 90 vocabulary activities, 90 short-cycle comprehension assessments, 90 grammar activities and 90 writing prompts. It also contains supplemental resources for teaching the science of reading.

Preliminary qualitative data obtained from dozens of educational leaders, teachers and parents nationally from New York to California who participated in Akua’s Literacy & Leadership Strategy Sessions where they received a demo of RRO revealed the following resounding sentiments: “We’ve never seen anything like this and our students need it!” Another educational leader remarked, “I’ve been looking for something like this and didn’t even know it!” She went on to explain how the unique needs of her students were *not* being met because the curriculum was *not* culturally relevant and, though her teachers were deeply committed and working hard, they had not been properly prepared to meet the students’ needs.

The book *Reading Revolution* was released in 2007 while Reading Revolution Online was released in August, 2021. Regarding use of the book and the professional development Akua provided to his school district’s leaders and teachers, Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Marcus Jackson recently reported, “As educators, our goal is to ignite a flame that burns for knowledge. For years, Reading Revolution has been able to ignite that flame for many of my students by improving reading levels by *1 – 2.5 grade levels in a year*” (www.ReadingRevolution.org).

Additionally, Latonja Stephens, Assistant Principal and Curriculum Director at Inkster Preparatory Academy just outside Detroit recently observed,

“ . . . if there were not a direct relationship between history and money . . . history and power . . . history and rulership, history and domination, then why is it that the European rewrote history?”

— Amos Wilson

We decided to adopt and implement *Reading Revolution* into not only our daily 3rd – 5th grade literacy curriculum but we also incorporated it into our social studies and afterschool tutoring program . . . our students in third through fifth grade grew an average of 1.7 years growth in reading based on the Spring 2019 NWEA MAP Reading Growth Assessment. We truly believe that *Reading Revolution* was an integral part of this growth.¹⁷

Authentic efforts at transforming literacy and education for Black children must take culture into account by utilizing Afrocentric (or African-centered) instructional strategies and content (Asante, 2017; King, 2018; Akua, 2019), culturally relevant and responsive approaches (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2014; Gay, 2002) and Historically Responsive Literacy Framework (Muhammad, 2020). Afrocentric or African-centered education simply means, “centering our children in the best of their culture to examine and analyze information, meet needs and solve problems in Black communities” (Akua, 2019). Presently, far too many African American children are centered in an alien cultural identity injected and imposed upon them rather than being centered in their own authentic cultural identity of excellence. In addition, they are schooled and trained to solve other people’s problems rather than learning how to solve problems in their own communities. African-centered education addresses these realities by restoring agency and sovereignty.

Ladson-Billings (2014) identified three domains of successful culturally relevant teaching: academic success, cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness. It is important to note that all three of these must be present to be considered culturally relevant, not just one or two. Academic success without cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness would mean that students would be ill-equipped to advocate on behalf of their own people or meet needs and solve problems in their own communities. Again, the purpose of education for African Americans from Emancipation was to be able to effectively advocate on behalf of your people and this could not be accomplished if one were not academically sound and culturally competent with sociopolitical consciousness.

To produce the kinds of literacy outcomes that are in harmony with the needs of African American students, Muhammad (2020) developed the Historically Responsive Literacy Framework. “The four-layered equity framework includes learning goals of 1) identity development; 2) skill development; 3) intellectual development; and 4) criticality” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 12). Similar to the requirements of Ladson-Billings’ framework, all components are necessary in totality.

Academic and cultural excellence go hand-in-hand. There cannot be academic excellence without cultural excellence and there can be no cultural excellence without academic excellence. Academic and cultural excellence are two sides of the same coin. A common concern of many African American parents is wanting their children to excel academically while also remaining culturally connected. As expressed by Ladson-Billings (1995), “One parent verbalized this as wanting their children to be able to ‘hold their own in the classroom without forgetting their own in the community’” (p. 27).

17. www.ReadingRevolution.org

Recommendations

Based on the current state of Black literacy, education and the pre-school to prison pipeline which deeply and deleteriously affects the life chances of African American students, the following key recommendations are provided for consideration and implementation by school leaders, parents and policymakers. Because the assaults were specific to African Americans, policies and funding should mention African Americans specifically:

1. Leaders and teachers should be trained in Restorative Practices as a way of de-escalating discipline issues and transforming approaches to discipline infractions and conflict resolution.
2. Provide consistent, long-term, professional development that addresses racism for all educators. It is important that administrators implement a systematic approach to addressing racism and discrimination in schools—one that uncovers attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that can be harmful to African/ African ancestry students (King & Tillman, 2018, p. 23). This is needed beyond some of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) professional development that some districts provide.
3. Provide intensive training to all educators of pre-school age students. Such training should include working with pre-school children (age groups, gender differences, appropriate instruction for each age group, classroom management, how to assess progress, working with parents, etc.) as well as anti-bias and anti-racism education. Provide training that is specific to teaching African /African ancestry pre-school males. (King & Tillman, 2018, p. 24).
4. Implement policies that ensure that African/African ancestry students have access to information about career and technical/vocation, the range of careers available to them, the type of training needed for various types of jobs, opportunities for internships, and post-secondary education generally. Such policies should place an emphasis on the role of the school guidance counselor in helping students to make informed choices about what they will do after graduation, how they can access information about post-secondary education, vocational/technical training, and other factors that will impact their lives after they graduate from high school (King & Tillman, 2018, p. 24).
5. Annual funding allocations to schools that serve predominantly Black populations must be revisited and revised to be equitable.
6. Additional annual funding should be appropriated and allocated to provide redress for past de-funding and inequitable funding of Black schools and programs and failure to properly serve African American

students. Also, proper oversight should be provided with parent and community stakeholders intimately involved in the process.

7. Additional annual funding should be appropriated and allocated by all school districts to provide materials that are consistent with Afrocentric and culturally relevant instructional strategies. These materials can be in the form of books, posters, online curricula, etc.
8. Annual funding at the local, state and national level should be appropriated and allocated to replenish the Black teacher/leader pipeline working in conjunction with educator preparation programs at HBCUs who have a proven track record of producing a significant percentage of the nation's Black teachers.
9. School leaders and teachers must be provided consistent opportunities for ongoing professional development in Afrocentric education. An Afrocentric approach to teaching that centers students in the best of their culture to examine and analyze information and meet needs and solve problems in their own communities is needed for Cultural Identity Restoration.
10. School leaders and teachers must be held *accountable* for Afrocentric content and delivery of instruction through school districts' observation and evaluation instruments.
11. School districts should adopt Muhammad's Historically Responsive Literacy Framework to increase Black student engagement and achievement (Muhammad, 2020).
12. "Initiate and maintain consistent communication and collegial relationships with parents of African/African ancestry pre-school students and their caregivers. Allow parents to express their expectations, concerns, and suggestions for working with their children" (King & Tillman, 2018, p. 24).
13. Parents should be intentional about introducing their children to literacy from the earliest age possible, reading to their children, keeping physical books and print material in the home and setting aside at least fifteen minutes of quiet time per day to read silently as a family.
14. Parents should ensure that their children are getting 8-10 hours of sleep per night as sleep (or lack thereof) can deeply impact academic performance and behavior.
15. Parents should commit to meeting with their children's teachers at least 2-4 times per school year to monitor their children's development and performance.

Future Research

Ultimately, the consistent, centuries-old cultural assaults upon Black literacy and education which resulted in forced ignorance, education suppression, the pre-school to prison pipeline, rampant miseducation and underachievement and inequitable, inadequate funding requires large-scale redress in the form of reparations. Future research should examine in more detail, the nature of the damage, quantifiable execution of redress and a specific plan for the reparations demand. Then and only then, can the problems of Black illiteracy, miseducation and the pre-school to prison pipeline be properly resolved.

Conclusion

The crisis in Black literacy and education, further fueled by a robust pre-school to prison pipeline, constitutes a national security issue that presents a clear and present danger to the wellbeing of the nation. This report provides an historical background to contextualize the origins of the problem, current and contemporary occurrences that exacerbate the problem along with research-based solutions and recommendations for school leaders, parents and policymakers.

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