

CROSSES TO BEAR AND PROMISES TO KEEP The Jubilee Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*

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*This article examines a decade or more of scholarly and popular writings that blame the persistence of racial inequality in educational performance primarily, if not exclusively, on the cultural inheritance of African Americans. This article focuses in part on the ways in which contemporary rationales for educational inequality are linked to a legacy of blaming racial subordination on African American personality traits and cultural norms. Furthermore, this legacy of "victim blaming" and its distortions of the African American past are considered in the context of the historical scholarship on education and cultural values in the African American experience. Finally, this article shows how unfounded assumptions about African American culture lead to day-to-day contempt and pity for the intellect and character of African American schoolchildren, giving them a heavy cross to bear on the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*.*

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A half century after the U.S. Supreme Court found that segregated schools are inherently unequal, there is growing evidence that the nation's public schools are becoming more segregated and that academic achievement is becoming more unequal. As Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee (2004) documented, for more than a decade, the nation has headed backward toward greater segregation for African American students. For Latinos, who have become the largest group of minority students, segregation has been steadily increasing ever since the first national data were collected in the late 1960s. According to Orfield and Lee, these patterns extend to the

nation's suburbs. The massive migration of African American and Latino families to the nation's suburbs is producing hundreds of newly segregated and unequal schools and frustrating the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to create desegregated schools and equality of educational opportunity. The recent emphasis on choice undermines rather than fosters the promise of *Brown*. Orfield and Lee (2004) concluded, "Both charter schools and private schools are even more segregated than our public schools" (p. 4). More important, after test scores for African American and Latinos rose steadily between 1970 and the late 1980s, and gaps that separated them from Whites had narrowed, test score gaps widened again in the 1990s, when scores for Whites remained virtually flat while scores for Blacks and Latinos declined. The patterns of increased segregation and results of various standardized test scores leave *Brown* with a troubled legacy on its jubilee anniversary. The dismay of the nation is fully understandable. What is more troubling and not understandable, however, is the growing tendency among some scholars and pundits to blame the persistence of unequal educational performance on the culture of Africans.

This article examines a decade or more of scholarly and popular writings that blame the persistence of racial inequality in educational performance primarily, if not exclusively, on the cultural inheritance of African Americans. Deeply frustrated that the degree of relative improvement in African American academic achievement has not moved closer to national averages, some scholars and writers have pointed to African American cultural norms as the fundamental reason that the promise of *Brown* has gone unfulfilled. The reemergence of this "victim blaming" ideology in the early 21st century reminds one of the ideological rationales for racial segregation at the dawn of the 20th century. Among the proponents of Jim Crow, legally mandated and customary rights of racial subordination were merely incidental in the persistence of segregation and inequality; they argued that the immorality, ignorance, and depravity of African Americans was the central cause of the differences between Whites and Blacks. Being blamed for one's own subordination is a cross that African Americans have borne for centuries, and it is somewhat disturbing to witness the

reemergence of this burden as a means to rationalize the unfulfilled promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Yet, some scholars and commentators who try to account for the contemporary racial gap in academic achievement take a historical view that lays differences in school performance (i.e., test score performance) at the doorstep of African American culture. This article focuses in part on the ways in which contemporary rationales for educational inequality are linked to a legacy of blaming racial subordination on African American personality traits and cultural norms. Furthermore, this legacy of victim blaming and its distortions of the African American past are considered in the context of the historical scholarship on education and cultural values in the African American experience. Finally, this chapter shows how unfounded assumptions about African American culture lead to day-to-day contempt and pity for the intellect and character of African American schoolchildren, giving them a heavy cross to bear on the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

As historian Daryl Scott (1997) has demonstrated, "experts" motivated or heavily influenced by racial ideologies and politics have historically blamed African American oppression on pathological cultural norms or what he terms "the damaged black psyche." Between 1880 and 1920, the period in which federal, state, and local governments instituted de jure segregation and political disfranchisement, the social scientists and historians who shaped the scholarly and popular images of African Americans depicted them as incapable of and undeserving of participation in mainstream American society. During the period between 1920 and the 1950s, liberal scholars and writers dominated in shaping the prevailing image of African American life, history, and personality. To support various policies of inclusion and rehabilitation, and to counter theories of scientific racism, they also invoked the idea that African Americans had been psychologically damaged by the experience of slavery and segregation. For example, to secure victory in *Brown v. Board of Education*, liberal "experts" were more than willing to stress the damaging effects of racial segregation on the African American personality in general and self-esteem in particular. As liberal influence over the African American image waned in the post-Kennedy-Johnson years, conservatives regained

ascendancy with the Nixon administration and invoked the damaged personality imagery as part of their backlash against civil rights gains in the 1960s (Scott, 1997, p. xii).

In post-Civil Rights America, among media pundits, scholars, and politicians, the tendency to view African Americans as people uniquely damaged by their own group experience and culture has continued well into the present. In recent years, the conservative backlash against civil rights, particularly school desegregation and affirmative action, has fostered the idea that African Americans are damaged socially and academically by a cultural inheritance that devalues intellectual achievement. More specifically, conservatives argue that an entrenched culture of anti-intellectualism is primarily responsible for the racial gap in school performance. "Black culture," argued Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom (2003), "has much to do with the racial gap in academic achievement" (p. 120). John McWhorter (2000), a Black professor at the University of California, Berkeley, has written that African American underachievement "stems not from laziness or inferior mental power" but from "a strong tendency toward anti-intellectualism at all levels of the black community" (pp. xii, 126). McWhorter argued that "the actual determining factor" of poor school performance among contemporary African American schoolchildren is "a cult of anti-intellectualism" that is endemic to all age groups and social classes in the U.S. Black population. Orlando Patterson (2000), a Black sociologist at Harvard, argued in a similar vein that the underachievement of African American students cannot be attributed to the long history of segregation and inequality, to genetic differences between the races; or to class differences. "In a nutshell," argued Patterson, "it is culture" (p. 206). Dinesh D'Souza (1991) wrote that Blacks and Whites in this country do not have vastly different goals. They have shared goals, he maintained. But they have vastly different cultures and therefore different means of achieving these goals. He called for "a concerted and direct effort to raise the cultural standards of all groups and particularly that of blacks" (p. 794). If significant change is to occur in African American academic achievement, contended D'Souza (1991), "we specifically must address the cultural breakdown in the African-American community" (p. 794). In his last book, the late John U. Ogbu (2003)

detailed his analysis of the racial gap in educational performance among middle-class African American students in the public schools of Shaker Heights, Ohio. He rejected arguments that racial biases or structural inequalities were holding back the academic achievement of Black students. Rather, he concluded that the family and peer culture of African American students was the central problem.

This most recent trend of blaming the achievement gap on the cultural inheritance of African American families and students has been developing since the mid-1980s when the late John Ogbu theorized that a long history of discrimination created a peculiar African American cultural identity, which he defined as an oppositional cultural frame of reference. He theorized (Ogbu, 2002) that African American students "are probably discouraged from working hard to succeed in school by generations of collective experience" (pp. 22-23). He resorted to historical assumptions about the formation and development of educational values in African American culture to explain why contemporary African American students are discouraged from working hard to succeed in school. In Ogbu's explanation, the reason for this lack of adequate and persevering effort is probably that, historically, African Americans, as were other involuntary minorities, were not "adequately rewarded for their educational achievement" (1990, p. 53). Consequently, "they may not have developed a widespread effort of optimism or a strong culture ethic of hard work and perseverance in pursuit of education" (p. 53). Therefore, African Americans developed over time cultural values and a collective identity that contradict and therefore undermine their verbal endorsement of academic achievement. Specifically, African Americans developed an "oppositional collective identity to White culture (p. 25). Hence, they perceive school learning not as instrumental behavior for getting a good education for future employment, but as assimilation or replacing Black culture with White culture (pp. 25-26). Thus, high expectations, mitigated by a weak work ethic and a persistent opposition to so-called White models of academic achievement, lead to frustration and low academic performance among African American schoolchildren.

In addition to being discouraged from working hard as a consequence of cultural inheritance that opposes learning and self-improvement, Ogbu argued that African American students also adopt folk heroes who "actually encourage disregarding rules in domains controlled by White Americans" (pp. 25-26). Finally, according to Ogbu (2002), African American students define their school culture as oppositional to White school culture. Under such circumstances, they fear adopting White or mainstream school culture because it would mean replacing their own cultural and language identities in order to successfully learn White ways" (Ogbu, 2002, p. 23). Consequently, African American students, to oppose mainstream school culture, actively resist learning the school curriculum, following the rules, doing homework, and assuming responsibility for their academic performance (p. 26).

John H. McWhorter (2000), borrowing heavily from Ogbu's theory of the relationship between Black culture and poor school performance, asserted with even greater force that African American culture is the cause of low academic achievement among African American children. Specifically, McWhorter argued that the achievement gap between Black students and White students is "an externally imposed cultural disorder that has taken a life of its own" (p. x). Throughout his polemic on Black culture and academic achievement, McWhorter relied on unfounded assumptions about the African American experience during slavery and Jim Crow. He argued that cultural norms uncongenial to learning and self-improvement (i.e., anti-intellectualism) attained a grip on African American culture because "the slave system severed Africans from the models in their indigenous cultures of black people living lives of the mind" (p. 137). Following this initial separation, McWhorter continued, "Generations and generations of blacks lived and died in a culture context in which books and learning were actively withheld or lent only grudgingly" (p. 138). This context, McWhorter concluded, produced and reproduced a slave and ex-slave culture that devalued ways of thinking necessary to scholarly success, and over generations African Americans developed a "wariness of school and learning" (pp. 138, 150). Although dominant-class Whites, according to McWhorter, imposed centuries of anti-intellectualism on many generations of African Americans during

slavery and segregation, "today the trait has developed a life of its own within our community" (p. 151). Hence, the contemporary "achievement-gap" between Blacks and Whites, wrote McWhorter, "is not foisted upon black Americans by whites, but passed on as a cultural trait" (p. 151). Yesterday's oppression and racism have become today's internalized, intractable cultural pathology. Although the two were joined in the distant past, they are now totally divorced from each other, and thus neither racial bias nor unequal resources contribute to the current racial gap in academic achievement. In summary, McWhorter maintained repeatedly that low academic performance among contemporary African American students is the result of neither racial discrimination nor unequal school resources but is the result of an African American family cultural inheritance that is deeply anti-intellectual and thus opposed to academic success.

Are such assumptions about the formation and development of African American culture warranted? Put another way, does the vast body of historical scholarship on the value of education in the African experience support contemporary assumptions that education has not been highly valued by generations of African Americans? Although there have been too few intersections between historians of African American culture and identity and historians of African American education, it is important to note that cultural histories of African American education document educational norms and values that are too complex and adaptive to be defined either as *anti-intellectual* or *oppositional culture*. Indeed, the most comprehensive study of literacy and education during slavery does not support McWhorter's notion that slave owners caused slaves to conclude, "Blacks and school don't go together" (pp. 27-30). Rather, concluded historian Janet Cornelius (1991), "The belief in the value of literacy and education was instilled deep within the African-American consciousness and took shape during the slave experience as a form of resistance to oppression and a maintenance of psychological freedom" (p. 150). In sharp contrast to Ogbu's contention that African American coping strategies or resistance to White racism took the form of rejecting education as White culture, Cornelius concluded that resistance took the form of valuing education as a condition of freedom. Her findings are consistent with

the findings of historian Thomas L. Webber (1978), which are detailed in his study of education and culture in slave communities.

The historiography of African American education during the Reconstruction Era supports the attitudes toward learning and self-improvement that are documented in the scholarship on slavery. Historians Robert C. Morris, Jacqueline Jones, Ronald Butchart, James Anderson (see Anderson, 1988), and James L. Leloudis (see Leloudis, 1996) characterized African Americans' beliefs in education not as oppositional to White culture or as anti-intellectual, but as resistance to oppression and a means to liberation. "For black people," Jones (1980) concluded, "schooling represented individual and collective defiance to white authority and a means of expanding their horizons beyond the limits of the cotton plantation" (p. 49). Similarly, Morris (1981) concluded the following:

Emphasis on black self-help, practical training, the refutation of prejudice through education, and gradual improvement of racial conditions is most often associated with Booker T. Washington, but this approach had its first large-scale application in the South during the 1860s. (p. 248)

In a similar vein, Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996) documented the dynamic existence of a coherent culture and identity in rural North Carolina that informed all questions of teaching, curriculum, academic achievement, school-community relations, student-teacher relations, and the role of school administrators in the larger African American communities. Instead of discovering cultural opposition to academic achievement, she found a nurturing educational environment that placed the success of African American children at the center of its mission. Parents sacrificed financially to meet the school's needs, and teachers and administrators put in extra time for professional development, specialized student assistance, and home visits. Clearly, parents, students, teachers, and administrators in Walker's study did not view learning standard English or other subjects in the school curriculum as the imposition of White cultural norms or the loss of Black identity. Walker's findings are supported in an earlier history of African American education in Hyde County, North Carolina. *Along Freedom Road* (1994), a wonderful

study by historian David Cecelski, extends the analysis of African American attitudes toward schooling until well into the 20th century. Altogether, the historical scholarship on African American education in the South provides no basis for the assumptions that Blacks in slavery, Reconstruction, or Jim Crow came to view education or academic success as threats to Black identity or as values antithetical to African American traditions. On the contrary, education was highly valued as a means to both liberation and individual success. This is not only evident in the social history of African American culture and education but also in the hundreds of autobiographies and memoirs written by African Americans. Louis Hilton's (1998) work documents the strong beliefs in academic success that are found in the autobiographies of African Americans from all kinds of backgrounds ranging from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

One might ask whether such norms and values have been confined mainly to the South, particularly the rural South. First, it is important to underscore the point that for 341 years, from 1619 to 1960, the vast majority of African Americans lived in the South. At the beginning of the 20th century, 90% of African Americans lived in the South. Thus, one cannot speak of the collective historical experiences of African Americans apart from the Southern context. Put quite simply, the question of African American collective identity and cultural norms from the colonial era until well into the 20th century is fundamentally a Southern question.

Nonetheless, the northern urban context must be examined on its own terms. The work that has been done on African Americans in the North during the antebellum and post-Civil War eras is consistent with findings of historians who have studied the development of education and culture in the South. Historians Robert L. McCaul (see McCaul, 1987), Leonard Curry, and V. P. Franklin documented African American attitudes toward education in the urban North and found beliefs and behavior quite consistent with those in the South. Significantly, the histories of Black education in the urban North stress the individual and community values of education that were imbedded in the culture and identity of northern African Americans. Leonard P. Curry's (1981) work on free Blacks in antebellum urban America contends that African Americans "no

less firmly than whites" perceived that their individual and communal advancement "required the literacy, intellectual development, and acquisition of non-manual skills that appeared to be obtainable only through an organized educational process" (p. 147). Indeed, Curry maintained, "It is possible that blacks . . . placed greater faith in the liberating qualities of education than did the whites and, hence, sought its presumed benefits more earnestly" (pp. 147-148). V. P. Franklin (1979) also stressed the centrality of education to African Americans' sense of identity and consciousness. Most Black Philadelphians, Franklin wrote, "considered ignorance a form of slavery, and believed that education could serve as an important path toward freedom" (1979, p. 197). Therefore, in spite of conditions in the public schools, "Blacks could still value schooling and education, and continue to work to drive ignorance from their community" (Franklin, 1979, p. 197). Franklin documented the strong cultural ethic of education in Black Philadelphia and the hard work and perseverance in pursuit of quality education for African American children and adults (Franklin, 1992).

Clearly, contemporary notions that the academic success of African American schoolchildren is held back mainly by a pathological cultural inheritance dating back to slavery and segregation have no basis in the historical scholarship on African American education and culture. Consequently, assumptions about the origin and persistence of anti-intellectual values or oppositional cultural values that adversely affect the academic success of Black schoolchildren, as expressed in the social theories of scholars like the Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, Dinesh D'Souza, Orlando Patterson, John Ogbu, and John McWhorter, are disconnected from the cumulative body of historical scholarship on African American culture and education. Such deterministic and absolutist notions of the African American past abound in undocumented assertions and plausible legends, all of which are unnecessary because of the detailed and comprehensive studies that have been written on the history of African American education and culture over the past three decades.

It is indeed ironic that a body of literature has built up that blames the racial gap in academic achievement on African American family and teen culture. This literature, which is tied closely to

anti-affirmative action sentiment, serves to rationalize persistent inequality and segregation, and flies in the face of the large body of historical scholarship that documents African Americans' deeply entrenched and enduring beliefs in the value of education and their historic struggle to acquire decent educational opportunities against almost overwhelming odds. More important, the blaming of poor school performance on Black cultural inheritance places an unnecessary and dangerous stigma on the character and intellect of African American schoolchildren. As Theresa Perry (2003a) pointed out, one "can scarcely find a black student who cannot recall, or give you a litany of instances, where he or she has been automatically assumed to be intellectually incompetent" (p. B10). Perry was generous in thinking that few respectable people will publicly assert that African Americans are intellectually second-rate. In fact, an increasing number of scholars and writers are very articulate and quite outspoken about the intellectual incompetence of African American students. More specifically, they are articulating notions of intellectual incompetence or mediocrity aimed pointedly at African American students in contradistinction to children of African and West Indian descent.

McWhorter, a professor of linguistics at Berkeley, made a point of saying, "Every black undergraduate I have taught who has been one of the best students in my class has been of Caribbean extraction" (2000, p. 144). Lest we should miss his intended target, he underscored the point: "It is not 'being black in America' alone that creates a friction with school; it is black American culture specifically" (2000, p. 145). In a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, African American professor Phillip Richards (2002) made a similar point: "With the exception of a few high-performers—often women from the West Indies or Africa—most black students do not achieve academic distinction" (p. 2002, p. B12). This kind of rhetoric increases the burden of "stereotype threat" (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995, 1998) on African American schoolchildren, a cross that they have borne for centuries. As Perry (2003b) stated, "For no American group has there been such a pervasive, persistent, well-articulated, and unabated assumption of mental incompetence" (p. B10).

There is growing evidence to support the idea that stereotypes and low expectations have harmful effects on students of color. For example, in a series of studies conducted with students at Stanford University, psychologist Claude Steele found that the negative stereotypes about African Americans' intellectual abilities impede Blacks' performance on standardized tests—a condition he called *stereotype threat*. Steele developed the theory that a stereotype threat—the threat of being perceived as fitting a negative stereotype or the fear of poor performance confirming that stereotype—can be powerful enough to shape the intellectual performance and academic identities of entire groups of people. According to Steele and Aronson (Steele 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995), everyone experiences stereotype threat because we are all members of some group about which negative stereotypes exist. When capable Black college students fail to perform as well as their White counterparts, the explanation often has less to do with preparation or ability than with the threat of stereotypes about their capacity to.

In some of the studies, Steele told one group of students that the tests were measures of their abilities; he told another group that the tests were laboratory experiments to see how students solved problems. In each case, African American students did much worse when they were told that the tests measured their abilities, and much better—and at the same level as Whites—when they were told the tests were laboratory studies. Steele concluded that the identification of a test as a measure of their abilities activates a racial stereotype and provokes self-doubt among the test takers. Similarly, Steele found that African American students performed much worse when asked to identify their race in a preliminary questionnaire. When not asked to do so, African Americans outperformed Whites. The question about race, Steele and Aronson concluded, promoted stereotype threat and thus hampered the capacity of Blacks to succeed (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1998).

As we inch closer to the jubilee anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the disappointments with the unfulfilled promises will become even more pronounced. Over the past decade, the nation has retreated rapidly from school desegregation. With the *Dowell* and *Freeman* decisions in the early 1990s, the U.S. Supreme Court made it far easier for districts to abandon desegre-

gation plans, and we have witnessed more rapid increases in public school segregation during the past decade. The current case of *Williams v. State of California* reminds us how deep and widespread are the racial disparities in educational resources, and a newly released study documents how African American, Latino, and Native American youth are being left behind by the graduate rate crisis and by state policies that require schools to retain students in a grade or deny them high school diplomas on the basis of test scores alone (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). When the nation has difficulty facing its past squarely, minorities often serve as scapegoats for deep social ills. We have already witnessed efforts to blame the lack of progress in access and equity on the cultural inheritance of African American families and children. In their recent book, *No Excuses* (2003), Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom maintain that Black family culture is the main obstacle holding back the academic progress of African American schoolchildren (p. 120-147). What, then, accounts for the steady and remarkable academic progress that African American schoolchildren made from the beginning of the 20th century to the point that their test scores began to decline in the late 1980s? It is fundamentally illogical to believe that African American family culture had much to do with the decline in test scores but little to do with the gains in test scores. More importantly, there exists a vast body of historical scholarship on African American education that documents the value of learning and self-improvement in Black culture. Clearly, it is time to stop blaming the persistence of segregation and inequality on the cultural inheritance of African Americans. The promises of *Brown* are unfulfilled, and the nation has to face up to this reality. Let us not evade the problems by making African Americans the scapegoats for the nation's failure and giving them yet another cross to bear.

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