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Aaron M. Johnson

Wayne State University, amdj9265@gmail.com

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Scholastic Liberation: Schools' Impact on African American Academic Achievement

AARON M. JOHNSON

Many education consultants and so-called experts and scholars on education claim they have the answers to help schools improve for African American children.
"Change your questioning techniques."
"Teach students that they need to have grit."
"Use this framework for understanding poverty."
"Here are the tried and true 10 strategies that you can use."

Some individuals and organizations have even used a scientific approach and have developed mathematic calculations and statistical metrics to support the notion that the social ramifications of racism and economic depression have little to no adverse effects on African American students' academic performance. Furthermore, many organizations' improvement frameworks are devoid of any mention of race, social justice, or equity. What many of these educational individuals and organizations have failed to acknowledge is how the history of social, cultural, and economic hegemony over African American people have served as barriers to them being successful in school environments. As a result of districts acknowledging what is called an academic achievement gap, many schools and districts have employed the services of large companies or individuals, who make substantial amounts of money suggesting strategies to them. Strategies have either failed or do not include improvements to pedagogy and school environments with the intent of school spaces becoming anti-racist, identity-confirming, and committed to social justice. Thus, schools use or adopt monetized frameworks that include those strategies and they believe that these actions alone will produce the desired results. The truth is, many of those strategies have failed and will continue to fail, particularly if they are used for the expressed purpose of closing the academic achievement gap. The achievement gap is the result of decades of academic neglect on the part of the federal government, individual schools and school districts, racist housing policies, and underfunded of schools.

First, many of these education entities that provide strategies to school districts are culturally disconnected from African American people and African American students. One cannot suggest strategies about how to instruct African American students if one does not understand who African American students are and what makes up their identities. Even the thought that there are strategies that work for, and can be designed to, impact African American students as a monolith, has a deleterious effect on how teachers plan meaningful instruction for them. As a result, it is wrong to assume, and unethical for people to suggest, that there are strategies that are specific to improving academic outcomes for African American students as though there is a difference in African American students' cognition. Second, schools often discount the sociocultural impact on African American students' learning. African American students' learning environments; the perceptions, biases, and preparedness of their teachers; and cultural relevancy of content being presented to them, all play a role. Schools frequently look at data that highlights African American students' failure in school, but rarely engage in meaningful inquiry into their instructional and organizational practices to understand why. Third, there is a negative perception of Blackness that is held by a number of people in this country, including educators. The institution of racism is upheld and supported by all of our nation's institutions, whether they be cultural, economic, or educational. Even positive beliefs about what Black students can accomplish are often accompanied by inaction, support of the status quo, and scapegoating.

The goal of this article is to help educators begin to think about how they can contribute to the liberation of African American students through scholastic endeavors. In

the end, the goal is to support and uphold education as the great equalizer in our society. To achieve that goal, we have to provide equity in the school context.

Sociocultural Impact

Vygotsky (1978) posited social development theory, which said that human beings learn in the following ways:

1. By being social with one another.

2. Learners progress when they are given opportunities to challenge their own learning and the learning of others through talk.

3. Learning occurs when students are met with appropriate challenge.

4. The realm of acquirable knowledge, within an individual's learning trajectory, is the balance between an appropriate challenge, and allows learners to receive help from a more knowledgeable other.

These components outline what Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development or ZPD. Educators seemingly understand the concept of ZPD and the necessity for students to be able to socialize as a part of their learning; however, pedagogy does not always support this type of thinking. Although the instructional practices of many classrooms lend themselves to allowing students to be social in their learning, students of African descent continue to find themselves outside of social funds of knowledge supported by the dominant culture and at the bottom of the achievement continuum when state sanctioned standardized testing is used as a measure.

Schools have to continue to support the practice of constructing classrooms that support the sociocultural paradigm. Although one may walk into classrooms that are ostensibly offering the students the opportunities to participate in social activities that promote their learning, for many African American students, these activities are still missing the mark

Tree Peeling, **Pixabay User KarinMerlijn**

in closing the gap in achievement. It is not enough to put students in groups to *talk* about an oppressive curriculum, for teachers to use so-called culturally appropriate texts which many times still do not align with African American students' identities, or to put students in social groups where they still lack social power. African American students, who have been pushed to the fringes of the social circles in school settings, must be supported by their teachers and other school staff. Their voices must be given credence in the school context, they must be allowed to express their truths (without fear of retribution) about how they are treated in school, and their stories must be valued in their various modes of expression, even if those expressions are angry in nature and tone.

More often than not, African American students are exposed to curricula and texts that are not culturally and socially relevant and that do not match up with their cultural identities (Cazden, 1988; Johnson, 2019). Schools and teachers often assume that there is a monolithic African American identity and that instructional strategies and texts will work for every African American student. It is not enough to introduce texts that have African American authors (although this is extremely important) or give a group of Black boys texts about sports. African American students need identity-affirming texts with complex characters and themes with which they are familiar. Additionally, African American students should be exposed to texts that have characters with a positive life trajectory (Tatum, 2005). Many times when African American students reject canonical texts, they are regarded as oppositional, uninterested and unmotivated, and unresponsive to traditional methods of instruction that work for students whose identities align to the dominant cultural context found in those same texts.

Furthermore, if and when African American students are afforded the opportunities to participate in academic activities that allow them to use identity-affirming, school-based resources, they also have to be intentionally privileged

to have social power among their peers. In homogenous environments where African American students are the predominant group, schools and teachers must break down the non-cultural social barriers (e.g. popularity among students, personality conflicts, the differing academic abilities) that prevent students from having access to conversations and modes of thought presented by their peers. Teachers must be aware of these and address these directly in their classrooms. In school environments where African American students are not the predominant racial group, teachers must provide equitable space for African American students' voices. In order to do this, it is important for teachers to understand the historical implications of schooling for African American students and have the courage to challenge the dominant cultural perspective that often comes through the voices and actions of students who benefit from it.

In order to privilege the voices of traditionally marginalized students, in these classrooms, African American students should be given the opportunities to be in leadership positions. They must be chosen to lead discussion groups, to plan projects, to be able to use their cultural experiences to be influential among their peers. Schools often masquerade as egalitarian institutions, while praising and rewarding students based on meritocratic ideals. We often choose the student who is the captain of everything, the president of the student senate, and the purveyor of everything AP or IB, for positions in the classroom environment that gain them even more social power. The students themselves know this and seek opportunities to maintain their social power. In school environments where White students are the majority, they are often the students who are the beneficiaries of this dynamic.

In meritocratic educational environments, students are given access to certain language, modes of thought, and achieve social power based on their academic accomplishments. Sometimes, students achieve social power because of their out-of-school or familial relationships (Lewis, 2001). When educators either promote or support access to academic content via social power, they aid in the marginalization of African American students and other students of color. Moreover, discipline in meritocratic educational environments is based many times on subjective criteria, with race being one of the leading determinants as to whether or not a student will face out-of-school suspensions or expulsions.

In egalitarian academic environments, students' voices are central to the planning and the of construction of the classroom space and the pedagogical frameworks used by the teacher. Furthermore, in these types of environments, teachers understand the cultural contexts in which students build knowledge and they chose content alongside their students that align with their cultural identities. Social justice in instruction and discipline is at the core in these spaces and children are disciplined in a democratic way. In egalitarian environments, restorative language would be used with students and they would be provided opportunities to positively connect with the school environment. Thus, the zero tolerance codes of conduct and discipline policies, which have proven to be ineffective, and that have drastic effects on students of color, would be non-existent.

Teachers and principals have to commit themselves to improving their educational environments for African American children by intentionally choosing them for classroom and school leadership positions, implementing students' ideas with regard to student programming, exposing them to multiple types of literacy, and reconstituting school environments that recognize the historical context in which school exists for them. More specifically, educators should seek to make schools into organizations that promote social justice activities and provide a healthy balance of equity. Additionally, schools should commit themselves to anti-racist action and pedagogy by engaging in regular and ongoing training for all school staff.

Being Poor Is Not the Same As Being Black

Not every Black student is poor, but every Black student is subject to the racist dogma that finds subtle and not so subtle ways to enter American schools and school systems. The privilege that accompanies such dogma manifests itself in various ways. Specifically, words like poverty, poor, low-socioeconomic, or disadvantaged, that are used to refer to African American students and other students of color in all-Black or integrated White environments, are synonymously used to mean Black or African American. Similarly, in not-so-specific ways, in school districts that are inner-ring and outer-ring suburbs of the cities like Detroit, terms like "students from other districts" or "students who come from outside our district," almost always means students from De-

troit, which in turn, means Black students. When referring to students who are not performing well, I often hear educators ask, "well, how long has this student been in *our* district?" Students easily pick up on this nuanced language and develop oppositions to the environments in which they feel marginalized.

Many times school officials use socioeconomic designations about students as colloquial terms to represent racial designations. On its surface, the use of an economic designation to represent a racial designation is a tool that is used to soften the language around race. Moreover, language such as this allows its users to use non-racial terms to describe something that is highly racialized. Thus, the colloquial term "poverty" being used to mean Black or African American is the neo-liberal way to deracialize conversations about African American students, student performance, and the roles that schools play in improving or impeding learning for these students. When terms like these are used, African American people are denied the ability to define who they are for themselves, and the nomenclature used to define them, are ones that are rooted in hundreds of years of social and economic oppression. Moreover, when people are denied the ability to define themselves with regard to their racial identity, gender identity, who they are as learners, and define the impact that school has on those identities, they are being denied their humanity. Audre Lorde, author, philosopher, educator, and activist, once said, "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive." Our national data on the academic achievement of African American students is telling us that African American students are being eaten alive. Let us continue to examine how and why African American students are being eaten alive in our nation's schools. What roles do teachers and administrators play in this? What impact do hegemonic forces have on the academic performance of African American students?

If one can describe African American students by using their socioeconomic statuses, rather than their cultural identities, one can deny their humanity, deny the significance of the history of racism and racial oppression on African American students, blame the students and their families for their economic statuses, and conflate poor academic performance and poverty without recognizing the racist environments that many schools tend to be.

Educators and schools are not immune to racist beliefs about African American students. In fact, educators have helped to perpetuate and have actively participated in the cultural hegemony of African American students. This systemic erasure of students' cultural identities has led to African American students' rejection of school-based content, poor performance on standardized assessments, and an overall dis-identification with the institution of school (Johnson, 2019; Ogbu, 1991).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, or NCES, and the U.S. Department of Education, of the nation's 3.4 million public school teachers, 83% of them are White (NCES, 2009: U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Roughly 76% of those teachers are female; thus, the overwhelming majority of teachers of Black children are White and female (NCES, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Similarly, school principals are racially homologous, with 80% of all public school principals being White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). While African American students only make up 16% of the public school population in the United States, whether in urban, suburban, or rural school districts, most of them will have a preponderance of White female teachers during their K-12 education experience (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Thus, unless those teachers have extensive training in social justice and anti-racist work and feel as though they have a moral obligation to provide instruction and curriculum that helps to liberate African American children, there will be a disconnect between the teachers and African American students, and African American students and school environments.

If we continue with the assumption that there is a cultural disconnect among many of the White teachers and principals and the Black students that they teach, we can further assume that White educators who benefit from White privilege, do not often understand or recognize the impact of biased and racist beliefs on African American children. The fact that school officials often replace a cultural or racial identity marker when referring to students, with an economic marker, is emblematic of deficit thinking about African American students.

With regard to instruction, White educators also often align their own identities with the school content that they teach, particularly texts in English Language Arts or social studies. Practices such as these also represent and support

the dominant cultural perspective. To help to liberate the academic identities of African American students, schools must commit themselves to aligning content to the cultural and racial identities of these students.

Of course there are a myriad of social ills that impede African American students' academic progress in schools and the suggestion here is not that teachers and schools are solely responsible for fixing those ills, rather, that schools are institutions that serve as conduits through which many of those ills are isolated and amplified. As such, if educators subscribe to the belief that learning is social (Vygotsky, 1978) and schools are vehicles for learning, then schools are ex post facto, social institutions. If schools are social institutions, they are susceptible to all of the components (good and bad) of sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical paradigms. Teachers and administrators are also participants within those paradigms and their allegiances, biases, and beliefs do not melt away upon entrance into the school environment. Thus, schools are culpable in improving social environments, starting with their immediate environment, the school context.

From Integration to Liberation

Post *Brown v. Board of Education*, schools have struggled with how to meet the federal requirement of integrating schools. More directly put, school districts have failed to ensure that African American students have equal access to a quality education, up-to-date resources, and opportunities to access language and experiences of the dominant culture. Access to the language and content of the dominant culture is necessary for students to be able to enter school spaces and be successful upon graduation from high school. Furthermore, access to language is granted when students are exposed to multiple texts in multiple genres, across multiple themes. African American students gain this access not through just mere exposure to texts though, but alongside more knowledgeable others acting as journeymen who apprentice them in reading, writing, and thinking.

The difficulty that districts have had in this endeavor is that they view integration as a feat to be accomplished rather than a foundation upon which to build. In the latter part of the 20th century and moving into the 21st century, African American families saw an improvement in their economic

mobility and their ability to access wealth through equity in property. Thus, African American students were enrolled into predominantly White school environments in suburban areas, but many were still marginalized when it came to having access to high level content. Furthermore, African American students continued to be over-represented in school suspensions and expulsions and have had difficulty breaking through the generations of static social paradigms.

In one suburban Detroit district in the late 1980s and early 1990s, scores of African American male students were retained if they came from the Detroit Public School system. One of the students who is now in his 30s, had this to say:

> My first schooling started in Detroit where I was an average student. When we moved to the suburbs, I was forced to retake the 1st grade. I was really confused and humiliated after a few weeks of starting the second grade. I felt as though I wasn't competent as other students and was made fun of. I was fortunate to come from a strong family and had friends who wanted to excel.

This student went on to earn his Executive MBA from Rutgers University, with high honors. Although this particular student was able to surmount the obstacles placed before him by his school district, many Black students do not. Even in integrated environments, Black students are often relegated to lower-level content, often determined by their performance on standardized tests, and they face disproportionate suspensions. Moreover, integrated school systems still often support and allow structures where African American students are not proportionately represented in the highest performing schools in the district and in honors level and advanced placement classrooms in every other school. There are a preponderance of African American students in less challenging classes, non-academic electives, or in special education.

The flaw in the way that most public schools systems integrate school environments is that they view integration as the end goal. Integration in and of itself does not liberate Black students. In a model where schools and districts do not go beyond integration, African American students may not find a connection to the teachers and school-based content. Furthermore, there is no promise that schools and districts will be fully integrated even if they are culturally diverse. In order for schools to move from integration to liberation, par-

ticularly for Black students, every teacher must be committed to culturally-relevant pedagogy, they must commit to anti-racist pedagogy and anti-racist school structures and polices, and they must position the voices of the learners as central to the schooling process. Schools often revel in the fact that they have diverse student populations and while that is great, it is not enough. Schools should be places where the multiple identities that African American students have to develop in order to navigate spaces that are predominantly white, are valued. Moreover, African American students also need to feel emotional and psychological safety; thus, the fear of unjust or inequitable discipline has to be addressed. As educators, we can commit ourselves to the scholastic liberation of African American students when we choose to commit to actively addressing our biases and perceptions through professional learning. Without the healthy relationship between African American students and the school, teacher, and content, we will continue to struggle in providing environments in which they can be successful.

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Dr. Aaron M. Johnson is the author of *A Walk in Their Kicks: Literacy, Identity, and the Schooling of Young Black Males* published by Teachers College Press. Aaron also serves as associate superintendent for instructional services and organizational leadership for Farmington Public Schools, adjunct lecturer at Wayne State University, and adjunct professor at Madonna University.