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Navigating Educational Terrain:
Tracing the Black Agenda

By

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the legislative, social and economic development of public education in the United States. Since its inception in the 17th century, American schools have been subject to criticism, yet many of the same issues (rote, homogenous teaching, lack of achievement, educators devoid of passion and purpose) *still* occupy convoluted dialogue between education reformists and parents alike. However, within this narrative lies the more complex narrative of education for Black Americans. For much of this country's history, Black Americans have existed in an often intensely segregated environment. Molded by ruthless disenfranchisement, a certain "Black educational agenda" managed to ripen within this context of political and economic oppression.

Principles of community uplift, knowledge of self, cultural identity, and collective survival are woven deeply and intricately into this search for freedom, knowledge and independence. Consequently, education for Black Americans has been perceived and used as a tool of liberation for centuries. In an attempt to trace both an overarching development of education, and the parallel shifts in education for Black Americans, I will apply a historical analysis of the past three centuries using broad strokes of comparison. In hopes of better understanding whether the Black agenda is still alive in well amidst contemporary educational terrains, I will analyze interviews with local educators and administrators.

Introduction:

The legacy and continuity of American schooling is as complex as it runs deep. During its three-century-long pilgrimage, education has grown robust with innovation but bewildered with corporate-driven reform and dulled by persistent inequality. Its forerunners and architects look to us across the centuries, eyes filled with hope and sorrow, only to find their precious creation seemingly in a constant state of crisis. While my understanding pales in comparison to the actual complexity of the matter, I am not alone in my concerns. Nearly since their inception has there been an unrelenting, somewhat *obsessive* critique of America's schools, highlighting a panoply of issues ranging from unqualified, disinterested, and overworked teachers, to gridlock bureaucracy and disengaged students. In fact, a keyword search by Gregory Cizek through ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) found 4,027 articles published since 1966, and 260 book listings that used word *crisis* in combination with *education*, *school(s)*, or *classroom*. "In every decade since the 1940s, books have described the entire American school system—from elementary to universities—as being in crisis"¹. Blanket indictments preside over the conversation surrounding this system, and its history is generally understood as repeated waves of claimed reform and remedy. American schools rank poorly when compared to major industrialized countries, which is to some extent indicative of a clear and troubling racial divide. Simply put, not *all* of America's schools are teetering on the brink of tragic indolence. In fact, a majority of mainstream America receives an average (or above average) education compared to their lower socio-

¹ Robert Franciosi, *The Rise and Fall of American Public Schools* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004) 1.

economic counterparts, leaving entire communities subjected to the mercy of “educational apartheid”, to a perpetual state of unrealized potential and devastating societal harms.

A double-edged sword, the education system in the U.S. has been the subject of intense debate for centuries. Indeed this mechanism is a major driving force behind human civilization, self-worth, the “lifeblood of democracy, the fuel of a strong and prosperous economy”, yet by the same token is crippling in its inability to provide uniform, quality benefits for all students, and, ultimately, its unrivaled ability to construct and crystalize deep-rooted socio-economic fissures². Being that education is an essential measure by which we gauge the “status” of countries, it comes as no surprise that the U.S. ranks second in terms of the lowest social mobility of industrialized high-income countries³. As a whole, the country is crawling behind at horse-and-buggy pace: American students rank 25th in math, 17th in science and 14th in reading compared to students in 27 industrialized countries notwithstanding the fact that it allocates an above average, 7.3% of its GDP on education, or that teachers in the U.S. spend a nearly unparalleled average of 1,050 to 1,100 hours a year on instruction⁴. It would seem that the failing of schooling in America is manifest, yet the magnitude of this shameful disservice cannot be fully understood by quantitative calculations alone.

² Darrel W. Drury and Justin D. Baer, *The American Public School Teacher: Past, Present, & Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education, 2011) 3.

³ “Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012.”

<http://www.oecd.org/education/CN%20-%20United%20States.pdf>

⁴ “The Broad Education Foundation: The Education Crisis.”

http://www.broadeducation.org/about/crisis_stats.html ; “Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012.”

In further examining the morbid state of America's schooling system racial disparities and educational deficiencies quickly reveal themselves. Nearly 60 years after the Supreme Court ruled that "segregated schools were inherently unequal and, therefore unconstitutional", we find ourselves in an eerily similar situation—providing students of color an inferior education⁵. African American students drop out of high school at a rate of 40% (compared to the national 28%), are three times more likely than White students to be placed in special education programs, and generally 70% of these 12th grade students score below basic on NAEP math exams⁶. Appalling, yet these figures merely reflect a glimpse of the illusion of alleged educational equality.

Perhaps even *more* sinister is the use of education as a tool of cultural alienation and annihilation. Referencing the abovementioned quote, education for Blacks in America is hardly an instrument that transmits and instills messages of Black history, culture, substance, or prominence. On the contrary, the values of self-sufficiency, racial pride, knowledge of self, and community uplift that have been integral to the liberatory tradition of resistance and independence in Black communities for centuries, are absent from mainstream pedagogy. Knowing that ruthless disenfranchisement has prompted the use of education as a liberating weapon, but that this tradition

⁵ Mary Ellen Leahy, "School Desegregation and Prejudice in the United States."

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1988/1/88.01.03.x.html>

⁶ "America Succeeds: The Facts." <http://americasucceeds.org/the-facts/>; "A Shared Agenda: A Leadership Challenge to Improve College Access and Success."

http://www.usc.edu/dept/chepa/IDApays/publications/SharedAgenda_FullReport.pdf; "High School Reform: National and State Trends."

<http://www.cta.org/~media/Documents/PDFs/Prof%20Dev%20Pub%20PDFs/HighSchoolReformpdf.pdf?dmc=1&ts=20131028T1728022915dfpdf>

Knowing that Black education has been molded by ruthless disenfranchisement and thus used as a liberating weapon, but also that this tradition has been subject to, and taken shape within, the broader development of American schooling, I ask two central questions: How have Blacks navigated the formidable hindrances of American economic, social, and political terrains in order to execute their educational agenda, and how is its use interpreted today? These questions are the foundation upon which I have constructed my research and guided the trajectory of this paper.

A number of scholars have analyzed the intricacies of urban education. Two approaches differing in focus, yet identical in their concern have attempted to identify its sources. Some authors more than others, propose varied solutions to the issues facing African American students. On one side of the spectrum falls a general focus on American urban public schools, teachers, curriculum, and reform. Renowned educator, historian, author and administrator Lawrence Cremin has published work that is chief among scholarship on American education. His three-volume, Pulitzer Prize-winning book entitled *American Education*, traces the economic, political and cultural forces that shape the nation's schools during Industrialization and Metropolitanization. Cremin begins his analysis from 1870—a time by which public schooling had become prevalent, increasing in enrollment, years of schooling spent, and average length of the public school year⁷. In his narrative, Cremin then follows the development of schooling by reviewing the work of progressive change agents such as Margaret Mead and John Dewey, identifying

⁷ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience 1876 – 1980* (NY, NY: Harper & Row, 1988) 544.

the beginnings of standardized testing, groundbreaking court cases filled with hope, and the never ending tug-of-war over what should be taught by whom and how. To the question at hand, Cremin does visit the topic of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the difference between equality of opportunity vs. equality of results amidst racial isolation and inequality in public schools, but does not devote much of his study toward detailing this struggle nor does he propose any viable remedies.

Similarly *The Rise and Fall of American Public Schools* analyzes the development of urban schools with a keen eye to the subject of continuity, change, and reform. Franciosi acknowledges that the public education system is quite different today than it was 200, 100 or even 50 years ago—that it now serves over 90 percent of American children compared to 65 percent in 1869. Nevertheless, he questions whether its costs currently outweigh its benefits⁸. Through this critical lens he finds that, for over two centuries American education has been (praised) and experienced several legislative victories, yet the battle for equity wages on⁹. Franciosi writes of the ills of general, mainstream school policy yet *does* address ways to ameliorate them in his chapter *Reforming American Education*. He classifies reforms into two main categories—accountability and establishment reforms—yet is largely silent on how these proposals translate to Black communities of learning. Nevertheless, this text helps deconstruct the difference in changes between policy, pedagogy and the often loosely defined term “reform”.

The other side of the spectrum is comprised of literature surrounding the complexities of Black education. Predictably, a particular focus is given to the

⁸ Franciosi, 9.

⁹ Franciosi, 8.

evidence of its negative attributes—issues of academic underachievement, unparalleled dropout rates, classroom disengagement, and perceived community discord. However a more limited body of work is geared toward the intellectual, social, economic, political, and psychological *uplifting* of Blacks, their communities, and the schools in which they attend. Inherent in these studies is a visible blueprint, a fundamental *acknowledgement* that this demographic, just by the nature of the group into which they are born, are at a significant risk for academic failure. However, in light of the litany of challenges that menace these students, that this race is too often studied as a problem, scholars have attempted to diagnose and treat the symptoms in equally extensive ways.

Here, the objective is to create a transformative agenda, adopting cultural consciousness, self-identification/reliance, and communal political empowerment as tools to combat the onslaught of forces working to slow positive educational benefits. Esteemed forefather of Black history, author, journalist, activist, and founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Carter G. Woodson and his book *The Mis-education of the Negro* published in 1933 laid the groundwork for a constructive critique of the educational system with substantial reference to its disfiguring effects on African Americans. His concept of mis-education relied on the fact that the system's failure to adequately recognize and present Negro History in schools relegates the heritage, significance, societal contribution and positive image of Africans and African Americans; it dooms them to accepting the inferior role assigned to him by the dominant race. The assertion the "mere imparting of information is not education [, that] the effort must result in

making a man think and do for himself” is the basic point of inquiry that has compelled me to think critically of the role of education¹⁰. However without the support and urgency that later came to exist, Woodson did not propose such drastic action or concrete methods of reform as future scholars would.

Black Education: A Transformative Research and Action Agenda for the New Century by Joyce E. King, is a compilation of renown intellectuals whose writings serves to identify “discontinuities, injustices, and bad practices that have been perpetuated on Black people over time, but...also identify the historical legacy of strength and struggle that has allowed Black people to make powerful contributions to their own education and that of others”¹¹. As it relates to my research, this seminal text investigates and identifies systemic issues hindering the education of Blacks in the U.S. and other Diaspora contexts. Using the findings of the American Education Research Association’s (AERA) Commission on Research in Black Education (CORIBE), this volume presents recommendations to challenge orthodox thinking and reverse the injurious effects of alienating school knowledge, culturally irrelevant curriculum, nominal financial support, unqualified teachers, and racial bias in special education. More importantly however, it demonstrates a positive role for culture in learning, the academy, and community. These practical links have helped shaped the ideological approach on which Chapter 5 is based.

Similarly, Peter C. Murrell Jr.’s book entitled *African-centered Pedagogy* holds that existing and contemporary educational frameworks are ineffective and harmful

¹⁰ Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1933) viii.

¹¹ Joyce E. King, *Black Education: A Transformative Research & Action Agenda for the New Century* (Mawah, NJ: Erlbaum Associates, 2005) xvi.

but *could* hold promise if reinterpreted. With this potential in mind, Murrell Jr. provides a practical guide that is rooted in African-centered practice and couched in notions of racial pride, intellectual excellence, acquisition of self-determination, and universal humanity. The principles put forth by this African-centered pedagogy are central to the efforts of revitalizing and advancing the Black educational agenda¹². *Educating Our Black Children* by Richard Majors, *Too Much Schooling Too Little* by Mwalimu Shujaa, and *Urban Schools Public Will* by Norm Fruchter are also grounded in the belief that school cultures perpetuate the race-based achievement gap obsessed with controlling, monitoring, disciplining, and testing. According to these texts, the inadequacy of education is linked to the identification of Blacks as belonging to a culturally inferior caste group whose heritage and beliefs are incongruent with school environments. In order to transform urban public schools and the populations they serve, community-based collaboration, enhanced teacher-pupil and school-community relationships, social justice and equity of educational quality must be embraced¹³. *Still Not Equal* by Peter Lang also examines how the effects of racialized political and social influences shape the dynamics of the educational and social experiences of Black children. Lang follows the historical pursuit of access and attainment, and hence critically assesses whether those goals are currently being fulfilled. As did the previous scholars, Lang also proposes a

¹² Peters C. Murrell Jr., *African Centered Pedagogy: Developing Schools of Achievement for African American Children* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2002).

¹³ Norm Fruchter, *Urban Schools, Public Will: Making Education Work For All Our Children* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2007); Richard Majors, *Educating Our Black Children: New Directions And Radical Approaches* (London, England: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001).

series of practical in-class strategies aimed at enhancing Black academic experience. As a joint body of work, these books improve our understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, schooling and education, and between what *is* and what *should* be. As such, much of the ideology set forth in these books is congruent with the themes that drive my research, and will appear throughout.

Indeed since their forced introduction to the United States, Blacks have steadily used education as a liberating force, a tool against alienation and cultural annihilation. This agenda (meaning the purposes and objectives of education) however, has transformed over time amidst the evolving socio-economic and political atmosphere of the country. Considering aforementioned illnesses that plague the current education system, many argue that today's agenda is wrought with disunity and disillusion. Others use the increasing numbers of Black students attending college as a clear indication of great progress. Given that the gap of educational polarity continues to expand, we might be tempted to ask which position is more "accurate". Yet the important question at hand is *how* has this agenda (and the agency used to navigate this terrain) developed over time, and *where* it currently stands as perceived by our youth and those who educate them. In an attempt to answer these questions, I will 1) trace the history of mainstream and Black educational agenda/agency, and 2) conduct interviews with students and staff of a local charter and high school. Accordingly, the method of approach for chapters 1 – 3 is two-fold. First, I will examine the education system through the lens of mainstream public education. Second, I will reinterpret this development as it pertains to the Black experience. With this arrangement in mind, Chapter 1

encompasses Colonial America until Reconstruction, outlining the intent vs. impact of education. Chapter 2 and 3 follow the same formula, with the former covering Reconstruction to *Brown v. Board*, and the latter focusing on post 1954 to present day. Chapter 4 will stray from my initial objective and shift its focus toward defining the purposes, challenges, and solutions of education for our young people of color. It is my hope that from these interviews and research I might be able to gauge whether the priorities of Black education—(self-knowledge, community, cultural identity, collective survival and enhancement)—have endured or, as Ayi Kwei Armah explains, have fell victim to the “far reaching social costs of alienating, soul damaging education¹⁴.

¹⁴ King, 347.

Chapter 1: Public Good, Public Enemy

For over two centuries, public schools have remained the most widely known civic institution in the U.S., yet little is known about its initial establishment, and for what and *whom* they were created. For equally as long, the categories of majority and minority populations could be used to interpret the agenda, execution, and experience of public education. However, in order to better understand what precipitated this racial distinction, we must first briefly examine how colonial America handled education prior to the creation of public schools.

The first schools in America can be identified as the product of the European Protestant Revolts. Unable to exercise their principles of worship and life, numerous groups of religious congregations left Europe and settled in the wilderness to begin life anew. Chief among the things they brought with them were their standards of religion—an insistence upon acquiring knowledge of the Gospel so as to gain personal salvation. Hence, the primary function of education at this moment was to teach children to read in order to understand what was demanded of them as outlined in God’s commandments¹⁵. Instruction and apprenticeship were initially responsibilities of the household: children were taught basic literacy and discipline that provided them the ability to participate in home and church religious services. Accordingly, the only textbooks used to educate children were the *Catechism*, the *Hornbook*, the *Psalter*, the *Testament*, and of course the *Bible*—all religiously imbued texts¹⁶.

¹⁵ Ellwood Cubberly, *Public Education in the United States: a study and interpretation of American education history* (Boston, MA:e Houghton Mifflin Co., 1934) 12.

¹⁶ Cubberly, 42.

As time progressed, this voluntary and often loosely designed system of education proved insufficient. Therefore, acting under the auspices of the Church, the local legislature legally required for the first time ever, that all children should be taught “to read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of the country” under The Massachusetts Law of 1642¹⁷. Town officials were to assess whether parents were carrying out their educational duties, and were granted authority to impose fines on those who did not. In light of the fact that the setting of schooling was still left within the homes, the Massachusetts Law of 1647 enacting yet another groundbreaking provision for communities to establish and maintain schools under penalty of law. It succinctly ordered:

1. That every town having 50 householders should at once appoint a teacher of reading and writing, and provide for his wages in such manner as the town might determine; and
2. That every town having 100 householders must provide a (Latin) grammar school to fit youths for the university, under a penalty of L5 for failure to do so¹⁸.

Thus religious purpose and instruction became the singular agenda during this early colonial period, and the abovementioned laws and the method of schooling they codified represent the foundation upon which American public school systems would later be erected.

This system, much like the regime under which colonists were ruled, encountered a surge of resistance. As fate would have it, Americans won their independence from Britain, yet were now faced with the formidable challenge of

¹⁷ Cubberly, 17.

¹⁸ Cubberly, 18.

building a nation out of thirteen former colonies. Many predicted that schools would play a major role in the formation of this new republic, and Revolution-era political leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush voiced early concerns with the imbalanced nature of schooling and its inability to produce citizens that would ensure the longevity of the republic. According to their understanding, the primary functions of public schools were two-fold. First, teaching political principles to the youth would more likely yield a virtuous, educated and functional citizenry. Second, shifting administration to local control would allow citizens to exercise self-rule—a cornerstone of American civil principle.

However the actual mode and agenda of colonial education in practice was differed vastly from that which its designers had envisioned, primarily because societies were largely agricultural in a functional sense; general public schooling took place within farms and plantations. In addition there were few significant factors encouraging schooling and literacy, such as Protestantism and the economic tensions with England. Motivated by the War of 1812, colonists developed an appetite to continue to expose British economic exploitation, and thus mass-produced politically charged pamphlets and newspapers containing theory about the function of republics and well-balanced governments¹⁹. Therefore, having limited need for formal education, schooling was scarce, generally cost associated, not governmental nor wholly secular²⁰.

¹⁹ Mondale, Patton, 12.

²⁰ Sarah Mondale, Sarah B. Patton, *School: The Story Of American Public Education* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001) 11, 12.

Outside of these confines, opportunities to learn became the responsibility of the parents—hiring tutors or sending their children to “dame schools” in pursuit of basic literacy and numeracy. In other words, private schools reigned supreme. In theory these commonly known “town schools” were open to “all”, yet in reality only those with sufficient social prestige and capital to pay the tuition fees would enroll²¹. This narrow framework meant that wealth, gender, and race were strong determinants of access to education, and this pattern would be melded into the agenda of public schools that underwent construction in mid nineteenth century²².

Ultimately the limited reach of colonial education, technological change and an influx of immigration necessitated a network of schooling that would fulfill the needs of a new industrial nation²³. Public schools were essentially the workings of democratic processes brought about by taxpayers, parents and protestant philanthropists who were reacting to the socio-economic pressures of immigration and technology²⁴. The abundance of cheap immigration labor fed expanding industry: the total population between 1840 and 1850 increased 35 percent while the sheer number of immigrants entering the country rose to 240 percent²⁵. The demographics and nature of the workplace morphed during this time. Competition for, and style of work transformed under this revolution, so parents suitably demanded that their children’s education absorb, adjust, and reflect these evolving needs. Whereas the lessons of colonial/early 19th century schools were primarily

²¹ Cubberly, 64.

²² Mondale, Patton, 12.

²³ Franciosi, 106.

²⁴ Franciosi, 101

²⁵ Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: common schools and American society, 1780 - 1860* (NY, NY: Hill and Wang, 1983) 64.

didactic and emphasized basic reading and arithmetic, the agenda of industrial-age public schools were heavily utilitarian. An educated work force was a productive workforce, and positions as clerks, factory workers, farmers, salesmen and the like needed to be fulfilled²⁶. Capitalist values of reliability, acquiescence, and regimentation characterized schooling of this age²⁷. That is, aside from its functionary feature, the mid nineteenth century system of schooling adopted an additional mission to expand its reach, role, and ideology. The customary “three Rs” of reading, writings, and arithmetic were now supplemented with ethics, law, commerce, and government. By and large, capitalism and its associated virtues of self-help, discipline and uniformity (especially to assimilate immigrants) underlined educational theory.

Weary of its past irregularities, and though pockets of middle- and upper-class tuition-based schools still existed, every state in the Union built a singular, locally controlled, and publically funded form of free public schools that would remain the basis for mass education²⁸. Meanwhile, concerns about increasing crime, poverty, political instability, and cultural alienation (seemingly exacerbated by the swell in city populations) prompted voluntary Protestant organizations to first begin establishing mass “free” or charity schools for the urban poor. These particular institutes, such as the New York’s Free School Society (that would later evolve into their public school system) continued to emphasize the traditional goals of American education—rational citizenship, industrious practices, and Protestant

²⁶ Franciosi, 119.

²⁷ Kaestle, 69

²⁸ William Reese, *History, Education, and the Schools* (NY, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 98, 99.

culture²⁹. Again, common schools were relied upon to provide a common language, social order, and an acceptance of American economic life³⁰. By 1830, locally controlled, voluntary elementary schooling was a common feature of life in most American communities, but had not yet developed the longed-for state-school system³¹. Thus, seeking to decentralize this growing educational system, countryside, towns and cities created school committees (now known as School Boards), which regained official control over the schools that were previously operated by voluntary associations and elite Protestant philanthropists. Convinced that schooling would remedy the salient issues of the time (economics, demographics, security), the general public grew to favor increasing state government involvement in education³². Directing the reign of these sentiments were a slew of social and common-school reformers including Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, Calvin Stowe, and John Pierce who, though differing on social issues like slavery and the role of religion, were united in their belief that improved public education would secure the nation's destiny through morality and good citizenship. In a sense, these reformers cultivated the ideological context for the creation and cause of public schools, so much so that by the end of the 19th century, it was commonly held that public education was "state-sponsored and reached all children in rural and urban areas, providing access to the same academic and moral training, including the norms of good citizenship"³³.

²⁹ Kaestle , 64

³⁰ Kaestle, 70.

³¹ Kaestle, 62.

³² Reese, 98 -100.

³³ Kaestle 75, Reese 101.

Though American public education experienced unprecedented growth in the span of a century, comprising a seminal part of this legacy (is) one of its most glaring and tragic contradictions. The high values of democracy and freedom that were central to the young Republic and its proclaimed Civil Liberties were jealously and *purposefully* guarded from enslaved Blacks. Initially, there *were* sentiments favoring emancipation, manumission, and enfranchisement even. Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and countless architects, supporters and enforcers of the Constitution expressed their concerns, yet those feelings cannot be seen in both practice and product of their work. By the time of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, slavery was not only a grim reality, but a codified one³⁴. Also by the end of the century, hundreds of significant slave rebellions had occurred, and knowledge of the Haitian and French Revolution was disseminated throughout Southern plantations³⁵. In constant fear of insurrection, and, knowing quite well that education would ultimately bring the institution of slavery to its demise, a slew of states adopted policies that made Black education virtually impossible³⁶. The state of South Carolina—seeming particularly attentive of the impending “threat” of literacy—was one of the first Southern states to respond with haste. In 1740 they instituted an Act that forbade slaves to read and write, while simultaneously making

³⁴ http://www.usconstitution.net/consttop_slav.html in reference to Article I 3/5ths clause, and Article IV Section 2.

³⁵ <http://americablog.com/2013/01/the-second-amendment-was-ratified-to-preserve-slavery.html>

Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War* (NY, NY: G.P Putnam’s Sons, 1915) 8.

it punishable for others to educate them³⁷. This marked one of the many that would soon follow.

The onset of the Industrial Revolution exacerbated the South's reliance upon slave labor, and thus tightened their regulations on slave education. Customary of U.S. bondage, enslaved Blacks naturally resisted both on an individual and collective basis. A series of large-scale conspiracies and violent uprisings that were connected to educated Blacks intensified the terror of White plantation owners. Leaders of the more known revolts, Gabriel Prosser (a blacksmith), Denmark Vessey (a free Black) and Nat Turner (a preacher), had greater opportunity, compared to ordinary plantation hands, to learn reading, writing, and religion, which were paramount to their motives³⁸. For slave owners, education of freedom, of opportunity, methods of revolt, of religion, of education in general would jeopardize their economic livelihood, lifestyle and safety. In fact, the vast majority of the South concluded

“intellectual elevation unfits men for servitude...[that] the more you cultivate the minds of slaves, the more unserviceable you make them; you give them a higher relish for those privileges which they cannot attain and turn what you intend for a blessing into a curse. If they are to remain in slavery they should be kept in the lowest state of ignorance and degradation”³⁹.

This fear manifested itself in their treatment of, and litigation pertaining to, enslaved Blacks as articulated in the following law passed by Virginia in 1819:

That all meetings or assemblages of slaves, or free negroes or mulattoes mixing and associating with such slaves at any meeting-house or houses, in the night; or at any school or

³⁷ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/docs1.html>

³⁸ <http://www.history.com/topics/slavery-iv-slave-rebellions>

³⁹ Woodson, 9.

schools for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered and unlawful assembly... [authorizing] corporal punishment on the offender or offenders, at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding twenty lashes⁴⁰.

It was this dichotomy, this contradiction of intent and execution, of intellectual freedom for “all” yet mental bondage for many that undercut the nineteenth century desire for reform and expansion of education. The popularized terms of “free” or “common” schools that blossomed during the Industrial revolution were rendered meaningless, a constant reminder that for scores of Blacks their education was neither of the two. Admittedly, it was precisely Black slave labor upon which the U.S. was founded and propelled into opulence. This exploitative state of affairs was fervently preserved for quite some time, and the denial of education for Blacks was but one of the many mechanisms used to perpetuate it. However, as troubled waters produce skilled sailors, Blacks turned their stumbling blocks into stepping-stones.

For Whites during the antebellum era, education was anathema to the interests of slavery; yet for Blacks the purpose of education was inextricably linked to the struggle for freedom. Access to the written word uncovered a world beyond bondage in which Blacks could become the masters of their fate, the captain of their souls—a literate world which enabled them to produce free papers, relay messages, or learn of abolitionist activities. As they were not included within the scope of the so-called “free” or “common” public school system, enslaved Blacks, at the risk of life and limb, navigated this terrain wrought with legal and extralegal impediments and constructed a variety of alternative methods by which they could educate

⁴⁰ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/docs1.html>

themselves. Self-taught education is among the most basic form of resistance, and there are multitudes of accounts confirming that enslaved Blacks frequently exercised their cunning and agency to achieve general knowledge or literacy. An ex-slave from Missouri, Mattie Jackson explained that gathering information by eavesdropping on the conversation of whites became a commonly used weapon in their private battle for liberation. Another ex-slave Henry Bibb noted that “slaves were not allowed books, pen, ink, nor paper to improve their minds...all that I heard about liberty and freedom to slaves, I never forgot”. In other instances, upon hearing whites read aloud or engage in conversation, some committed certain letters or word to memory and repeated them to literate members of the community as promptly as they could. Thus eavesdropping constituted a vital component of the “grapevine telegraph”— an intelligence network within enslaved communities⁴¹.

The covert mission to become literate continued through the ingenious practice of “stealing” an education. Heather Williams details a panoply of tactics in her work *Self-Taught*. She writes that some enslaved Blacks hid spelling books under their hats or in their bosom so as to be prepared at any moment to entreat or bribe a literate person to teach them. Some enticed white children (who did not understand that they were violating slave code) to teach them by debriefing their school’s lesson, or poor white men who simply did not care. Former slaves recount stories of trading food and money or skills in exchange for letters or words, and the stories abound. G.W. Offley fed a white boy whose father gambled away the family’s money, and later traded boxing and wrestling lessons with white men for

⁴¹ Heather Andrea William, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 9.

instruction. Richard Parker collected old nails to trade for marbles he later used to pay white children to provide him with reading lessons; James Fisher bought exchanged whiskey with an old white man for lessons, others copied words and letters onto tree bark, fences or in the dirt. The list goes on. Yet another ex-slave in Williams' book, Mandy Jones, gave testimony to the fact that enslaved people maximized the use of their resources and conditions. She knew of a young man who learned how to read and write in a cave to which he would retreat under the cover of night. She also described the well known "pit schools" that lay on the periphery of many a plantation. Slaves would dig large pits in the ground in strategically placed locations in the woods, covering the hole with bush and vine when they left. These pits were in some cases inhabited by runaways yet served the more educational practice of housing schools that were facilitated by literate Blacks. On the Sabbath, slaves were not required to work, and, as whites would attend church and socialize away from their houses, they would convene under large oak trees and in secret places with spelling books⁴². In addition, some enslaved Blacks learned indirectly by mere contact and observation of daily interaction. The employment of slaves in business establishments for example, accelerated their learning. By assisting clerks in their "master's" store, many enslaved workers picked up on the skills and education that were required to keep records, execute transactions and ensure the overall efficacy of the business. There is a body of correspondence that explains in detail how scores of slaves were entrusted with these responsibilities. John McDonough stated that his slaves "transacted all my affairs, made purchases of

⁴² Williams, 20-21.

materials, collected my rents, leased my houses, took care of my property and effects of every kind, and that with an honesty and fidelity which was proof against every temptation”, while another group of slaves all could read and write whereas the master himself was hopelessly illiterate⁴³.

The covert congregation was also central to the enslaved community’s education process. Several nights a week, enslaved adults gathered around a Black preacher/leader or group of community elders in hidden places called “hush-harbors” located in nearby swamps or woods⁴⁴. Away from the watchful eye of the White world, slaves were able express their spirituality through preaching, praying and singing. Emotional release, community support, and the articulation of hope and a yearning for freedom were vital components of the hush harbors, yet they also served a more direct purpose. The very existence of a slave controlled group that met both in secrecy and often in the company of neighboring plantations symbolized Black resistance. Though they were largely denied access to formal teaching, the pedagogy of the congregation emphasized themes of salvation, dignity, solidarity, and opposition to white oppression⁴⁵. As such, hush harbor gatherings provided some of the context within enslaved education; however it was music and stories that provided the content on a larger scale.

Spirituals and folk tales conveyed a central educational message that served a plethora of purposes in the enslaved community. The aforementioned congregations were subtly announced in song:

⁴³ Woodson, 210.

⁴⁴ Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876* (NY, N: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980) 224.

⁴⁵ Cremin (a), 224.

“I take my text in Mathew, and by de Revelation, I now you by your garment, Dere’s a meeting here tonight. Dere’s a meeting here tonight, Oh! (Brudder Tony,) Dere’s a meeting here tonight, Oh! (Sister Rina,) Dere’s a meeting here tonight, I hope to meet again”⁴⁶.

“No Man Can Hinder Me” or “Not Weary Yet” embodied a spirit of resilience or an escape from slavery, while others that included Biblical metaphors taught human folly and morality: “an eagle soaring higher in the sky than other birds but who still had to return to earth for food taught the importance of humility and kindness; a chicken devoured by a hawk because he had not listened to his mother’s warning taught the dangers of disobedience”⁴⁷. In this sense, song and story were in their own way a curricular system as didactic and informative as the schooling Whites received. Deprived of literacy, enslaved communities used these means as an ancillary educative function, preserving and transmitting traditional beliefs, information, and inspiration by verbal communication. Through this medium did enslaved populations unify, uplift, connect to the past, and learn how to negotiate and understand the world in their own terms⁴⁸.

After the Revolutionary War, the northern states developed a distinct population of Blacks whose efforts to educate themselves were vastly different from their enslaved counterparts. As stated earlier, southern Blacks were denied all forms of instruction by law until the Civil War, yet they managed to counter this institutionalized lack of education in a variety of ways. While the southern process of becoming literate was slow as it was dangerous, Blacks in the north experienced a

⁴⁶ William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard, Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs in the United States* (NY, NY: A. Simpson & Co., 1867) 9.

⁴⁷ Cremin (a), 227.

⁴⁸ Cremin, 227.

different struggle. Prior to the Civil War, free Blacks in the North were becoming increasingly literate. In turn, they gained a functional understanding of the American political system, and effectively used the courts as a vehicle to elicit the judicial backing for educational opportunity. Black legal manipulation dates back to the Massachusetts Education Act of 1789, which required towns of 200 or more families to provide elementary and grammar schools for their youth—*regardless* of race⁴⁹.

However, progression was often met with discriminatory opposition (financially, physically, or otherwise), at the White-dominated public schools. Weary of this treatment, a group of Black adults in 1798 petitioned the Boston School Committee to establish a separate system of schools for Black children, yet the committee denied this request (and a similar appeal in 1800). That very year Blacks gathered funding from both Black and White donors to open private schools for their children, thus beginning the tradition of Black privately owned, independent education as a 200 year-old history. Considered one of the most prominent northern Blacks during this era Prince Hall, veteran of the Revolutionary War, abolitionist, and founder of Black Freemasonry, famously established one of these schools. An early embodiment of the principles and strategies of self-determination and intellectual uplift, he began an independent school in his son's house⁵⁰, which was moved to the African Meeting House in 1806—the first church built by and for Blacks that soon became the hub of community organization, celebrations and

⁴⁹ M. Brown, RoSusan Bartee, *Still not equal: expanding educational opportunity in society* (NY, NY: Peter Lang, 2007) 20.

⁵⁰ Mwalimu Shujaa, *Too Much Schooling, Too little Education* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994) 128.

political/anti-slavery activism⁵¹. These schools quickly prompted the Committee in 1806 to grant their initial request upon the condition that they (the Committee) would exercise complete control over funding. Unsurprisingly, within the next decade these segregated schools were recognized as dreadfully inferior. This state of affairs continued through the *Roberts V. City of Boston* case in 1850. Here, Blacks battled for integrated education, as they believed that separate tax-supported schools were inherently unequal, and were unjustly located in far-off locations that caused their children to endure the torment of harsh weather conditions. Benjamin Roberts lost his case to have his daughter attend the closer majority-White public school, yet in 1855 this was overturned when the Massachusetts legislature passed a law stating no child could be denied admission to public schools based on race or religion (only to be countered yet again with *Plessy v. Ferguson*)⁵². For decades to come, northern states like Philadelphia, New York and Boston gave birth to a number of schools that educated Blacks who would go on to make substantial contributions as artists, poets, ministers, journalists, Congressmen, lawyers, physicians and teachers⁵³.

During this era, the establishment of public education developed into a more solid institution with aims to educate its citizenry in religious conviction, morality, and work ethic. However as this system was built amidst a dark environment of racial injustice and forced servitude, it also naturally cast a shadow of negligence

⁵¹ Nancy Curtis, *Black Heritage Sites: An African American odyssey and finder's guide* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 1996) 296.

⁵² Brown, 21; Anderson, 7.

⁵³ William Jeynes, *American Educational History: School, society, and the common good* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007) 88-91.

over virtually all Blacks. Yet In the face of unrelenting efforts to curtail their education, enslaved Blacks just as fervently fought *for* enlightenment. Under restrictive mobility and through eavesdropping, coercing, trading, congregating, singing, working and disseminating thousands of Blacks redefined and regained control of their learning. In the north, Blacks similarly wrestled for access to education. Within this context, the struggle began with racially mixed schools that stimulated the need to create separate, independently-ran Black institutions. Capitalizing the use of legislation and the atmosphere of abolitionism, from this environment stepped forth an educated elite of Black Americans. By Reconstruction, Blacks in both the north and south generally acknowledged that educational opportunity would yield political, social and economic progress. Universally, the purpose of education then was to ignite the flames of resistance, to liberate one another from both mental and physical bondage—a tool whose uses would experience a great deal of fluctuation in the coming ages.

Chapter 2: From Reconstruction to Reexamination

As the Civil War came to a close, America's schools opened their doors in new territories and to an unprecedented number of children. During this period, a vast westward movement accelerated the demand for a system of schooling that replicated the east. Much like the proponents of public schools that preceded them, these settlers were unyielding in their belief that education was paramount to creating a stable republic. With the backing of Congress who henceforth required that all states guarantee a free (nonsectarian) education to all children, schools appealed to, and drew in, scores of settlers along with their financial investment. In order to keep up with the pressures of expansion, classes were organized in sod dugouts, nonfunctioning saloons, and wherever else space available to them. Also in tandem with their eastern counterparts, these schools fed their pupils the fundamentals of Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic, new courses on Geography, Philosophy, and Physiology, all with a strong dose of morality. Less the heavy industrial emphasis, here too were national standard and ideals firmly rooted in the purpose of mainstream education, as best conveyed in the McGuffey readers used in the west⁵⁴.

The city school systems however continued to lead the development of innovation and systematization. During the years following 1876, the classic eight-year elementary school period solidified its form, and a survey of 82 cities conducted by the States Bureau of Education revealed affirming statistics:

⁵⁴ Mondale, Patton, 46-57.

The average number of hours students spent in actual classroom study over the eight year span totaled 7,000, of which, 1,188 hours were devoted to reading, 1,900 to arithmetic, 616 to spelling, 559 to writing, 500 to geography, 300 to grammar, 150 to history, and the remainder to such subjects as science, singing, drawing, physical training, manual training (for boys), and sewing and cooking (for girls)⁵⁵.

The sheer time spent in class and the improved organization reflects the growing favor that public education garnered.

The end of the century signaled yet another development as concerns for secondary education spread. High school then became the dominant mode of post-elementary schooling, and enrollment therein virtually doubled every decade from 1890 to 1930. In response to the transforming interests and needs of the nation, along with a more diverse student body, the curriculum broadened as well. Beginning in 1890 classroom instruction included Latin, German, French, English Literature, history, algebra, geometry, physics, chemistry, and newer subjects such as manual training, home economics, typewriting and bookkeeping were offered and quickly popularized. Largely unaffected by the 12 years of progress and the proceeding period of retrogression, the public school system as a whole witnessed exponential growth. Expenditures increased from \$69 million in 1870 to \$147 million in 1890; enrollment from 7.6 to 12.7 million—largely due to the continuous influx of European immigration. Thus it stands that the United States during this period provided more schooling to more children than any other nation⁵⁶. For many, the century old promise of universal education was finally materializing; yet for

⁵⁵ Cremin (a) 545, 546.

⁵⁶ Mondale, Patton, 57.

Blacks who were harshly segregated (in schools as well), this promise symbolized another method by which they were kept separate *and* unequal.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the public school was one the most highly revered institutions in the U.S, yet during the following few decades it would undergo a series of structural and pedagogical changes that drew much criticism. The massive waves of immigration continued to inundate most urban centers like New York and Chicago where two-thirds of the children in public schools had foreign-born fathers. As immigration reached its zenith in the prewar era, the progressive social reform movement also reached new heights. The contingent concerned with increasing efficiency of schools successfully centralized and bureaucratized school administration⁵⁷. What was once governed by an urban machine-style ward system (wrought with dozens of sub-district boards for a single city—like Pittsburgh who had 39 boards with 504 members), school management was strategically siphoned into small boards with nonpartisan members elected from the city. By 1923, the median board size had seven members⁵⁸. As a result, control shifted into the hands of proclaimed pedagogical experts who began to formulate new ways to cope and educate this surge of children. They concluded that in lieu of the academic traditionalism of verbal studies and academic subjects, children would reap more benefit by receiving practical studies that would prepare them for jobs⁵⁹. In fact, the labor-public education relationship was so profound that

⁵⁷ Mondale, Patton, 65.

⁵⁸ Franciosi, 152.

⁵⁹ Mondale, Patton, 64-66.

it successfully obtained federal support for vocational curriculum with the implementation of the Smith-Hughes Act in 1917⁶⁰.

In order to better sort these predicted future industrial, commercial, and domestic workers, school districts implemented vocational tracks according to differing ability groups—a process of guiding by intelligence tests that was first used during World War I to identify future officers. During this time, the nation’s leading psychologists designed tests, which were promoted as mechanisms that would measure student’s intrinsic intelligence. Believed to be revolutionary educational science, these tests were used by schools to become more efficient and practical in their allocation of resources and energy. This practice soon became embedded into educational practice, serving as the model for college admissions screening (known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT) beginning in 1941. Educator William Chandler and journalist Walter Lippmann were the first to reject these aptitude tests. They warned that the tests were merely reflective of a lack of educational resources and should not impede future opportunities—a debate that would wage on for decades to come⁶¹. In addition, the “life adjustment movement” which sought to concentrate classroom instruction on the basic skills of daily life, such as hygiene, interviewing and consumer choices was heavily denounced. Exacerbating the instability of education at this time were tight budgets, low salaries and victimization of schools to patronage and corruption.⁶²

⁶⁰ David Carleton, *Landmark Congressional Laws on Education*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002) 63.

⁶¹ Mondale, Patton 66-67.

⁶² Franciosi, 120.

These abrupt shifts in vision and organization prompted unprecedented criticism from experts and parents alike. The *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* was the first publication to turn a critical eye toward the development of public education in 1918. The report declared that “education in a democracy...should develop in each individual the knowledge, interests, ideals, habits, and powers whereby he will find his or her place and use that place to shape both himself and society to ever nobler ends”⁶³. Soon to follow in the 1940’s and early 50’s was a barrage of literary ridicule that condemned the quality of education in the public schools. *Quackery in the Public Schools* by Albert Lynd written in 1953 attacks the efforts of a narrow few “education experts” who are replacing traditional teaching with a mass of discursive practices based on proclaimed progressive education theories. A former college professor and school board member, Lynd understood this shift in control and focus to preparing students for practical affairs as an encroachment on the traditional function of schools. To him and the like-minded sort, the purpose of teaching was, and still should be to train the minds of its students⁶⁴. Arthur Bestor’s *Educational Wastelands* continued the frontal assault on the agenda of the 1940’s and early 50’s public schools, which emphasized vocational preparation. Bestor also lobbied for a restoration of traditional curriculum for all students—yet another example of the evident shift in focus brought about by the first half of the twentieth century.

⁶³ Herbert M. Kliebard, *Changing Course: American Curriculum Reform in the Twentieth Century* (NY, NY: Teachers College Press; 2002) 46.

⁶⁴ Albert Lynd, *Quackery in the public schools* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1953).

And so, American public education reveled in making elementary and secondary schooling nearly universal by expanding its capacity to millions of children, and systematizing its operation. This goal, having a clear economic virtue, impressed other industrial nations and was quickly emulated. This goal, while dramatically decreasing national illiteracy, assimilating immigrants into American society, and providing incremental social mobility by expanding educational attainment however, did not challenge the deeply entrenched racial segregation that plagued so too plagued education. This goal then, ultimately remained unfulfilled⁶⁵.

Following the illegalization of slavery, the period between the late 1860s and 1870s introduced both new opportunities and old hindrances. It is important to note that the memories and passions of the most devastating US war (more than 625,000 soldiers and sailors died in Union and Confederate service, compared to 405,000 Americans in World War II) had not been forgotten⁶⁶. Black codes, local ordinances that regulated conditions of living and traveling, along with unconstrained violence were Southern mechanisms employed to maintain white supremacy and re-enslave those who had been emancipated⁶⁷. Sentiments surrounding the educability of Blacks were expectedly similar, believing that Blacks were not “as capable as acquiring knowledge as the white man is”⁶⁸. The Reconstruction Act and the civil rights amendments did indeed codify Black’s new social status, yet white defiance and hostility subverted congressional goals. Since

⁶⁵ Mondale, Patton, 69.

⁶⁶ Robert Cruden, *The Negro In reconstruction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall International, 1969) 3.

⁶⁷ Cruden, 20.

⁶⁸ Cruden, 56 ; John Esten Cooke, *A life of Gen. Robert E. Lee* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1883) 475.

educational funding was largely a state operation, Blacks had to convince the very same people who deprived them of the opportunity that it was in their best interest to support their education. Thus, until Congressional Reconstruction granted them political power Blacks had to (yet again) rely on their own resources and ingenuity to ensure access to education⁶⁹

However, Reconstruction provided new outlets for Black citizenry, labor, political participation, and education. Most notable was the unprecedented surge in acquiring education that emerged amidst this two-pronged environment. Booker T Washington described this intense desire as a “whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make an attempt to learn...Day schools, night schools, and Sunday schools were always crowded, and often many had to be turned away for want of room”⁷⁰. The continued spirit of self-reliance, self-determination and a deep-rooted yearning to control their education formed the basis of the Black educational movement during Reconstruction. Notwithstanding support from northern philanthropists, missionaries, and organizations (support that was occasionally rejected by Blacks), their individual and mutual actions were the primary force that brought about unprecedented growth in Black education—an effort that had been fiercely constrained during the generations of enslavement. Such awareness revolved around this topic that John W. Alvord, the superintendent of schools for the Freedmen’s Bureau, traveled across the South to develop a more thorough understanding of the matter. In his December 1866 general report on the Bureau’s schools, he found that:

⁶⁹ Williams, 79.

⁷⁰ Booker T. Washington, *Up from slavery* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1963) 22-23.

“Throughout the entire South...an effort is being made by the colored people to educate themselves. In absence of other teaching they are determined to be self-taught; and everywhere some elementary text-book, or the fragment of one, may be seen in the hands of Negroes”⁷¹.

Utilizing their new gained freedom, scores of organized, formerly enslaved Blacks began establishing educational associations, informal collectives, and schools entirely staffed by Black personnel that were primarily made possible by their money, labor, and dedication. The Zion School in Charleston, South Carolina by 1866 had 13 teachers, an enrollment of 850 students, and an average daily attendance of 720 pupils. In 1867 Camden Blacks established 22 schools that served more than 4,000 children⁷². The Georgia Educational Association, which served to supervise schools, create school policies, and to raise funds, was created in 1865 as a result of the collective efforts of ex-enslaved and Black leaders⁷³.

Just as Blacks had considered centuries prior, education then was not a commodity to be selfishly reserved but rather an indispensable asset that should be distributed—formally or informally. At the helm of this expansion were countless Blacks (ranging from highly qualified to scarcely literate) whom volunteered to teach across the south. In fact, it was common practice that as soon as students mastered rudiments of reading and writing, they quickly began teaching others. H. S. Beale noted “It is impossible for those that have mastered the Alphabet to go any where in the country and not have every leisure hour taken by an eager multitude

⁷¹ James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South: 1860 – 1935* (University of North Carolina: Chapel Hill, 1988) 7.

⁷² Anderson, 8.

⁷³ Anderson, 11.

clamoring for help to learn ‘the book’⁷⁴. With haste did communities make use of their children’s recently obtained skills. Some assisted their parents in night schools, read texts from the Bible for preachers to memorize and preach the next Sunday, and others as young as thirteen began teaching at night schools⁷⁵. Motivated by a strong sense of duty, resolute under the constant threat of violence, and managing to operate with extremely limited funds, formally trained or not, both the young and elderly coordinated the execution of the Black agenda⁷⁶. Yet another testament to the collective spirit of Black education, efforts to bolster it were not limited to those directly engaged in the institution of schooling. Black soldiers from the Eight United States Colored Infantry, the Thirteenth, Sixty-second and Sixty-fifth Colored Regiment for example, also contributed to newly established schools, and in some cases founded schools with their donations⁷⁷.

Having long been the central Black-controlled institution, the Church yet again served as a focal point of Black education during Reconstruction. Offering instruction on evenings and on weekends, the Sabbath school system reached thousands of children and adults alike who did not benefit from the paltry efforts put forth by the Freedman’s Bureau. Alvord’s conservative estimates in 1869 counted 1,512 Black church-operated schools with 6,146 teachers and 107,109 pupils—a number that continued to grow long after Reconstruction. In 1868 or example, the African Methodist Episcopal church enrolled 40,000 children in

⁷⁴ Williams, 172.

⁷⁵ Williams, 172.

⁷⁶ Williams, 105, 122.

⁷⁷ Williams, 57.

Sabbath Schools, and reached 200,000 by 1885⁷⁸. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Western Colored Baptist Convention were part of the larger 10,000 local Black churches that were estimated in operation during Reconstruction; many of which actively established Sabbath schools⁷⁹. This rapid growth is indicative of the essential role that Churches had in educating the masses of formerly enslaved Blacks. Not limited to general instruction, the church also afforded members the skills and art of self-government through management of finances, cooperation, and planning. The church fostered and maintained a sense of Black identity and culture, and as such was considered the greatest educator of all⁸⁰. They were, as historian A. A. Taylor describes, “the social center...the theater, the forum, and the general meeting house of the Negro community”; a remarkable example of Black determination to achieve educational self sufficiency that would seek, establish, and support their own schools⁸¹.

Aside from creating a profound tradition of pedagogical self-help, ex-slaves were the first among native southerners to campaign for universal public education. By 1865 fourteen southern states had erected 575 schools, employing 1,171 teachers for the 71,779 for both black and white children. Though attendance was not completely uniform, Alvord reports finding that among ex-slaves’ schools, the daily attendance surpassed that usually found in the north. He writes “in the District of Columbia, the daily attendance at the public school is but forty-one (41) percent; while at the colored schools of the District it is seventy-five (75) percent...in the city

⁷⁸ Anderson, 15.

⁷⁹ Cruden, 79

⁸⁰ Cruden, 85.

⁸¹ Anderson, 15; Cruden 85.

of Memphis it is seventy-two (72) percent; and in Virginia eighty-two (82) percent’”⁸². These comparative numbers reflect the fact that “free” schooling was quickly becoming an accepted practice. Blacks soon helped carve this custom into law by collaborating with Republicans in southern constitutional conventions that legalized public education in the former Confederate states. Whereas there were no specific mandates to create public school for Blacks, by 1870, every southern state had specific guidelines in its constitution to ensure a system of education at the expense of the state⁸³.

Though free schools and churches were considered “the guardians of civil and religious liberty”, extralegal organizations and tactics, along white supremacist redeemers who took power after federal withdrawal worked viciously to undermine this progress. Soon after Reconstruction, Blacks experienced severe disenfranchisement: their political subordination was cemented in southern law, trapped by the social customs of an agricultural economy that depended on coercive control of life and labor. These whites did not entirely eliminate schooling for Blacks, but devised government statutes, which would gradually institutionalize clear distinctions between white and black education. From the late 1870s until the Civil Rights Era of the mid-twentieth century, Blacks (and their efforts to self-educate) existed in an often intensely segregated environment⁸⁴. As was customary, Blacks’ education managed to develop within this context of political and economic oppression.

⁸² Anderson, 19

⁸³Anderson, 19.

⁸⁴ Anderson, 21.

Although largely an initiative featured by the Freedman's Bureau, industrial education has often been (however erroneously) defined as the most poignant debate during the first half of the twentieth century. With the institutional stability of slavery gone, the nation deliberated on what to do with the millions of freedom-seeking blacks. Suggestions ranged from shipping them to Africa, to granting them the privileges of full citizenship, to leaving them to fend against devices of racism and segregation. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the superintendent of the Freedman's Bureau proposed that a *special* education—one that would secure lasting peace between the races and subordinate Blacks to their "proper place"—would be the solution to racial disputes over societal positioning. Put differently, he and his army of white supporters believed that industrial education would remedy the so-called Negro Problem of rampant laziness and gross immorality⁸⁵. Whatever its roots, it was within this larger context that Booker T. Washington (Armstrong's star pupil) spread the doctrine of the Hampton-Tuskegee Model which would, as Washington proclaimed, create the most "the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen"⁸⁶.

Although much less successful than history implies, this emphasis on manual training did permeate certain communities and inspire some Blacks (as well as northern philanthropists, businesses, and religious organizations) to carry out its mission. Among these were schools that were independently created by Blacks such as Elizabeth Wright who founded Denmark Industrial School; Jennie Dean who

⁸⁵ Donald Spivey, *Schooling For The New Slavery: Black Industrial Education, 1868-1915* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978) 16, 19.

⁸⁶ Anderson, 73.

formed the Manassas Industrial School; Mattie Booth who opened a school for Black women; Cornelia Bowen who founded Mt. Meigs Institute; Carrie Tuggle who created Tuggle Institute; Lawrence C. Jones who operated Piney Woods Country Life School of Mississippi; and the well-known Charlotte Hawkins Brown who nearly singlehandedly founded and ran Palmer Memorial Institute. Some institutions drew heavily from the work of Washington; others offered classical training in academic material, while others combined both methods⁸⁷. There were, however, numbers of Blacks who understood and opposed what the Tuskegee-Hampton model symbolized. W.E.B. Dubois is frequently mentioned as the most vociferous and eloquent opponent of Washington, yet there were plenty others. William Roscoe Davis candidly challenged the industrial education idea by claiming “If Negroes don’t get any better education than Armstrong is giving them...they may as well have stayed in slavery”⁸⁸. Ultimately, while differing in terms of approach, what matters here is that these schools advanced the agenda of Black educational self-sufficiency and self-help.

The story of Black education in the postbellum north is complex as it is mistakenly considered entirely egalitarian. The northern states that actively excluded Blacks from public schools before the Civil War began enacting legislation that prohibited racial segregation by its end. Be that as it may, northern rigid school separation prevailed during the first half of the twentieth century. It is understood that, with the mass migration of hundreds of thousands of southern Blacks into northern communities, educational segregation became more extensive by 1940

⁸⁷ Raahistory, 12

⁸⁸ Spivey, 36.

than it had been since Reconstruction. In light of this heightened visibility and friction, *De Facto* segregation in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana—states considered more legislatively hospitable for Blacks—featured the assigning of Black children to “colored schools” or separate classrooms within the same building, fully equipped with separate American flags and fenced off playgrounds⁸⁹. White supremacist views backed by “scientific findings” of eugenics spurred the rapid increase of separate school systems. New Jersey public education for example, whose number of segregated Black students increased by 35 per cent from 1919 to 1935, is said to have been strikingly similar to states below the Mason-Dixon line⁹⁰. Intensified racial isolation was resisted by a campaign of boycotts, petitions, litigation and lobbying lead by the NAACP and most Black-operated periodicals; yet it simultaneously nurtured a growing sentiment of Black separatism—a pedagogical agenda that would propagate both in and out of the classroom setting, and reach its zenith during the second half of the 20th century.

Propelled by postwar disappointment, race riots, lynchings, an insistence on racial segregation, and a growing concern for the maltreatment of Black children in white schools, this impulse toward a new subdivision of self-help and separation would soon manifest itself in a broad variety of outlets. Northern Blacks soon developed a slew of independent businesses, social welfare organizations, and political entities. W.E.B. Dubois and Carter G. Woodson (who established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History) spearheaded intellectual

⁸⁹ Davis M. Douglass, *Jim Crow Moves North: The Battle Over Northern School Segregation, 1865 – 1954* (NY, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 3, 5.

⁹⁰ Douglass, 141-142.

inquiry into the heritage and significance of Blacks; Marcus Garvey, who is considered an outspoken opponent of Black separatism; organizations such as the National Negro Business League, the Cleveland Association for Colored Men, the Phyllis Wheatley Association, and a variety of Fraternal/social organizations; periodicals such as *The Crisis*, *The Chicago Defender* and the *Afro-American*; the prolific writers, poets, musicians, and artists of the Harlem Renaissance, all (as inadequate as this list is) to some extent provided a social and educational service for the Black community.

Nevertheless, racial isolation directly impacted the task of schools as they were now considered a center for providing broader benefits to the Black community. Jennie Porter, a principle in an all Black school in Cincinnati, argued that

“[t]he new [black] school is used as a socializing agency, not only for the children, but also for the adults of the community. Under its guidance and control, come parents and children alike to engage in social recreation, literary programs, dancing, plays and games”⁹¹.

Dean Louis Pechstein echoed her sentiments in claiming “greater inspiration, greater racial solidarity, superior social activities, greater retention, and greater educational achievement are possible for the Negroes in separate public schools”⁹².

The Frederick Douglass School was precisely the embodiment of this belief, as it offering supervised athletics, adult education, and social clubs after school, along with “race development”-centered curriculum to teach students the value and history of his/her own background⁹³. Pro-segregationists feared that through integration the function of schools as a community center would be lost, that the

⁹¹ Douglass, 180.

⁹² Douglass, 181

⁹³ Douglass, 182-183.

patience, love, understanding, interest, and nurturing care of Black teachers would be lost to less sympathetic and emotionally connected white teachers—a polarizing debate to this day.

By the first half of the twentieth century, education began taking its own form within the Black context, and thus a debate emerged as to what was the *purpose* of education. Though still closely linked to the struggle for freedom, the Black educational agenda experienced a clear divide, being that greater access to learning provided an ability to reflect and deliberate on both the *type* of education most needed (primarily industrial or academic) and *how* they were being educated (racial composition of teachers, schools, and pedagogy). Though this divide should not be considered as a simple dichotomy, but rather a fluid continuum of views that existed between the two, it is nonetheless referred to as having been lead by two schools of thought. Booker T Washington directed the use of education as an exclusive tool for economic self-sufficiency. His “Tuskegee Idea” was to provide practical education for Blacks so that they could reap the benefits of their new economic advantages and find jobs⁹⁴. “In all things that are purely social”, Washington famously declared in his Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895, “we can be as spate as the finger, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress”⁹⁵. Also quoted as urging Blacks to “face the music, learn that it is a mistake

⁹⁴ Brown, Bartee, 22.

⁹⁵ Tony Johnson, *Historical Documents in American Education* (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2002) 134-135.

to be educated outside of your environment”, Washington clearly felt that political and social rights were merely secondary goals to be gained in the distant future⁹⁶.

The “contrasting” side defined education in under entirely different terms. W.E.B. Dubois argued that Washington’s philosophy was tremendously limited and damaging to the advancement of Blacks in the post-Civil War era. Critical of Black disenfranchisement and withdrawal from institutions of higher learning, education, as he saw fit, “must not simply teach work—it must teach life”⁹⁷. Paralleling this particular function of Black education, Carter G. Woodson wrote that “if a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated”⁹⁸. Implicit in these statements and in the life work of these two forerunners was the notion that education should provide Blacks with a platform on which to gain knowledge of self, equal rights, and shared progress.

Ultimately it can be said that these contending philosophies had identical long-term goals for educational equality. However, the architects of Black education would then draw from this divergence in approach. Thus by the end of the first half of the 20th century, ideas of separatism yet self-knowledge, economic self-sufficiency yet cultural identity and enhancement would define the Black educational project and lay the ground work for the forthcoming innovative and radical approaches of the 1960s and 70s.

⁹⁶ Brown, Bartee, 23; Cruden, 73.

⁹⁷ Phil Zuckerman, *The Social Theory of W.E.B. Dubois* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004) 196.

⁹⁸ Carter G. Woodson, “Negro History Week,” *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 11 no. 2 (April 1926) 239.

Chapter 3: Rising tides

Over the past 60 years education has experienced seismic shifts in social, economic and political realms, making some of its most remarkable achievements while simultaneously creating some of its most intricate problems. From *Brown v. Board* to *Race To The Top*, waves of racial conflict, legislation, reconciliation, and reform have washed ashore a unique crisis in education. No longer isolated lawsuits in corners of the U.S., in 1954 *Brown v. Board* marked the first of many major educational shifts to come. The mere forbidding of discrimination (distinct from the enforcement of integration), issues of state compliance and ever enduring racial seclusion undermined the perceived success of *Brown*⁹⁹. What *Brown* did modify was the way America thought about schooling. The educational theory that prevailed prior to *Brown* was informed by ideals of social homogeneity and the common identity of whiteness. *Brown* was pivotal in reevaluating this pattern by increasing awareness of the nation's racial dilemma and revitalizing the belief in equality that had been at the heart of American creed, however theoretically¹⁰⁰. Attention given to racial inequality with respect to education would continue and intensify as the Civil Rights activists brought their demands to the nation's schools. From then on, the needs of the disadvantaged would define a new subcategory in America's educational agenda, with progressive legislation moving toward the advancement of equity through education¹⁰¹.

⁹⁹ Raymond Wolters, *Race and Education: 1954 – 2007* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008) 4.

¹⁰⁰ Cremin, 204; Mondale, Patton, 130.

¹⁰¹ Cremin, 242.

However, the response to Soviet Union's launch of *Sputnik* temporarily diminished the issues of racially balanced integration. Motivated by hurt pride and the threat of competition, the U.S. refocused its sights far away from racial harmony and toward the old doctrine of education for economic improvement. Reformers of the day condemned American education as being devoid of rigor and failing to challenge the brightest students, effectively beginning the era of sharp, reform-oriented criticism of schools. They attributed losing the Space Race to the alleged incompetence of teachers who did not emphasize mathematics and science. Therefore the nation's attention turned to the European model once again. There, most students attended vocational schools to match their ability and interest while only a select few continued with academic education after age fourteen. Conversely, American students of vastly different interests and intellectual abilities were educated in the same schools and classes—a system thought to be unfair to the high-achieving children¹⁰². Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, the “father of the atomic submarine” became the leading advocate of this view, believing slower learners to be an impediment to their more “gifted” counterparts and ultimately a danger facing the nation. To win the educational race with Russia, America would have to “unshackle our talented youth from the lock step of the average and below-average pupil”, and do away with “life skills” curriculum¹⁰³. The year following *Sputnik*, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which allocated nearly \$1 billion for the improvement of foreign language, science, and math. Thus the educational objective during this time was clear: training an elite corps of engineers

¹⁰² Wolters, 45.

¹⁰³ Wolters, 47.

and scientists to facilitate a cold war victory and secure American dominance yet again¹⁰⁴.

Though public concern was particularly high after *Sputnik*, it was quelled by the fact that the comprehensive approach endured. American education was not reshaped according to Rickover's model but rather bolstered by James Conant, America's one man reform movement, who successfully made ability-grouping the nation's top priority. Until the mid-1960s, educational reformers demanded (and high schools offered) more advanced courses for their talented students while increasing grouping of students according to "ability". Small schools were being consolidated to facilitate these changes, and the general trend that swept the nation was toward "stiffer courses and more homework", as the *New York Times* noted.

Dialogue surrounding the underachievement of black students predicted that equalization through desegregation would make even the playing field. After the mid-1960s however, U.S. attention would turn away from the gifted-centered curriculum. Soon enough, the civil rights movement gained momentum, race riots ensued, tensions inflamed, and the pursuit of academic excellence was exchanged for concerns with uplifting and placating the underprivileged¹⁰⁵.

President Johnson's *Great Society* served as the signal for decades of structural reforms to cope with such glaring disparities between the nation's privileged and underserved schools. While desegregation had been deemed unconstitutional 10 years earlier, educational equity only then became a national,

¹⁰⁴ Darrel Drury, Justin Baer, *The American Public School Teacher: Past, Present, & Future* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2011) 7.

¹⁰⁵ Wolters, 51, 57.

albeit legislative priority. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was the initial step in using education to carry out the War on Poverty. Adult basic education occupied a major component outlined in the act that provided vocational and literacy training in the Job Corps. Popular programs like Head Start (that aimed to enhance intellectual development of preschool children of poor families), Upward Bound (aiding high potential, low-income high school students prepare for higher education) and the National Youth Corps were also featured in the EOA¹⁰⁶. A year later in 1965, Congress ratified the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which directed \$2 billion dollars to school districts with large low-income communities. In an effort to hold these schools accountable for their performance and close the “achievement gap”, federal provisions (like Title 1 designation) were granted upon satisfying benchmarks and goals that measured student progress via test scores¹⁰⁷.

In 1966, the new emphasis on equity was bolstered yet again. The publication of a congressionally authorized study by James Coleman and his team of researchers found large racial disparities in student success. The *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, otherwise referred to as the Coleman report, documented that, on average, black sixth graders trailed nearly two years behind their white counterparts, and by the twelfth grade they lagged four years behind¹⁰⁸. Together with the creation of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (which

¹⁰⁶ Cremin, 316-319; Robert S. Miller, “Economic Opportunity Act of 1964”, <http://jschell.myweb.uga.edu/history/legis/econ.htm>.

¹⁰⁷ “Education Laws: Elementary and Secondary Education Act” <http://education.laws.com/elementary-and-secondary-education-act>

¹⁰⁸ James Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966) Section 1.3, 23.

collects evidence of student performance in core subjects and is now the largest continuing evaluation) this study accomplished two things:

First, it moved educational policy away from its traditional focus on *inputs*—such as the number of books in a school library—and replaced that with an emphasis on student *outcomes*. And, second, it showed that the caliber of teachers...was more strongly associated with student achievement than nearly every other school-related factor...as research provided empirical evidence consistent with [their importance]¹⁰⁹.

Once again attention was turned toward reconciliation; how to make right the many wrongs such as educational inequity along racial lines. In 1971 the Supreme Court ruled that busing could be used as a tool to achieve racial balance (an issue that will be discussed later). However the so-called Great Test Score Decline of the mid 60s to late 70s also became a national priority. These discoveries were made possible largely by the efforts of the brainchild of the scientific education movement: standardized testing. These standardized tests made it easier to follow trends in student achievement after WWII, and they quickly became adopted as the benchmark for researchers, teachers, and students alike¹¹⁰. However, this emphasis on testing would come with both insight for, and impediment to, educational success.

By and large, these quantitative inquiries brought national concern with education to an all time high. Curriculum retrenchment, or “a return to the basics” was the response of educational reformers of the time for both privileged and underprivileged students. The federal Report of the National Panel on High School

¹⁰⁹ Drury, Baer, 7.

¹¹⁰ Franciosi, 43.

and Adolescent Education (*The Education of Adolescents* in 1976) advised that curriculum be reduced to “essential skills susceptible to school training”. Consequently, many high schools—especially those catering to disadvantaged students—followed this policy of skills training through drill work. Essentially, the elevated concern with equity produced a new trend of teaching, one that was stripped of ideas that gave meaning to learning. Rather than dealing with the fundamental problems of content, quality, and access that faced the nation’s schools, regulatory shifts to a focus on core curriculum (English, math, science, history) were frequently utilized¹¹¹. Irrespective of approach, by 1979 it was clear that education was, as President Carter “our most important national investment...[That] our ability to advance both economically and technologically, our country’s entire intellectual and cultural life depend on the success of or great educational enterprise”¹¹². By the two next decades, this statement and focus would bring about great structural change in America’s schools.

Political and press reports of this “learning crisis” which was thought to be caused by low standards, lack of purpose, and a failure to strive for excellence, would soon open the flood-gates to free-market reforms that challenged basic principles of public education. Traditionally, the aim of American public schooling was to educate its citizens to partake in a democracy and to serve as the great equalizer. However, following the publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983 (which tied poor student performance on national and international tests to poor economic

¹¹¹ Daniel Tanner, Laurel Tanner, *History of the School Curriculum* (NY, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 2009) 23.

¹¹² Frank Thompson, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1979, Book 2* (United States Government Printing Office, 1980) 1958.

performance in the global marketplace), schools were forced to compete in a business-driven world where the one thing that mattered most was the bottom line¹¹³. The assessment grimly reported that

“[T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments...we have allowed this to happen to ourselves....We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking unilateral educational disarmament”¹¹⁴

While some, like author Nicholas Lemann and historian Carl Kaestle, worked to debase these broad-sweeping claims, state after state began to put forth school regulations with haste. High school graduation requirements, lengthened school days and years, more homework, an emphasis on traditional subjects, and of course, more tests were but some of the methods used to retain competitive edge. The burden of these reforms was shifted to state and local authorities as the federal government decided to rescind its role in education. These local authorities in turn tightened their grip on students to ensure that they were working diligently to meet new standards—no doubt the making of a high-stakes, heavy testing environment¹¹⁵.

“A Nation at Risk” was soon followed by several others—such as *Tomorrow’s Teachers* published by the Holmes Group in 1985, and *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy in 1986—

¹¹³ Mondale, Patton, 177, 185.

¹¹⁴ “A Nation at Risk”

http://datacenter.spps.org/uploads/SOTW_A_Nation_at_Risk_1983.pdf

¹¹⁵ Mondale, Patton, 186 -187.

that set in motion an ambitious agenda for teacher professionalization and education reform in general. These reports ignited a debate about teacher efficacy and education quality that would carry on to the present day¹¹⁶. By the close of the 1980s, there was little debate whether public schools needed improvement—especially those in cities where per-pupil spending was often as low as a third of what it was in neighboring suburbs. The most glaring issue became that of funding, without which schools would find it virtually impossible to improve.

John Golle, the founder and chairman of a for-profit company called Education Alternatives, Inc, best embodies one reform philosophy for educational prosperity. To his rhetorical question “You want to improve public education?”, he answers “The way to do it is compete with them. Allow them the chance to compete with private enterprise, and vice versa. That’s the way you’re gong to make public education better”¹¹⁷. The approach of business-oriented competition would emerge victorious in the reform battle during the late 80s. Continuing this trend, mainstream education became entirely preoccupied with the “learning crisis” and increase in global competition. The call for structural renovation was answered by a variety of corporate companies, which poured funding into charter schools and test-prep initiatives. During the reign of this business-driven model over the next few decades, highly controversial systems of schooling were hastily implemented and continue to dominate public education discourse to this day.

The extent to which *Brown v. Board* enhanced the state of black education comes to a paradoxical conclusion. Without doubt, this landmark case dismantled

¹¹⁶ Drury, Baer, 8.

¹¹⁷ Mondale, Patton, 187.

Jim Crow and allowed the U.S. to begin removing racial barriers. However, what *Brown* specifically condemned was desegregation, not advocate *integration*, which was deeply questioned from both races. The Supreme Court's ruling assigned all students, regardless of race, to the nearest neighborhood school; asserting that "Desegregation does not mean that there must be an intermingling of the races in all school districts. It means only that they may not be prevented from intermingling or going to school together because of race"¹¹⁸. Ironically, desegregation in the realm of education has been far less successful than in other areas of public life, such as athletics and interstate commerce. In fact, by the next decade in 1964, as a report by the *New York Times* noted, "98.9 per cent of the 2,901,671 Negroes students in eleven Southern states still attend all-Negro schools"¹¹⁹. While many assumed at its outset that *Brown* would close the achievement gap, more than five decades after the ruling it hasn't done anything except *widen* that gap. All the while prejudice, discrimination, and inequality did not disappear. Yet by and large leaders of Black communities understood school integration *and* segregation as an opportunity to gain greater power and control over their education¹²⁰. The Black educational agenda of independence, racial uplift, race pride and solidarity that had developed during enslavement, that had articulated and debated during the early 20th century, now had greater latitude to expand its influence.

As aforementioned, integration became a topic of intense debate that would soon nourish and contest the goals of Black educational agenda. While it is

¹¹⁸ Wolters, 4.

¹¹⁹ Wolters, 44.

¹²⁰ Mondale, Patton, 129.

commonly held that the deep-rooted resentment of intermingling of races was a defining characteristic of the south during this time, it was not exclusive to southern states. Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut for example, admitted “we’re just as racist in the North as they are in the South”, scoffing at distinction, saying, “*de fact, de jure*, I don’t want to hide behind those two phrases”¹²¹. Therefore, quite fittingly, Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell explained that, racial imbalances (either in school or in residential areas) throughout the nation were “largely unrelated whether a particular State had or did not have segregative school laws”. Rather, they were largely the result of the personal principle and economic ability of individual families and communities¹²². By 1966, most states grudgingly accepted the 1964 civil rights act as a flexible law that, in order to receive federal funding, required desegregation. In the North and the West, students were usually assigned to the nearest neighborhood schools, while in the South, beginning in 1965, many communities allowed their students to select a school to attend, and choose they did.

The battle of integration intensified upon the Supreme Court’s decision to uphold the use of bussing as a desegregation tool. Given the patterns of steady residential segregation, the busing plan devised by federal judges typically involved transporting Black students to schools in predominantly white areas. Many White parents and whole communities objected, but the Court unanimously ruled in the *Charlotte-Mecklenburg* case in 1971 that courts withheld the authority to order bussing as a desegregation plan. Denver became the first southern city to be ordered

¹²¹ Wolters, 149.

¹²² Wolters. 149.

to begin bussing, setting in motion the advancement of desegregation (generally in the south but also in most of the rest of the country). Court-ordered racial mixing immediately provoked fierce opposition from White officials and public alike. Protests and violence dominated the educational policy debate in the 70s, as it quickly overshadowed the lingering changes on public schools—especially in the south. For instance from 1968 to 1988 the percentage of Black students attending predominantly Black/Latino schools declined sharply in the south—from more than 80 percent to about 55 percent—and fell in every other region except the northeast. Boston (and the METCO system) serves as the most apt representation of northern resistance, where a federal judge ordered racial mixing between heavily predominantly White South Boston and majority Black Roxbury. On the first day in September 1974, only 10 of the 525 white students assigned to Roxbury High, while police-escorted buses that carried 56 Black students heading for South Boston High were stoned¹²³.

Though a year later the Supreme Court withdrew and barred court-ordered desegregation between inner cities and suburbs (the first decision in a series of major rulings that effectively reversed the trend after 1988, and marked an era of “resegregation”), its effect on the Black educational agenda was two-fold. Under the mantra of receiving a “better education”, advocates of integration (largely parents, officials, and other adults) readily ushered their children aboard busses to predominantly white schools. “Ensuring blacks into predominantly white, middle-class schools would improve their chances for social mobility by linking blacks to

¹²³ *Urban Issues: selections from CQ Researcher* (Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications, 2013) 358-360.

social networks and prestige associated with these white-dominated institutions” was the argument used by both citizens and the theory underpinning the *Brown* cases¹²⁴. Also supporting integration was a belief that integration would yield more personal effect of broadening horizons. In her book *The Other Boston Busing Story* by Susan Eaton, many of her interviews with sixty-five METCO graduates vividly recount the hardships they endured during busing (cultural disconnects, physical alterations, alienation from both Black and White communities,). However in retrospect they believe that the long-term gains of learning to live simultaneously in White and Black communities outweighed the cost. As one participant explains, this meant “seeing the world as mine, too...as belonging to me as much as it did to them”¹²⁵. For Blacks in support of desegregation, they perceived it as an opportunity to alter the pattern of intense social and economic isolation. Nevertheless, at this particular junction the Black educational agenda would emphasize a certain level of segregation that would better cultivate the concepts of self-reliance, self-knowledge, racial pride, and community uplift.

Despite the recruiting and failed efforts of busing, a majority of Black students and their parents chose to attend Black schools. This was due in part to the history of opposing school integration, fearing, with good reason, white maltreatment of black students, the loss of jobs for black teachers, and the dissolution of black-controlled educational institutions¹²⁶. Even proponents of integration such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Charles Johnson (who believed segregated

¹²⁴ Susan Eaton, *The other Boston busing story: what's won and lost across the boundary line* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) 16.

¹²⁵ Eaton, 38.

¹²⁶ Douglas, 7.

schools with inadequate equipment, poor salaries, and desolate housing were bad enough) recognized the merciless mistreatment of these young students who were constantly barraged with derogatory slurs and whose aspirations were dashed by discriminatory expectations. Therefore, much as they had done in the nineteenth century, blacks emphasized the importance of children learning under the nurturing care of black teachers who, as they believed, would be more likely to exude empathy, compassion, patience, interest, and a natural love for their students¹²⁷. This type of teacher-pupil relationship was perceived as transcending mere academics, offering socio-emotional support and a willingness to go above and beyond. Due to these circumstances and the ability of blacks to exercise independence in these schools, many blacks maintained segregated institutions. As an editor of the *New York Times* commented, “a significant fraction of American Negroes—including many of the most articulate and politically active—want integration as little as the Governors of Mississippi and Alabama”¹²⁸. Such were the persisting sentiments within black communities that allowed for the agenda of self-help and racial uplift to further develop.

However, segregation was but one of the phenomena that accompanied Black consciousness and cultural awakening of the 1960s and 70s. Education was historically attached to the uplift of Blacks—a notion grounded in the understanding that it represented communal knowledge and hence symbolized group strength and collective progress. The Civil Rights and Black Power movement advanced this uplift by cultivating feelings of racial solidarity, effectively redefining the institutions and

¹²⁷ Douglas, 173.

¹²⁸ Wolters, 127.

terms by which they would become educated. As Blacks had considered it for centuries, schooling during this time was not limited to the traditional setting. In a very real sense the black community became the center of education, as professor and activist Preston Wilcox explained; street corners, stadiums, churches, storefronts, picket lines, the stage, bars, and even courtyards of jails and bedrooms were *their* classrooms. The content of the curriculum also was derived from the Black experience: sit-ins, bus boycotts, the Memphis strike, the March on Washington, the New York school integration struggle, Selma, Alabama, NAACP, SCLC, SNCC, CORE, the Freedom Rides, the NOI and the Black Panthers, to name a few, “made learning and doing inseparable; apprehension and comprehension indivisible; intellect and emotion one; and thought and action a single effort”¹²⁹. The philosophy and spirit that inspired these intellects, these foot soldiers, and these movements was precisely the connection that had founded the Black educational agenda since its inception: liberation.

It is important to note that in these moments of social upheaval, adults assumed a central role as both the educator and the pupil. The struggle for education, its tools, and uses had never been limited to children; dating back to slavery adults were at the forefront of fighting for, and disseminating knowledge of, literacy, culture, and empowerment. As such the members of the many Civil Rights Movement organizations assumed a dominant role in pushing forward the agenda of racial uplift, but with a particular emphasis on political participation and civic duties. For instance, amidst the backdrop of nonviolent movements across the

¹²⁹ Nathan Wright, *What Black Educators Are Saying* (NY, NY: Hawthorn Books, 1970) 5.

south, the Education Department of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference soon became the Citizenship Education Program. A central element SCLC's grassroots work, the CEP functioned as a leadership and citizenship education program for thousands of Black southerners who came to join the freedom movement. Once a month, in motel rooms, church basements, individual homes, forty to sixty people studied and worked together for five days. Dorothy Cotton (Director of the CEP from 1960-1968) explained that here at these workshops, they discovered the workings of local, state, and federal government, the rights and privileges of the individual before the law, in some cases reading and writing, civic duties, and arguably most importantly, discovered their own power and self-worth so as to redefine themselves as Black people in America. In the ten-state, region wide program, the thousands who came through the CEP workshops left as members of the "ground crew" as Dr. King referred to these newly-equipped social change agents. With this educational experience that was closely tied to a powerful, socially liberating movement, they returned to their homes charged with the responsibility to "create their radically new roles in the necessary transformation of their communities, their nation, and their world"¹³⁰. Though these types of educational outlets were by no means affiliated with mainstream pedagogy, there were commonplace for a plethora of organizations such as the Nashville Christian Leadership Council, SNCC, CORE, FOR and the SCLC whose objective was to promote a Black agenda of racial progress, uplift, pride and solidarity.

¹³⁰ Dorothy Cotton, *IF your Back's Not Bent: The Role of the Citizenship Education Program in the Civil Rights Movement* (NY, NY: Atria Books, 2012) XVII, 108.

Freedom Schools were also one of the products of this type of liberating education that transformed myriad communities. Generally made as alternative free schools for Blacks in the south, they were part of the national movement to achieve socio-economic and political equality in the U.S. Though the Council of Federated Organizations coordinated the efforts of representatives from the four leading civil rights groups at the time (SNCC, SCLC, NAACP, and CORE), by and large, they were established with the support of local community members who provided them housing and buildings to organize their schools. As was the case with Mississippi in the summer of 1964 (known as Freedom Summer), forty-one Freedom Schools opened in the churches, on the back porches, and under trees throughout the state—far from the customary mainstream school setting. The students of the schools ranged from unschooled small children to the elderly who had spent their lives laboring in the fields and were taught by volunteers who hailed from a wide range of geographical and educational backgrounds. The leaders of the Curriculum Conference held in March 21-22 before the summer, realized the need for *this* system of schooling to follow an overarching Black agenda as well. As such, their curriculum was split in three: Academic Curriculum, which consisted of a Black History subgroup, Citizenship Curriculum, and a Nonacademic Curriculum that included the use of newspapers, drama, creative writing, and leadership development through participating in voter registration drives. These three sections of the Freedom School Curriculum rested upon a familiar principle of using the “The school [as] an agent of social change”¹³¹.

¹³¹ Cotton, 110.

During the mid 60s a distinct cultural and conceptual shift towards Black history and Africanization surfaced. Considered a by-product of the decades-old civil rights movement, knowledge of this history and heritage soon became the cornerstone for using education as a liberating tool. In other words, the employment of education as a liberating force used the foundation of political activism on which to build and develop black competence and self-concept¹³². Therefore a seminal part of the Black educational agenda during these times was a call for an African-centered pedagogy—a familiar phenomenon in Black life that had began decades earlier with Alice Howard, Anna Julia Cooper, Dubois, Woodson, Garvey, and the like¹³³. Those earlier efforts were now being built upon and incorporated into the curriculum of black independent schools that approached teaching from an African frame of reference. A significant milestone of the 1960s was the advent of the *Nguzo Saba* (1966), a value system based on principles of *Umoja* (Unity), *Kujichagulia* (self-determination), *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility), *Ujamaa* (cooperative economics), *Nia* (purpose), *Kuumba* (creativity), and *Imani* (faith) that many schools used to organize their curricula and teaching during the 60s, 70s and 80s¹³⁴. The National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools (later renamed the American Teachers Association) was one of the earliest national organizations that helped promulgate the need for teaching the history of Blacks in their own classrooms¹³⁵. And, from these calls came a response, a growth of hundreds of community-based,

¹³² Wright, 10.

¹³³ Shujaa, 148.

¹³⁴ Shujaa, 138; William Deburg, *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan* (NY, NY: New York University Press, 1997) 275.

¹³⁵ Shujaa, 137.

independent preschools, elementary schools, and high schools that had developed and implemented a challenging curriculum which incorporated African/African American history and culture¹³⁶.

These schools worked diligently to imbue instruction with principles of Black history, changing the educational system from a traditional form to a functional one. It was customary for these schools to accompany lessons on aeronautics, for example, with researching the role of Africans in American aviation (such as the Tuskegee Airmen). They developed speculations on the source of the wooden glider in the Cairo Museum, drawing from it evidence of ancient Egyptians who investigated principles of flight. Lessons on architecture identified the triangle as the center of Egyptian understanding used to construct the pyramids. These young students were involved in Science EXPOs, and were visited by Black architects who not only evaluated projects but spoke to them about using their firm to promote the development of black communities. These schools implemented Black History quizzes, were visited by Black businessmen- and women to speak to students, were given hands-on demonstrations of the Yoruba counting system, taught units of Kemetic (Egyptian) history, and given examples of applied Egyptian mathematics—functions that were clearly distinct from mainstream education¹³⁷. It was typical for these schools to foster a defined set of standards that were rooted in Black-centered ethical development. For instance, the *New Concept Development Center Parent*

¹³⁶ Shujaa, 305; Kofi Lomotey, “Independent Black Institutions: African-Centered Education Models,” *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (1992) 455.

¹³⁷ Shujaa, 305.

Handbook that was used in these institutions defined some their expectations as an ability to:

“1) Think critically and question everything; 2) understand history; 3) set good examples and accept just criticism; 4) practice a life-style which recognizes the importance of African and African-American heritage and traditions, and is geared to the values which will facilitate the present and future development of African people”¹³⁸.

This educational agenda promotes and demonstrates a certain kind of qualitative development, one that transcends the simple acquisition of literacy and numeracy. *These* lessons reflect Black pedagogical principles that were aimed at liberating and empowering students to impact their communities; lessons that extended its reach past traditional classroom settings.

As aforementioned, while the message of Black education remained the same, its mediums and messengers of the era took on new forms. Not adhering to the popular methods of nonviolent integration, the Black Power movement concentrated its focus on the downtrodden, disenfranchised, and the nation’s inner city youth who did not reap the benefits of citizenship and democracy. Black Power advocates exuded lessons of “Black-self worth, socioeconomic and political independence, and the ultimate defeat of evil” during a time when Blacks were still met with unrelenting discrimination, violence, oppression and environmental challenges¹³⁹. These expressions were at the forefront of what in 1966 became Black Power, and Malcolm X was one of its most indefatigable leaders.

¹³⁸ Shujaa, 306.

¹³⁹ Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, “The Autobiography of Malcolm X: Nation of Islam”

During all of his activist life Malcolm X (as a minister of the Nation of Islam and later the independent Al-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) gave sermons and speeches in Mosques, nationally televised interviews, lectures at universities, in Nation of Islam private schools, and on street corners. His messages—be they official speeches aimed at the eyes of the nation such as the “Ballot or the Bullet”, or for the ears of local communities—served an educational function. He candidly denounced police brutality, poor public facilities in Black neighborhoods, shed light upon the battles of the urban north, and the hypocrisy of American society, while actively revealing Black history to crowds in Harlem, Detroit, Pennsylvania, Chicago and Boston (focuses that Huey Newton and Bobby Seale would later devote much of their attention to and outline in their *Ten Point Program*)¹⁴⁰. To the latter point, Malcolm instilled pride in masses of Black youth who were regarded as the nation’s undesirables, by imparting them with black self-worth and self-assertion. As per the ideology of the NOI, Malcolm frequently used the term “the original man” to address Blacks which alludes to the belief that Black people were the first humans on earth, the originators of culture and civilization which, by nature, rendered them divine beings¹⁴¹. Embracing their rich history and terms like “Black” and “Afro-American”, Malcolm called for a self-directed black identity and cultural revolution that, with the increasing strength of the civil rights and Black Power movements, began taking shape in black communities across the U.S. (note the rising self-expression marked by Afros, African clothing such as the dashiki, and slogans like James Brown’s song

¹⁴⁰Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (NY, NY: Viking Press, 2011) 489.

¹⁴¹ “The Autobiography of Malcolm X: The Original Man”

“Say it Loud: I’m Black and I’m Proud!”)¹⁴². Echoing Marcus Garvey’s “up you mighty race”, Malcolm demanded that blacks begin to uphold their dignity and reclaim their fate. Such messages were invaluable and constructive to the youth’s self-perception, as they were used as vehicles to thrust forward the agenda of racial solidarity and uplift.

Inspired by the philosophy of Malcolm X and those who subscribed to the ideals of Black Power, a new determined faction of youth would embrace this legacy, and their subsequent actions elevated the goals of Black self-determination. In 1966 Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale organized the Black Panther Party, a grassroots political organization that stood in the vanguard of social change. Considered the sole organization in the history of Black struggle against oppression that was armed and promoted a revolutionary agenda, it represented a great thrust by the mass of Black communities for equal justice and liberation¹⁴³. Newton and Seale immediately recognized “What We [American Blacks] Want” and “What We Believe”, codifying it in their Ten Point Platform and Program¹⁴⁴. Aside from voicing a wide variety of concerns, this manifesto was many ways illustrative of the Black educational agenda, since, as Kato Cooks emphasized in a recent interview, “education was a cornerstone of the Party’s foundation”¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴² “The Autobiography of Malcolm X: The Black Man”

¹⁴³ Blackpanther.org: Legacy pg. 1

¹⁴⁴ Philip Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* (NY, NY: Da Capo Press, 1995)

¹⁴⁵ Examiner.com, “Kato Cooks: His truth behind the Black Panther Party (exclusive interview).”

They too believed that in order to reject black degradation, properly educate the youth, and enact “Black psychic conversion”, they must instill a of sense pride in their culture and heritage¹⁴⁶. Point 5 of their TPP, gives testimony to this focus:

“We want education for our people that exposes the true nature this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society. We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else”¹⁴⁷.

The Liberation Schools that they constructed were the realization of point five’s intent, and were quickly spread in chapters and branches of the party throughout the country. These schools exercised a curriculum that was molded to fit the needs of the youth. Three days of the week were spent in class learning the principles of liberation, history, and activism, Thursday was Film day, and Fridays were used for community field trips—all served with a well-balanced breakfast and lunch. During the evenings, Community Political Education classes were held for adults¹⁴⁸. What’s more, in light that the Black educational agenda was not wholly defined by conventional standards, the Party emphasized learning through action¹⁴⁹. Whether by trailing police through Black communities with guns and a law book to halt police brutality, publicizing their display or reading or carrying out the thirty-five Survival Programs that they implemented on the street level (including the Free Breakfast

¹⁴⁶ Historyinanhour.com, ‘Malcolm X’s Influence on the Black Panther Party; Cornel West, “Malcolm X and Black Rage.” *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*. By Joe Wood. (NY, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1992) 49.

¹⁴⁷ Foner, 3.

¹⁴⁸ Foner 170, 171.

¹⁴⁹ Foner 63.

program, free clinics, grocery giveaways, manufacturing and distribution of free shoes, senior transport and service programs, protesting rent evictions, welfare rights workshops, free bussing to prisons, prisoner support, and legal aid programs) the Black Panthers aimed to educate through their actions and thereby stimulate others to act as well¹⁵⁰.

On the whole by the 1980s, academic achievement had experienced a trend of subtle increases, yet behind these statistics did a much more important pattern develop. According to the NAEP, during the 70s and 80s there ad been a narrowing of the racial gap in school success, as measured by standardized tests. For thirteen year old students, the gap in reading and math reportedly decreased by 60 per cent¹⁵¹. Historian James Anderson echoed these reports, saying that underserved populations and ethnic groups who lagged behind “and had not had access to good public education were making significant strides...[And] in some ways our schools were doing a better job in important areas than they had ever done historically”¹⁵². Yet the small steps that had turned into giant leaps for the Black educational agenda cannot be measured by orthodox methods. Blacks navigated the social, political and academic terrain of this era by using education as a liberating tool. Civil Rights organizations developed education workshops and voter registration drives that would educate, and thereby liberate thousands of southern and northern Blacks. At the very same moment, the foundations of Black history were built upon and being embraced by Blacks across the nation in mind and in practice. The lessons of racial

¹⁵⁰ Foner, xxvii; Blackpanther.org: Legacy pg. 10; “Kato Cooks”.

¹⁵¹ Wolters, 237.

¹⁵² Mondale, Patton, 186.

pride, uplift and solidarity were crystalized in the curriculum of independent Black institutions. Nonetheless, these lessons that connected the legacy of the past to those present and those coming, were not contained by the physical structures of schools. On the contrary, the advent of the Black Power Movement gave rise to unconventional educators who were nurtured by the rich and complex legacy of self-determination, who would not once step foot into public schools during their activism, and yet had more impact on the minds of the masses more than any one school had done. Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, the students of the university protests who successfully lobbied for Black Studies, and a slew of Blacks whose efforts remain undocumented, redefined what it meant to be “educated”—how and where this education would take place. As it had centuries prior, it was not simply the acquisition of literacy and numeracy that mattered most, but rather the collective progress that could be realized by the *use* of education in the struggle for greater equality, justice, and racial unity.

CHAPTER 4: Through the storms of change

Since the 1990s, education has undergone an array of shifts that have earned record-high criticism. The fierce debates over the best way to educate the nation's school children during the last 24 years have been eerily similar to decades past. However, the defining questions of the age now surround methods of intervention: What is the right program to implement in certain schools? What is the most effective way to teach? How should we train our professionals¹⁵³? Though these questions become irrelevant when examining how well they are able to implement solutions, attempts to answer them created a free-market based and business-oriented trajectory that came into full fruition during the nineties, but have also had drastic consequences for reorganization of class, race/ethnic arrangement, and the future of public education¹⁵⁴.

In light of three main assumptions, an alliance of public officials, corporate leaders, and educators were compelled to (and were successful in) requiring more stringent academic standards and improved results on national/international tests for all students. The first understood that the same way the economy prospers under marketplace competition and consumer choice among varied products, public schools so too would become more efficient if they competed with one another and gave parents the power of choice in the schools that their children attended. The second held that, in an information-driven economy, rigorous academic curricula (especially in math and science) would cause students to perform better in the

¹⁵³ Charles Payne, *So Much Reform, So Little Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008) 6.

¹⁵⁴ Michael Fabricant, Michelle Fine, *Charter Schools and the Corporate Makeover of Public Education: What's At Stake* (Ny, NY: Teachers College Press, 2012), 1.

workplace. The last belief was that standardized tests measure what has been learned and can approximate future employee performance. Consequently, reformers drew from corporate practices to create new school solutions: set clear goals and high standards for employees, reorganize operations that give managers and employees the power to decide how the product is to be constructed, then hold them responsible for the quality while rewarding those who meet or goals, and punishing those who do not. These strategies were claimed to have worked for Ford Motor Company, IBM, Hewlett-Packard along with a number of other firms, and, if applied to schools, could revolutionize public education¹⁵⁵.

Unmoved by the inherit difference between school operation and business governance, corporate leaders recommended a number of these methods that are now widely used today: establish well-defined national goals and standards, give parents (though not all) choice to select their preferred school, allow schools to compete for students, test often, inform taxpayers and parents of how well their children are performing by issuing report cards, reward staff, schools, and students who meet goals, while punishing those who fail. As a result, this radical renovation of the public schools has been crafted and funded by private philanthropy and corporate politics, effectively entangling the distinction between public and private schooling, engorging the role of business interests, and diminishing participation of community members as stakeholders¹⁵⁶. During this era, the rise of the small, and charter school movement along with the heavy reliance on test scores have since been the focus of popular debate and reform. While it would be inaccurate to

¹⁵⁵ Mondale, Patton, 178.

¹⁵⁶ Fabricant, Fine, 1.

completely attribute the present challenges to these school developments, it is a vivid reform lens through which to examine the complex and competing ideologies, economic impacts, political motivations, and community needs that are reshaping public education.

Charter schools gained prominence during a period in history when educational despair within communities of color were alarmingly high, privatization had taken root, and public schools writ large were under siege by proclaimed reformist. Initially developed in the 1980s by progressive educators under the management Albert Shanker, Ray Budde and the American Federation of Teachers (2nd largest Teachers Union), charter schools were built with an affinity toward educating and nurturing low-income communities, children of poverty, color, and immigrants. These two men envisioned charters as an entity to allow teachers to try out new ideas free from the interference of local district bureaucracy, and hence focus on the lowest-performing students and dropouts, working toward innovative ways to stimulate their interest in education. In these early stages, charters were a rarity, a scarce educational alternative that were educator run, social justice driven, and community-based. Given the deplorable condition of many under-invested schools where public education had failed families for generations, parents quickly (and understandably) supported the growing network of charter schools, as they naturally sought to provide better opportunities for their children¹⁵⁷. By the time Minnesota passed the first charter law in 1991, and opened the first charter school in 1992, the ideology of “choice”, vouchers, high-stakes testing, and competition had

¹⁵⁷ Ravitch, 12; Farbricant, Fine, 2, 3, 5.

been perceived by many policy makers as the preferred method of school reform. Thus, the small numbers of relatively autonomous, experimental charter schools were heavily influenced by this school of thought, and became reengineered by philanthropic, corporate, hedge-fund, and real-estate interests¹⁵⁸.

Given the nation's astronomical concern for public education that was ignited a decade earlier by *A Nation at Risk*, support from these organizations came hand over fist. Media outlets bombarded public schooling with criticism, arguing that the force behind independent, alternative education would unleash the true potential of students, and strengthen the performance of schools nation-wide. At this exact time, the louder voices of "entrepreneurs" (such as state advocacy groups, think-tanks, and Charter-Management Organizations) championed charters as the policy alternative to the wasteful investment in, and injurious effects of, traditional schooling. The vast financial resources and influence of a variety of agents, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates, the Broad, and the Ohlin foundation, would soon join the fold, bolstering the effects of these forces. In essence, the initial progressive direction of charter schools was being steered by a rising ideological faction. These advocates accentuated the perceived virtue of high-stakes testing, low-cost-short-term educators (i.e. Teach For America, founded in 1990), relentlessly blamed teacher incompetence and union resistance, and ultimately vocalized charter schools as the only way to lead the nation out of its educational (and therefore economic) misery. However, these burgeoning charter schools would also develop

¹⁵⁸ Daine Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*, (Ny, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 13; Fabricant, Fine, 2, 17.

their own discursive, and sometimes questionable track record which left little attention paid to its consequences on conventional neighborhood schools—effects that will later be examined¹⁵⁹.

Throughout the remainder of the decade, the mainstream educational agenda reflected a focus on corporate driven reform. For instance in 1992 Baltimore hired a private company, Education Alternatives Inc. (EIA) to run nine of its schools—the first for-profit company to manage American public schools. John Golle, head of EIA, believed firmly in the use of competition to renovate schools in need of repair. He explained that “We had everyone compete. Compete for the delivery of the food services. Compete for the maintenance and the cleaning of the building, interior and exterior. And by competing what we found was we were able to drive up the quality and drive down the costs”. Though critics questioned why EIA replaced unionized teacher’s aides with interns, cut special education services in half, and reduced the art and music program, it became evident that their influence was a force to be reckoned with¹⁶⁰. Elsewhere, corporate investment leavened. By the mid 90s, education in the U.S. was a \$300-billion-a-year industry: for-profit tutoring companies were introduced into classrooms to help raise test scores, school districts earned additional money by allowing corporate logos to appear in school buildings (i.e. Whittle Communications offered free media equipment to schools in exchange to have children watch 12 minutes per day of Channel One news featuring commercials geared toward young audiences), dozens of comprehensive school reform projects, including Teach for America, Success for All, Accelerated Schools,

¹⁵⁹ Fabricant, Fine, 17.

¹⁶⁰ Mondale, Patton, 202.

America's Choice, the School Development Program, the Coalition for Essential Schools, the Talent Development Program, Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) were introduced the realm of reform¹⁶¹.

This unprecedented shift boosted the nation's confidence in reform, as it did President Clinton's. In 1994 he signed Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which, among four other school readiness goals, claimed that by the year 2000 "The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent" and that the "United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement"¹⁶². Three years afterward, in his Call to Action for American Education in the 21st Century, the first listed goal to address the educational problems relating to international competitiveness was to "Set rigorous national standards, with national tests in fourth grade reading and eight-grade math to make sure our children master the basics"¹⁶³. With amplified corporate and federal investment the schools of the near future seemed quite promising, yet the reality in several instances, as many observed, would yield mixed results. Observers on both sides of the ideological divide desired the wholesale improvement of the education. Yet the conservative theory of change—one that believed the system of penalty is most the effective form of incentive—would prevail. Indeed the behavior of some teachers, administrators, corporate investors, and venture philanthropists indicated they felt it was tolerable to fail kids (primarily urban) and get away with it. Indeed accountability was very much needed. However, the dominant theory at the

¹⁶¹ Mondale, Patton, 201-202; Ravitch, 21.

¹⁶² Pamela Farris, *Teaching, Bearing the Torch* (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill College, 2014, 3rd Ed.) 55.

¹⁶³ Farris, 56.

moment did, and still does draw from this punishment-heavy school of thought, No Child Left Behind would demonstrate this with clarity.

As it limps into its thirteenth year, the \$26.5 billion No Child Left Behind law is the most hotly contested, unfunded federal mandate directly impacting the agenda and function of public education today. The first initiative to truly bring the federal government as a regulator of American schools, its basic stated intention is to augment accountability through standardized testing, hoping to weed out teachers who do not raise student achievement scores, and reward those who do¹⁶⁴. NCLB originally predicted that by 2014 every student in America was to perform math and reading at grade-level—a claim comparable to “saying, ‘I’m going to push you out the window, and I know you can fly’”, says Daniel Domenech, former superintendent of Virginia’s Fairfax County Public Schools¹⁶⁵. In order to make this haughty claim a reality, each state must develop and administer tests (categorized by racial and cultural groups) to students in grades 3-12. Schools are then mandated to report Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) using the data from these tests, and face a series of incremental consequences if not met each year. If any given school fails to make AYP for the second year, it is subsequently is placed on a “need for improvement” list, and required to create a two-year school improvement plan which includes curriculum and in-services for teachers and staff. Failing to make AYP for the third year results in the school having to provide free tutoring to student, while permitting them to transfer to other schools; four years results in a

¹⁶⁴ Fabricant, Fine, 13; Congressional Quarterly Inc., *Urban Issues: Selections from CQ Researcher* (USA: CQ Press, 2013) 6th edition, 11.

¹⁶⁵ Congressional Quarterly Inc., 32.

complete restructuring of curriculum and possible removal of several teachers; five concurrent years can lead to the takeover or closing of the school¹⁶⁶. Aside from school functioning, NCLB further opened the door to colossal entrepreneurial opportunities that had risen a decade earlier. Eyeing the federal funds that were set aside for after-school tutoring, thousands of tutoring companies materialized overnight to claim a share. New companies, consultants, and vendors were hastily pieced together to advise schools on how to meet NCLB testing targets, how to analyze its data, design teacher evaluation systems, train teachers, train principals, use new technology, and how to “turn around” failing schools¹⁶⁷.

These newfound procedures quickly posed fundamental challenges to educators and students alike. Marking the 20th anniversary of *A Nation at Risk*, it was announced that the education system as a whole remained as obsolete and unsatisfactory as it did in 1983. While statistical evidence both proves and contradicts this statement, it is easy to understand why such a claim held weight throughout the nation. For one, Thomas Timar of the University of California explains that these strategies of “bureaucratizing the process of school improvement and turning it into a chase for higher test scores” have not worked¹⁶⁸. In fact, though NCLB’s requirement that every school “have very qualified teachers is good” as Gary Orfield, a professor of social policy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education observes, it actually incentivizes teachers to abandon failing schools. Jennifer King-Rice, an economist and associate Professor of educational policy at the

¹⁶⁶ Farris, 57.

¹⁶⁷ Ravitch, 12, 15.

¹⁶⁸ Ravitch, 61.

University of Maryland, College Park explains that “Teachers say, ‘I cant produce the AYP results’” the law demands from low-performing schools with scarce resources, and, frustrated, go elsewhere. To add, the law provides no additional funding to help schools meet the qualified-teacher rule. Very few districts provide extra pay or additional inducements to attract talented teachers to under-invested schools. Those who do have seniority often exercise their right and leave when the opportunity avails itself¹⁶⁹. As a result in some cases, unstable, uncaring, and indolent teachers are left to populate these schools where stability, compassion, and competence are among the things children need most.

The environment of high-stakes testing that NCLB has constructed continues to provoke intense debate. Unbeknownst to many and contrary to popular belief, where there had been little but stagnation years prior, there has been positive movement in the last few years. Though test scores are unsatisfying and often equivocal measures, between 2002 and 2007 a report from Council of Great City Schools showed: 59 percent of fourth-grade students scored at or above proficiency on their state’s math test (compared to 49 percent in 2002) and 46 percent of eight-grade students did the same (increased from 35 percent in 2002). Reading scores, albeit more difficult to move, during the same years the percentage of at-or-above-proficiency fourth-graders went from 43 percent to 55 percent, while the eight-grade numbers went from 34 percent to 42 percent. Still more (and while not accounting for college-readiness which is far worse), New York City to date has seen a 20 percent improvement in graduation rates since 2002, brining it to a still

¹⁶⁹ Congressional Quarterly Inc., 31.

disappointing, yet all-time high of 66 percent¹⁷⁰. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) since 2006 the U.S. has seen significant performance gains on international science assessments¹⁷¹.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a general concern regarding the abhorrence of, and overreliance on, standardized testing. There is, as Charles Payne laments, “considerable validity in the charge that tests don't reflect the whole child and don't tell us what we need to know; that the pressures on districts to cheat have increased dramatically; that some test-score improvement is just the result of narrow teaching¹⁷². The content of these exams often place up to four-times the weight on multiple-choice sections of exams, encouraging shallow fact mongering while diminishing the value of higher-order, critical thinking¹⁷³. These limitations echo the same concerns voiced by reform advocate Samuel Gridley Howe, who, upon examining the abysmal test results of Boston schools in 1844, concluded that there was far too much rote learning of facts without an understanding of the principles behind them.

A century later the concern over rote, homogenous, partial testing is manifest. Teachers grumble about how their students are being tested on disconnected facts at the expense of higher level thinking skills, which is even more emphasized in low-income schools where the need for meaningful instruction is the

¹⁷⁰ Payne, 3; New York Post (<http://nypost.com/2013/12/07/new-york-citys-misleading-graduation-rates/>)

¹⁷¹ Congressional Quarterly Inc., 6.

¹⁷² Payne, 6.

¹⁷³ Edweek,

http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/11/17/12gallagher_ep.h30.html

greatest¹⁷⁴. The NCLB's focus on tests as the sole measure of a child's progress puts teachers in an ethical bind by being forced to "teach to the test" rather than what they find most effective or interesting. Left with little room for imagination, spontaneity, and innovation, these high-pressure mandates "definitely lowers morale", says Marshalita Peterson, as associate professor of education at Spelman College, and increases the likelihood to cheat by desperate educators who do not want to lose their jobs or who hope to earn a bonus¹⁷⁵. By 2009 each state was spending millions of dollars to develop, administer, and evaluate tests in addition to the millions spent on reading instruction. During the same year, President Obama's new program, Race to the Top was "designed to spur systemic reform and embrace innovative approaches to teaching and learning in America's school"¹⁷⁶. According to this contest, state and local school districts would compete for funding in a race toward attaining the highest performance-based standards. However, according to renowned education policy analyst and author Diane Ravitch, Race to the Top has done nothing but make schools less stable, encourage turnover, promote policy churn, and undermine professionalism. In effect, the program targets teachers as the source of student success/failure, and offers school districts to fire teachers with low test-scores as a remedy. As 2014 neared, states were spending hundreds of millions of dollars each year on testing and on test preparation materials; schools in some districts and states were allocating 20 percent of the school year to preparing for state tests. The misallocation of scarce resources was hardly surprising, because

¹⁷⁴ Baer, Drury, 15.

¹⁷⁵ Congressional Quarterly Inc., 32; Ravitch 111.

¹⁷⁶ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/fact-sheet-race-top>

schools lived or died depending on their test scores. The thirst for data became unquenchable, revealing that, under the banner of racial equality lay a more insidious educational agenda that favored economic considerations above all else¹⁷⁷.

These monumental shifts in education have had devastating effects on the state of Black education, magnifying the severity of its issues. Deindustrialization and the mass exodus of the middle-class from cities to outer-ring communities took with it its robust tax base while federal investment in cities declined, leaving behind poor families to face the rising plight of urban decay. Although poverty rates declined in the 1990s, the number of children living in disadvantaged communities (high poverty rates, high percentages of high school dropouts and unemployment) increased during that period, totaling around 5.6 million¹⁷⁸. This subsequently gave urban education a distinctive twist, concentrating lower-socioeconomic status students in urban school districts (about 50 percent of all Black and Latino students attend schools in which 75 percent or more of the students are low-income)¹⁷⁹.

Yet at this exact moment, the unparalleled, mandated expectation of the era that all students must achieve at academically higher levels became explicit. Disregarding that Black students of particularly challenging socioeconomic backgrounds start with an enormous disadvantage, Urban educators were now being asked to quickly reverse the trend of low academic achievement en masse, at a time when the tax base and federal support of the nation's schools were in flux and

¹⁷⁷ Ravitch, 61, 116, 13; Congressional Quarterly Inc., 47.

¹⁷⁸ Clarence Stone, *Changing Urban Education* (Lawrence, KN: University Press of Kansas, 1998) 4; Robert Rothman, *City Schools: How districts and communities can create smart education systems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2007) 11.

¹⁷⁹ Congressional Quarterly Inc., 11.

in intense competition.¹⁸⁰ To add, large numbers of schools that served Black students were least likely to offer the curriculum and access to funding (to attract quality teachers, obtain facilities, and learning equipment) needed to meet new standards for participating in today's world¹⁸¹. These disparities would make Black education seem synonymous with underachievement and academic failure—a connection reinforced by impending government programs and public hysteria.

Whether Black education and its long-standing agenda has been dismantled, developed or evolved over the past three decades is still being debated upon. In the same manner that No Child Left Behind was argued to have brought both positive and negative changes in mainstream education, it so too affected Black education. Supporters of NCLB reason with two main points. For one, it is claimed that student achievement scores have, albeit slightly, increased. U.S. Chamber of Commerce Senior Vice President Arthur Rothkopf voiced that while current testing data is still “abysmal”, it nevertheless “represents improvement from where this nation was” before the law. He noted that the gap in reading and math scores for Black and Latino students has diminished since the NCLB took hold. To be sure, test scores are not the only method of measuring education, but to the extent that they matter, says Diane Ravitch, “they are improving”. In her recent book *Reign of Error*, an entire chapter called “The Facts About Test Scores” demonstrates the ways in which test scores are calculated, subjective, and, most importantly, have improved slowly, steadily and significantly since 1992 according to NAEP data. While there is statistical evidence that contradicts and supports that claim, a more fundamental

¹⁸⁰ Stone 5, 6.

¹⁸¹ King, 200.

and frequently used point of inquiry is that NCLB data-reporting requirements have “lifted the carpet” to reveal two previously unrecognized facts—the continuing underperformance of the entire system, and the achievement gap for low-income students of color. Increasing accountability for these groups of students (Blacks, Latinos, children with disabilities, English-language learners) had led schools to focus on the students who have been “left behind” in the past, NCLB advocates declare¹⁸².

While national attention was more focused on the issues facing underserved students and communities as a whole, the effects of the last two decades has taken a toll on the Black educational agenda. Corporate investment successfully retooled education under a business-oriented model, which favored the bottom line over student growth. NCLB and R2T clearly prioritized the measurement of performance rather than the improvement of that performance, spent hundreds of millions of dollars each year on testing, made schools less stable, encouraged teacher/administration turnover, promoted policy churn, undermined professionalism, and abandoned the traditional idea of equity of educational opportunity where federal aid favored districts and schools with the highest needs¹⁸³. Yet what dealt the most devastating blow were the minimal opportunities that Common Core permitted for this agenda to (become realized). The obsessive call for high-test scores was answered by the narrow focus on “a single set of clear educational standards for kindergarten through 12 grade in English language arts

¹⁸² Congressional Quarterly Inc., 31; Rothman, 21.

¹⁸³ Norm Fruchter, *Urban Schools, Public Will: Making education work for all our children* (Ny, NY: Teachers College Press, 2007) 67, 68 ; Ravitch 61, 15.

and mathematics”—restraints that significantly reduce the opportunity and freedom for teachers to impart lessons of self-knowledge, self-help, racial pride and uplift¹⁸⁴. In fact, as per this effort homogenize classroom instruction, school lessons, interaction and even teacher-preparation programs center on an effort to disregard race differences. While proper teaching should indeed be impartial and unprejudiced, this mass-produced “colorblindness” ignores students “unique culture, beliefs, perceptions, [and] values”, says Associate Dean Dianne Mark of Central Michigan University¹⁸⁵.

With respects to its function within the Black educational project, this curriculum is often considered “culturally dissonant”. In other words, mainstream pedagogy does not accurately reflect Black culture, history, significance, or interests¹⁸⁶. Doing quite the opposite, the dominant culture is used as the standard and basis for measuring and socializing youth while invalidating the minority groups’ intelligence and societal contributions¹⁸⁷. Erhabor Ighodar explains this process as “curriculum violence”, wherein a heterogeneous society such as the U.S.,

“these destructive external elements permeate every facet of children’s lives from the home (house) to the schoolhouse, to the church house...images of ‘perfection,’ are represented and controlled by the dominant culture. In the schoolhouse, models of correct thought and behavior are ascribed to the dominant group. For the African American students in particular, the unfortunate omission and misrepresentation of the African intellectual

¹⁸⁴ <http://www.corestandards.org/resources/frequently-asked-questions>

¹⁸⁵ Congressional Quarterly Inc., 35.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Majors, *Educating our black children: new directions and radical approaches* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), 28.

¹⁸⁷ Brown, 232.

(cultural) heritage creates a perpetual gap between what was, what is, and what is possible”¹⁸⁸.

This argument contends that history has been written “by a white hand” that has gone to great lengths to encourage Blacks to forget their history and existence that predates slavery¹⁸⁹. It is then understandable why the Black experience has often been absent from textbooks, and continues to be relegated amidst a curriculum that does not test its students on Black experience/history. Furthermore, the widespread use of school knowledge, or what is (and is not) taught about Black history and culture in the context of world, community and economic development, is said to breed the type of alienation that masks itself as truancy, school dropouts, and academic failure. After all, Ighodar asks, is it not a “miscarriage of justice for us to continually remind children of their nonexistence in history and expect them to excel academically”¹⁹⁰?

Suffice it to say that recent educational transformations have had broad-encompassing political and economic ramifications on the Black agenda. It should come as no surprise then, that an outgrowth of these effects is the systemic, and therefore more formidable impediment to the survival of these core values of racial identity, solidarity and uplift. Underlying mainstream education still lays the discourse of Black cultural relegation, inferiority, and deterioration. However, as it had during an era of pitiless enslavement, industrialization, civic upheaval, and psychic conversion, the use of education as a liberating tool lives on. The Black

¹⁸⁸ Brown, Bartee, 232.

¹⁸⁹ Rufus Burrow, *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 1994), 21.

¹⁹⁰ King 11; Brown, Bartee, 230, 234.

agenda had always linked educational rights to political, social, and civil rights—first via the struggle for opportunity, and now via the struggle for equity. This ethical core and focus has guided Blacks in navigating mainstream terrain toward greater equality and humanity. Today, with ever-evolving challenges, we still (as the next chapter reveals) navigate these rugged terrains.

CHAPTER 5: As the wheel turns

Throughout history, the education of Blacks in the United States has been considerably shaped by two central problems. One is the *access* to educational opportunities and the other is the *quality* of accessible and relevant schooling. With this in mind, Blacks' efforts to devise and provide their own methods of education has met tremendous opposition. Nevertheless the use of education as a liberating tool began before the grim days of slavery; existing at its core were the ideas of liberty and self-reliance that were involuntarily brought to North American shores. In using education as a liberation tool, Blacks have survived a rich tradition of designing, developing, and maintaining independent educational institutions as well as an agenda that has been founded upon the principles of racial pride, identity, and communal uplift. These concepts have been vital to the survival of their communities and culture, but are now being placed under examination in today's evolving educational landscape.

We are now brought full circle to where we began. *How* Blacks have navigated this terrain of mainstream education (up until the 90s) to educate themselves—both formally and informally—has been answered in the previous chapters, yet the lingering questions of continued relevance and applicability remain. How are we interpreting the use and purpose of education today? In what ways, if at all, are schools and teachers imparting the principles of this agenda? Is there in fact a separate agenda for Black students? What are the issues facing educators and how in what ways can we mitigate them? Grappling to answer these questions, I turn to my own experiences in public education, but more importantly

to those who are at the vanguard of public schooling: teachers and administrators. Admittedly, the interviews I conducted with these teachers and administrators in the Capital District of New York cannot possibly represent nor embody the full spectrum of sentiments surrounding public education, but through their answers I hope to better address the question. It should be noted that the schools in which I conducted my interviews serve primarily students of color from low-income and underserved neighborhoods, and that all of the participatory teachers and administrators are *also* people of color. As it relates to how this agenda fares amidst contemporary school landscapes, these demographic factors are quite telling.

Mrs. Jones (pseudonym) and Mr. Hill (pseudonym), for instance, both belong to a local charter elementary school whose student population is 90% Black, 8% Hispanic or Latino, and 1% Asian or Other Pacific Islander. With regard these students income background, 93% are eligible for free lunch, and 4% are eligible for reduced price lunch¹⁹¹. Evidently, the school and the teachers it employs are invested in serving these particular underserved communities. As a teacher, Mrs. Jones' understanding that education is (or should be) formulated to fit the needs of its students of color is parallel to Mr. Hill' perception as a principal—a theory and practice that will be discussed in forthcoming sections¹⁹². Institutionally speaking, this charter school places an extraordinary emphasis on the construction of Black identity and communal responsibility, ensuring that these notions are interwoven in

¹⁹¹ “New York State Report Card”, <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/files/2011-12/RC-2012-010100860899.pdf>

¹⁹² Mrs. Jones (pseudonym, middle school teacher) in discussion with the author. March 6th 2014; Mr. Hill (pseudonym, charter school principle) in discussion with the author. February 24th 2014.

the school's physical (class names, stationary, etc.), social (peer treatment and interaction), and academic environment. This stands in sharp contrast to the institutional function of the remaining mainstream public schools from which I drew my participants.

Mrs. Medina serves as the principal of yet another local charter elementary school. The demographic of this particular school is 70% Black, 16% Hispanic or Latino, 3% Asian or Other Pacific Islander, 9% White, and 2% Multiracial. Here, 90% of its students are eligible for free lunch and 10% are eligible for reduced price lunch¹⁹³. Also accommodating a very specific community (located in the most dangerous zip code of the city with the second highest concentration of homeless children), Mrs. Medina's school provides a food pantry that is open 7 days of the week, and in-house dental office and health clinics. Although Mrs. Medina did not mention an explicit teaching or orientation surrounding the construction of Black identity or communalism, by virtue of these additional support systems and the answers she provided during the interview, it is clear that she, along with her school is committed to educating young students of color. "This is my civil rights movement, and I have to help my people progress", she concludes¹⁹⁴.

With regard to the Black educational agenda, public high schools might often operate on a much more disconnected level. In these settings, due to the rigid homogenization of the common core curriculum and culture, it often becomes an individual initiative to impart messages that are specifically tailored for the

¹⁹³ "New York State Report Card", <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/files/2011-12/RC-2012-010100010044.pdf>.

¹⁹⁴ Mrs. Medina (pseudonym, principle of an elementary charter school) in discussion with the author. February 11th 2014.

development of young students of color. The demographic complexion of the public high school at which Mrs. Harper works is 33% Black, 15% Hispanic or Latino, 17% Asian or Other Pacific Islander, and 35% White. 58% of these students are eligible for free lunch, and 10% qualify for reduced price lunch. As the numbers indicate, this school is markedly more concerned with mixed populations and their array of respective needs. However, as Mrs. Harper explains, with an agenda that must serve a wide assortment of students, students of color consequently “don't learn about themselves”. She goes on to explain that in its absence, “we need schools for socialization, and for development...we need more minority teachers because it seems hard to learn from people who don't look like you, and that is just the reality of it”¹⁹⁵. Mr. Young, a teacher at a local career academy high school comprised primarily of low-income students of mixed race explains, “the school as a whole hasn't developed a plan socially, morally or culturally, it comes from the teachers themselves”¹⁹⁶. In the absence of an institution-wide effort to serve as an agent of cultural and social production, the responsibility is assumed almost entirely by willing teachers. Mr. Young is but one of the very few. The high school over which Ms. Anderson presides also demonstrates how the Black educational agenda is faring. At this particular school 57% of students are Black, 12% Hispanic or Latino, 8% Asian or Other Pacific Islander, 22% white and 1% multiracial. 50% of these students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Ms. Anderson asserts that while the school as a unit is not focused on one kind of student, that the *purpose* of education

¹⁹⁵ Mrs. Harper (pseudonym, public high school teacher) in discussion with the author. February 10th 2014.

¹⁹⁶ Mr. Young (pseudonym, public high school teacher) in discussion with the author. February 26th 2014.

is universal, that for the “students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, the difference to *them* is the opportunity to change their situation in life. Education takes on more of a meaning for them than anyone else”¹⁹⁷.

To the latter point, this acknowledgement that for students of color education is somehow *different*, that it acquires a distinct purpose with unique stakes, was nearly uniform (5 out of 8) among the interviewees. The exceptions were not convinced that the agenda of education should be different for students of color, and as such relied on a more Universalist, colorblind premise. For instance, Mrs. Jones answered “the purpose should be that *every* child should be educated and educated well”, while Superintendent Kelley similarly rationalized that all students should be taught “how to learn, and in doing so foster an appetite to learn... to instill a sense of civic responsibility...[and] to build confidence in academic and social responsibility”¹⁹⁸. Mr. Hill believes that the purpose is not a separate one, but rather “education should be tailored to meet the needs of the student...they need to receive a culturally relevant education...so that they are able to make a contribution and improvement of themselves, their family and ultimately their community”¹⁹⁹. While the Black educational agenda does not seem to be entirely perceived as separate, one of its precepts (community uplift) is *still* the shining thread of hope that runs throughout differing ideologies.

¹⁹⁷ Ms. Anderson (pseudonym, high school principle) in discussion with the author February 26th 6th 2014.

¹⁹⁸ Mrs. Jones; Sup. Kelley (pseudonym, superintendent of a public school district) in discussion with the author. March 7th 2014.

¹⁹⁹ Mr. Hill (pseudonym, principle of an elementary charter school) in discussion with the author February 24th 2014.

Also nearly unanimous (7 out of 8) was the idea that schooling is managing quite well, but only for certain populations and locations. The most demonstrative juxtaposition between ideals was answers from Mr. Hill and Superintendent Kelley. When asked, “are schools producing satisfactory results”, Mr. Hill snapped

“Absolutely not! The results are really dismal and even more dismal when it comes to urban students and students of color. The system has failed our folks miserably for generations....the emphasis needs to be put on the fact that *schools* have failed our communities, not that students are failing, that *schools* can do better. There are also many examples of schools that do well with the same types of populations, and that has been the case for years²⁰⁰.

On the contrary, Sup. Kelley replied

“Absolutely! The beauty of this country is the melting pot concept, one of the few places that people can come from anywhere and there will be a public school system that they can attend. There is variety in the quality, but it doesn't matter where you're from, what matters is the opportunity to enhance yourself...When people say schools fail, they really mean *society* fails...Do we *truly* want equity or are we ok with the poor and rich neighborhoods? Our economic system rests on the rich and poor”²⁰¹.

I deliberately draw attention to the these demographic factors, differences in ideologies, and variations in school missions so as to emphasize that the makeup of teachers, communities, and schools represent a paramount variable in the execution of the Black educational agenda, and the achievement of academic, economic, and social excellence in lives of these young students of color. In other words (as the forthcoming sections will convey) these educators focus intently on the unique needs of their student populations and regard lessons of identity, community uplift,

²⁰⁰ Mr. Hill, 2014

²⁰¹

and racial pride, which are otherwise absent from mainstream pedagogy, as an integral part of their development.

“The Point Of It All”; perspectives on purpose:

For centuries, the purpose of education (while varying in its methods and execution) was clear. In the absence of freedom, political birthrights, social harmony, and economic prosperity, education has offered vision, promise, and hope. It served as a means by which Blacks could collectivize their efforts to achieve higher social, economic and intellectual status. Dubois claimed with conviction that “of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and for 5,000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental”²⁰². Yet as we face an entirely different host of challenges (as briefly described earlier), many claim that this purpose has been diluted, that it has been reformatted to narrowly fit the needs of market globalization and competition. It is believed that now, more than ever, students must be equipped with the skills and readiness to enter this burgeoning world. Still one of the largest purveyors of income inequality, this economic agenda is reminiscent of the *Sputnik* crisis in 1957, and seems to take precedence over the traditional purposes of education. The question then becomes (for this subsection at least), what *is* the purpose of education and the role of educators and education during these shifting social, political and economic scenes?

Answers from interviewed teachers and administrators outline an agenda that incorporates the long-standing goals of education (i.e. community, racial pride, and identity) along with its more modern motives. Mrs. Jones explains that the purpose of education is

²⁰² Fabricant, Fine, 5.

“more than just reading, writing, and doing math, but to reflect on who they are as people, how they effect the whole community. Not to just go to college and make money, but to support yourself *and* (emphasis hers) your community—to give back. It is to make them see just beyond themselves”²⁰³.

Aside from making it clear that the notion of communalism is still firmly rooted in the function of education, she adds that

“the purpose should be to make sure that every child is educated and educated well. Not because they come from a so-called good neighborhood. Not because they come from a good background...the motive should be that all students have access to an excellent education. All students. Not just the select few or the rich”²⁰⁴.

Her response reflects centuries old focus on mutual uplift. Similarly Executive Director of a local charter school, Mr. Hill asserts that the goal is to make students

“become highly skilled so that they are able to...choose a career field and make a contribution and an improvement of themselves, their family and ultimately their community. *That’s* the goal. In order for that to happen they need to be imbued with a few other things than just academic skills. They need to be taught about their responsibilities that they have to themselves and community....a sense that they should be coming back to *give* something back”²⁰⁵.

Serving as the Principle of a school in an area with the highest crime and poverty rates in the city, Mrs. Medina considers this day and age as “*our* civil rights movement—educating the poor urban student or the poor rural student”. As far education goes, she comments, “it is, or should I say *should* be the great equalizer...but this is it. For my students education is the only way out and I take

²⁰³ Mrs. Jones, 2014.

²⁰⁴ Mrs. Jones, 2014.

²⁰⁵ Mr. Hill, 2014.

that personally, and very seriously”²⁰⁶. Ms. Anderson, another principle of a public high school believes that education should “create citizens to contribute something to the world, to make our communities and our country a better place”. It has to do with “making sure students understand their history, math and science, [but also to] have particular skills to do and *be* innovative and creative”²⁰⁷. Interpreting education in a slightly more practical sense, Superintendent Kelley believes education “should foster an appetite to learn...to provide students with skills to think and analyze critically so that ultimately they can become a part of, and participate in, a global society” ²⁰⁸.

Such a distinct emphasis indicates that, though the Black educational agenda has adapted to meet the needs of new generations (to be discussed later), at its foundation lays the cornerstone of community uplift. This unwavering effort to “reach back as you climb” has withstood the test of time from slavery to present-day, both in practice and in promise. My interviewees’ constant reference to community stands as a testament that the purpose of education cannot be discussed without casting a keen eye toward community uplift. While it is disturbing that this message often gets lost in translation within the context of higher education (newly-minted professionals of color failing to “go back and give back”) I have directly witnessed the manifestation of this phenomenon during my time tutoring, mentoring, interacting with, listening to, and teaching local middle school/high school youth. Virtually all of these students exhibit a yearning to “go back” to the

²⁰⁶ Mrs. Medina, 2014.

²⁰⁷ Mr. Hill, 2014

²⁰⁸ Sup. Kelley, 2014.

same neighborhoods whence they came, and “give back”—clearly a product of internal conviction coupled with the external forces of teachers, mentors, family, and of course, community.

It would be foolish however, to claim that the current educational agenda is based solely on community uplift. It would be equally as inaccurate to argue that, for *that* reason, the goals of the agenda have remained the same, for they have not. Case in point, the focus of racial pride and identity of decades past has been curtailed and seems to be diminishing. Though internalized racism, cultural alienation and appropriation act like streams that divert and divide our communities, ultimately expediting violence and apathy, this much-needed knowledge is subordinated to national economic prowess. To whatever extent it is warranted, rabid concern over globalized competition and the eventual (or continued) decline of U.S. hegemony has resulted in legislation like *No Child Left Behind* or *Race to the top* among many. This prioritization of data-collection through standardized testing and accompanying curriculum has limited the number of opportunities for in-class dialogue surrounding racial-pride and identity to take place. With adverse affects aside, a focus on economic wellbeing is not completely an issue. In fact, it is estimated that by 2020, 65 percent of jobs in the U.S. will require postsecondary education²⁰⁹. However it becomes an issue when most students of color educated in mainstream public and private schools know little (if any at all) information about their African heritage, their connection to magnificent ancient civilizations, or even modern-day Black heroes aside from the usual Dr. King, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X (if

²⁰⁹ Georgetown, 3.

lucky), and now President Obama. It becomes an issue when Carter G. Woodson's eighty-one year old claim that "the thought of the inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in almost every book he studies", that "traditional curricula of the times...did not take the Negro into consideration except to condemn or pity him", or that "the role of education as a factor in the uplift of the Negro has been still less significant", *still* bears truth²¹⁰. Yet, while Black racial pride and identity seem to have no place in mainstream education, as long as the concept of Black history and knowledge of self and culture existed, it was *always* linked to the Black educational agenda—whether in the classroom, street corner, or pulpit.

The cultural and conceptual shift toward Africanization (marked by the creation of *Nguzo Saba*, independent Black institutions that taught African history and by the Black Power Movement) reached its zenith during the 1970s and laid the groundwork on which schools would continue to incorporate these ideologies. Ujima Ya Ujamaa School (WA), the Frederick Douglass Institute (MO), The Kemet School (SC), Nubian Village Academy (VA), The Garvey School (NJ), the Afrikan People's Action School (NJ), Imhotep Science Academy (MN), and the school over which Mr. Hill presides are current-day examples of the surviving efforts to integrate racial pride and identity. With regard to cultural development, Mr. Hill explains, "we do a lot that embraces the culture of our students...For instance the school homerooms have team names and those names come from Kiswahili principles. The students learn how those principles apply to themselves and their role within the school and larger community...We do a lot of themed events... [such

²¹⁰ Woodson, 1, 11, 25.

as Hispanic heritage and Black history month] and we make sure we connect those larger themes to academics as well”²¹¹. Nonetheless, though it is still incorporated into the construction of certain charter schools, after-school programs, academic departments in colleges and universities, lessons of street scholars or the works of published academics, the portion of racial pride and identity that comprises the Black educational agenda seems markedly less. Today’s agenda, while touting the community uplift as its cornerstone, has the added weight of economic pressures and therefore has, to some degree, compromised its focus on racial pride.

²¹¹ Mr. Hill, 2014.

“Footsteps In The Dark”; perspectives on issues:

A host of issues continue to afflict education, particularly in low-income and “high-minority” neighborhoods that can be used to better understand and delineate the “state” of schooling. If in fact we are committed to changing the educational experience of students, we must address these obstacles that impede their academic and intellectual stimulation. Thus, while no one list can adequately capture all of the challenges in its entirety, according to a literature on Black education, the most popular qualms surround

- Alienating school knowledge—what is (and is not) taught about the culture, history, and significance of the contributions of people to world, community, and economic development that reflect the body of students.
- Low expectations of students and curriculum that are culturally irrelevant or low-quality
- Neighborhood violence.
- Lack of functioning equipment.
- Dysfunctional staff.
- Physical quality of school facilities.
- Long-term lack of resources for healthy and productive living for adults (resulting in malnutrition, prenatal and childhood disease, emotional trauma, and lack of material resources).
- Misplacement and overrepresentation of students of color in learning disabled classes (often with inadequately trained teachers).
- Underrepresentation in classes for the gifted and talented, and STEM fields.
- Reduced national and local financial support.
- Access to (or lack thereof) educational technology.
- Privatization (the seizure and selling) of urban schools.
- Higher rates of suspension, truancy, and expulsions.

- The persistent “achievement gap” and “high-stakes testing gap.
- Increasing school segregation and limited opportunities to learn the skills and values of need for engaged global citizenship.
- Higher dropout or “push-out” rates.
- Lower grade point averages.
- Lower levels of participation in higher education, lower retention and graduation rates.
- Lack of parent education (and training) for community building and sustainable development.
- Overrepresentation of Black and Latino/a students in segregated, failing, and dysfunctional schools²¹²

Of course, there are varying degrees of such issues that differ between schools, districts, and states, yet many of these topics were brought up when my interviewees were asked to identify the most formidable challenges facing students and educators today.

The implications of standardized testing were among the most widely discussed. As aforementioned, tests, and their supporting legislation (i.e. NCLB and R2T) “reduces the chances schools will be able to focus on helping students acquire critical thinking, research and writing, and production abilities” as Linda Darling Hammond writes, but “it will also reduce opportunities for students who learn in different ways and have different talents to show what they have learned”. Therefore, she concludes, there is “a strong possibility that these efforts will actually reduce access to education for the most vulnerable students rather than increasing

²¹² Anyon, 155-163; King, 11-12.

it²¹³. Punishing low performing schools while failing to provide the tools to increase performance, Mrs. Harper shares this concern. She believes testing to be

“one of our main issues...they don't measure your ability [and] automatically places students in special education [based on low test scores]. *I* was placed in special education for a hearing disability but was fortunate enough to get tutoring. Unfortunately in a lot of urban schools, when they want to place students in special education, the parents will agree because they may not have the financial means of getting extra help outside of school. Testing has this trickle effect on huge populations of a lot of Black males in special education. For instance if you look at a Regents exam some of the wording is not what a lot of students are used to or were raised around. There's a cultural disconnect. Not to mention they make the students feel unaccomplished”²¹⁴.

As Mrs. Harper explains, the effects of standardized testing are compounded when taking cultural relevance and effects on self-esteem into consideration. According to her, what tests fail to do is measure the “whole” student and their respective growth patterns, as well as provide culturally accessible material that negatively affects the highest-need populations. Mrs. Medina also finds it disturbing that

“kids are being assessed on content that hasn't been rolled out in effective curriculum”....one of the things that NYS used to do and hasn't done in over 4 years is that once your students took a standardized test, they would provide an item analysis on how they did. Now, if the prevailing thought is that data informs instruction, the issue becomes that I haven't *gotten* any data. All I know is that a student has a base scale of 250. That doesn't mean anything to me. I don't know *why* that student has that score. Before, we were able to archive and

²¹³ Rothman, 21.

²¹⁴ Mrs. Harper, 2014.

review old tests [but]...that part of the conversation is cut off...we are not allowed to keep any of the tests and they don't provide us with an item analysis²¹⁵.

Most of the reform dialogue—irrespective of race—points to the strain under which testing and common core place entire school districts. Scathing articles, journals, books, pamphlets, even 7th grade students with whom I have spoken describe how the push and pull effects of increased rigor and diminishing investment inadvertently sabotage student success and widen the achievement gap. While one cannot “close the achievement ‘gap’ as long as achievement is principally regarded as performance on high stakes standardized tests”, the difficulties that both pupils and educators confront daily are more complicated than state examinations²¹⁶.

Generally speaking, until around the 1970s children of all races and classes attended urban schools. Urban sprawl and white flight (caused by a variety of suburban pulls and urban pushes) over the past few decades has increased the number of urban schools with high minority populations as well as the concentration of poverty. Even when the nation’s overall poverty rate has declined during the past 20 years, the cities have gotten poorer and the concentration of poverty there deeper²¹⁷. Evidently, poverty-related issues rank high on the list of impediments to student success. “Education falls under Maslow’s law of hierarchy” says Ms. Anderson, “so when students come to schools without having basic needs met—not having proper attire for the weather, not having a good night’s sleep due to issues at home—[it is difficult] to try to meet academic needs”. Because of this,

²¹⁵ Mrs. Medina, 2014.

²¹⁶ Peter C. Murrell Jr., *African Centered-Pedagogy: Developing schools of achievement for African American children* (Ny, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002) 16.

²¹⁷ CQ 44.

she adds, “teachers struggle to accomplish academic goals amidst these larger issues”²¹⁸. Mr. Young explains that poverty has broad-ranging effects:

“Attendance is a *huge* issue. My first period class I have on the books twenty-three students, but I normally get maybe 8 students...[because] they cannot afford bus fare, they walk in negative degree weather...if you live within a one mile radius you cannot take the school bus, even though in other districts [proximity] doesn't matter”. Further connecting poverty as a hindrance to academic achievement, Mr. Young observes that “a lot of students who have sight issues don't have, but *need* glasses...a lot of students come to school hungry and we know that if they are hungry they will not do too well in the classroom...many are suffering financially and cannot afford pens or notebooks or an alarm clock to get up”. These issues are “compounded because there is no strong teacher-parent bond”²¹⁹.

A self-fulfilling prophecy on the behalf of educators, as Mr. Hill notes, often perpetuates the deplorable state of education in particularly low-income areas. We “suffer from chronic low expectations on the part of the schools...in terms of thinking that these students that come from these communities cannot achieve at very high levels”. So when we see low student achievement...”or things like poverty, or things that the community inhibits...that validates the belief that they can't do very well... the problem is that schools [focus] on what is wrong with the students”, as opposed to “what *schools* need to do...The students will respond and rise to the expectations because they *want* to do well, they just need the support *to* do well”²²⁰. Ms. Anderson adds, “not every student gets what they need. Some students get what

²¹⁸ Mr. Hill, 2014.

²¹⁹ Mr. Young , 2014.

²²⁰ Mr. Hill, 2014

they want, and others get what's left over, and that is not fair"²²¹. Refusing to use these obstacles as "excuses", Mrs. Jones believes that

"There are no *real* issues unless you make them an issue. If you have a passion to teach, you teach. It doesn't matter what the child does or does not bring...my job is to teach; your job is to learn. Sorry you have issues at home, sorry we don't have the materials, but we are going to figure it out....That is how education has always been. We didn't always have computers or Internet or copying machines and pre-made curriculum....Families are not an excuse, if you look at our history, that's part of it. They broke up our families during slavery, so that is not a valid excuse that our children cannot learn. We didn't always have the best food or sleeping arrangements, but somehow we figured out how to learn, how to read and write...We *cannot* use those 'disabilities' to stop them from learning, or to justify giving them a lower standard of learning. They will rise to the occasion no matter what"²²².

The latter point made by Mrs. Jones speaks to the question of continued relevance and applicability of the Black educational agenda. As mentioned earlier, overwhelming odds created an enduring connection between education and liberation. Learning and self-improvement were the means toward collective uplift and dignity.

Today the challenges of educational reform, economic pressures, poverty, low-expectations, rote and drill teaching (all of which date back since the mid 19th century), or any of the above listed issues seem to derail the use of education as a liberation tool. Of course, today, education is regarded as the "golden ticket" as Mrs. Medina likens it; obtaining an education is virtually tantamount to improving one's situation—climbing the ladder of success. This is precisely why an unprecedented

²²¹ Mr. Young, 2014

²²² Mr. Hill, 2014

push for children from all walks of life to attend college is so normative, regardless of whether higher education is suited for them. By virtue of being *born* in the U.S., (and especially compared to neighboring or third world countries) children are given a distinct, global advantage. Superintendent Kelley recognizes the U.S. as “one of the few places that people come from anywhere and there is a public school system they can attend...an opportunity to enhance yourself”²²³. However, on the whole the schooling system is perceived to be producing unsatisfactory outcomes. “The results are dismal, and even more so when it comes to urban students and students of color. The system has failed our folks miserably for generations and it needs to be more of a priority”, Mr. Hill expressed²²⁴. Clearly there is a discrepancy between the two statements above, yet Mrs. Harper, Mr. Young, Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Medina, Ms. Anderson, Sup. Kelley and a seemingly vast majority of educators and students alike agree that changes need to be made. Avoiding the philosophical debate on what form education *should* take, the better question then becomes, what exactly are some measures that have been used or proposed to bring about said change, with a particular focus on the Black educational agenda?

²²³Sup. Kelley, 2014

²²⁴ Mr. Young, 2014

“Wade in the Water”; perspectives on moving forward:

While there are no doubt terrible forces working against the Black educational agenda, there are equally those who work diligently to advance it. Of course, in the context of “traditional” American life, culture and ideology (e.g. *rugged individualism, innate ability* and *merit by competition*), the task of Black education becomes increasingly difficult as these ideas underlie much of the educational policy²²⁵. However, there are efforts—be they from teachers or administration, community activists, scholars, volunteers, parents or otherwise—that practice and theorize ways to execute the agenda of identity and community. At its most basic understanding, Black education is defined along two dimensions: “systematic efforts to teach Black children in the United States, particularly in the public sector...[and] the quality of education that the African American community has historically organized itself around while considering issues of cultural responsiveness and community political empowerment”²²⁶.

The thread that connects these two dimensions and is used as the primary vehicle to imbue students with ideas of self-sufficiency, racial pride and communal uplift, is teaching. And, as such, the role of teachers is to serve as the agents to push forth this vehicle, and help students navigate school terrains. Asking my interviewees what their perceptions of educators were, their responses were similar to that of African indigenous pedagogy which views teachers as selfless healers intent on inspiring transformation and propelling students to a higher

²²⁵ Murrell Jr., xxxi.

²²⁶ King, 46.

spiritual level²²⁷. Mrs. Jones considers her role as an educator is “to educate by any means necessary...to care about students in all aspects, and not just education but in their personal lives...to paint a future for them of what their lives *can* be if they work hard enough to achieve...to develop all aspects of them²²⁸. High School teachers Mrs. Harper and Mr. Young admit that their roles as educators are multilayered. As “psychiatrists...nurturers and role models”, “parents and social workers” they understand their goal as being able to provide a “framework for students to think on their own”, along with instilling in them the “principles of respect and the basics they will need to survive in the real world²²⁹. Mrs. Medina is in her position, as she insists, not because she has a profound love for education but rather “because I have to help my people progress...I am a servant, a primary advocate for my students and my families”²³⁰. All of the educators with whom I interviewed clearly take pride in their work as they reflect the qualities of talented, dedicated, passionate and consistently hard-working educators across the globe, and are an inspiration to behold. Of course, not *all* teachers are visionary catalysts for change; issues of teachers unions and shameful cases of failed schools (as popularly brought to light with the documentary *Waiting for Superman*), along with indirect and direct experiences with less-than stellar teachers have created a deep-seated distrust of them.

Nevertheless certain qualities and characteristics of teachers *are* frequently cited as being effective in maximizing student potential and academic/personal

²²⁷ King, 15.

²²⁸ Mrs. Jones, 2014.

²²⁹ Mrs. Harper, 2014 ; Mr. Young, 2014.

²³⁰ Mrs. Medina, 2014.

success. For one, it is held that ideologies of low expectations are often used to explain school failure (e.g. “its the kids fault”, “they do not want to learn”)²³¹. Therefore, the ability to hold students to *high* expectations is indispensable. Both interviewed teachers and administration mentioned this, as they believe that holding high expectations will 1) boost student’s self-esteem and subsequently increase performance, and 2) ensure that teachers are equally held accountable. For another, classroom practice is central. Gloria Ladson-Billings, in her book *The Dreamkeepers*, analyzes the schoolroom habits of five Black and three White teachers who had immense success in getting Black children to achieve their highest potential. Summarizing the principles of their effective practice she observed that:

They see their teaching as an art rather than as a technical skill. They believe that all their students can succeed rather than that failure is inevitable for some. They see themselves as a part of the community and they see teaching as giving back to the community. They help students make connections between their local, national, racial, cultural and global identities...Their relationships with students are fluid and equitable and extend beyond the classroom. They demonstrate a connectedness with all of their students and encourage that same connectedness between the students...They believe that knowledge is continuously recreated, recycled, and shared by teachers and students alike”²³².

“We have students for eight to nine hours day”, Mr. Hill says. “Therefore we have an obligation because we have them, in many cases, more than their parents have them. So we have a lot of opportunity to impact them and their life trajectory, we

²³¹ Anyon, 11

²³² Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994) 25

have an opportunity to remove whatever deficits they may have come in with”²³³. In order to utilize this opportunity teachers must be sensitive to, and be willing to address the social, political, and emotional needs and concerns of their students, however uncomfortable or difficult. Teachers need to know and understand their students on an individual basis in order to aid them in their life pursuits as individuals²³⁴. In doing so, it should come as no surprise that if a child feels as if they are listened to and valued, they are more likely to attend school, feel better about themselves, and subsequently be motivated to learn and avoid negative behavior. Ladson-Billings makes it evident that the use of cognitive strategies and exercises, social justice approaches, and positive, pro-social, interpersonal relationships between teachers and pupils is critical. For example, in the study of Kinder, Wakefield, and Wilkin, *Talking back,, Pupil’s views on disaffection*, pupils discussed the importance of positive relationships with teachers, and were asked to identify the best way to reduce problems in the classroom. The second highest response (next to altering the curriculum) was to focus on changing relationships with teachers²³⁵. The pupils in this study also pointed out time and again, that “teachers did not give them enough respect, and pupils are far more likely to report to school and co-operate with teachers when they have teachers whom they like and with whom they can communicate”. From this, we find that “teachers that utilize humour

²³³ Mr. Hill, 2014.

²³⁴ Majors, 30

²³⁵ Majors, 6

and a well-timed smile, who set high expectations and respect and praise pupils can affect their learning”²³⁶.

It is true that teachers are asked to fulfill a compendium of responsibilities—often with little pay or recognition. Each day they enter a classroom, they are called upon to have hope in the face of adversity in order to set high expectations for self and for students, foster genuine teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships that generate self-esteem and self-worth, recognize and reconcile the multi-layered needs and concerns of their students, identify and work with parents as partners in their children’s education, become active in their surrounding communities, be a positive role model, nurture, liaise, and steward their students into capable, caring and character-rich adulthood²³⁷. Yet they should not bear this task alone.

In order to produce and maintain teachers of this ilk, we as a society must improve the recruitment of good candidates (who *want* to teach) into the profession, prepare them well for the challenges of the classroom and community they will meet, support them as they begin their teaching careers, provide them suitable working conditions, compensation, and benefits, give them the public respect they deserve for the vital work that they do, ensure them the professional sovereignty they deserve in their classrooms, and treat them as valued professionals²³⁸. After all, it is them on whom change ultimately depends: all reforms are essentially classroom reforms. The democratization of school governance and organization serves the catchall goal of improving classroom

²³⁶ Majors, 6.

²³⁷ Murrell, Jr., xxxviii; Majors 30.

²³⁸ Ravitch, 132.

teaching. Never-ending efforts to shift away from rote drill and homogenous instruction toward active student learning, higher-order thinking skills, and increased student achievement cannot be made unless *teachers* enact it²³⁹. However the output of educational attainment isn't just calculated by teacher input. Forces that are at times, and to some extent, beyond their control such as curricular content and cultural disconnects within the schools, must also be considered.

As was first mentioned by Carter G. Woodson, the importance of adopting a curriculum that reflects Black cultural and historical traditions, their significance and contribution within a national and global contexts, while challenging existing political and cultural norms, cannot be underestimated. As it currently stands, the way in which mainstream education is transmitted (teaching style) and the content of education material (curriculum) have discounted Black social and cultural capital (whether consciously or not), regarding it as problematic and encouraging the relegation of it²⁴⁰. Aside from the twenty-eight days of Black History Month, which politely reminds the public that Black culture and history is intertwined with the total fabric of American life, a culturally-relevant curriculum is absent in countless classrooms across the U.S. In its absence the general public defines Black people, their life situations, experiences, and communities as “the problem” says Ladson-Billings in the introduction to *Black Education*. We refer to students as “low income”, “culturally diverse” and the “achievement gap” and “drop outs”, but we really mean Black children. “We speak of ‘welfare moms’... ‘violent individuals,’ when we mean Black people. We say ‘housing projects,’ ‘ghetto,’ and ‘poor neighborhoods’ as

²³⁹ Anyon, 12.

²⁴⁰ King 142.

proxies for Black communities”. There is little, if at all, “language of excellence, hope, and promise aimed at Black people and their circumstances”²⁴¹. For Black children, what good is it if they can speak Queen’s English, can perform sufficiently on a standardized test, or recite European history if they know nothing of their family, are out of touch with their African heritage, do not recognize African influence on language, math, science, and agriculture, or cannot relate to, and understand their community?

It is no wonder that internalized racism runs rampant, that feelings of cultural alienation reigns supreme, that schools are feeders into the prison industrial complex, or that “somewhere between 1st and 4th grade, many children begin to view school as a place of rigid control and conformity, rather than places that encourage learning, inspire creativity, and arouse critical thinking” and knowledge of self²⁴². The homogenized/mainstream values internalized in schools often clash with the values that children from ethnically diverse backgrounds bring to school (i.e. the students that are found the most in the office or unsuccessful were being to who *they* are, but in the context of school it is seen as negative, disruptive, defiant, etc.). Some argue that family cultures should change to “assimilate”, when in fact changing the culture of *schooling* is far simpler²⁴³. An explicit African-centered pedagogy then, can be used to restructure school culture and revitalize the Black educational agenda.

²⁴¹ King, xv.

²⁴² Murrell Jr., xviii.

²⁴³ Stone, 26.

Not merely a method of teaching, but pedagogy as teacher thought, action, awareness (of their own cultural values and biases), knowledge, and identity connects the cultural substances of Blackness through the principles of MAAT (truth, justice, order, reciprocity, harmony, and balance), the core of the African value system²⁴⁴. In an African-centered pedagogy, productive tasks:

- Create an intellectual environment and cultural community in their classrooms that systematically provides the social, intellectual and cultural tools for rich and worthwhile learning and development;
- Research the deep structure of African American culture, history, language and life well enough to appropriate it in the structuring of the classroom intellectual environment for African American children
- Mold community teachers that develop the contextualized knowledge of culture, community, and identity of the children and families as the core of their teaching practice.
- Crucially appraise their own practice by recognizing and *deconstructing* the ways that traditional pedagogy and current instructional paradigms perpetuate underachievement of children of color
- Engender activity that every child can perform with assistance, but that nonetheless simulates a challenging problem-solving situation or creative performance likely to be faced by an adult
- Involve purposeful, socially engaging, intellectually enticing, real-life problem-solving activities that encourage more than the mere use of memory, but requires that the child make judgments about what information, procedures or strategies apply to what he or she is planning, justifying, or creating

²⁴⁴ Murrell Jr., xxiii, xxi.

- Exercise multicontextual and multilingual communication and adaptation, (or as Mrs. Medina calls it, “mainstreaming”)
- Generate scientific, technological, social, cultural, political, and economic literacy²⁴⁵.

The Commission on Research in Black Education’s (CORIBE) *Ten Vital Principles for Black Education and socialization* similarly places collective enhancement and survival, along with the study of *African tradition* (history, culture, and language; *hegemony* (uses of schooling/socialization and incarceration); *equity* (funding, teacher quality, content, and access to technology); *beneficial practice* (at all levels of education, from childhood to elderhood) at its highest priority²⁴⁶.

These goals must be made explicit in classrooms, and extend to all members of education (teachers, students, families and communities alike) in order to effectively navigate school terrains. Having perfected this skill, the immediate goal of reclaiming, revitalizing, and redistributing the Black educational agenda becomes clear, and easier to attain. As mentioned earlier, this agenda has been hindered, delayed and tempered by issues of cultural alienation, an exchange of individual over collective pursuit, unfavorable reform and governmental policies, a failure to engage parents and communities, pessimism, disunity, lack of vision, an obsession with monitoring and disciplining, crime, violence, apathy, materialism...the litany goes on. However, some of the recommendations listed above reference the primary aims of an African-centered pedagogy, which ultimately reflect the principles of self-sufficiency, racial pride and communal uplift that have comprised the pillars of Black educational agenda for centuries. *If* the aims of the Black agenda can remain

²⁴⁵ Murrell Jr., 96, 136, 158.

²⁴⁶ King, 20-21.

grounded in such philosophies of the past, *if* we can, as our ancestors have done, avoid being dissuaded by minor obstacles yet find motivation in the overwhelming ones, then we *will* maintain the use of education as a liberating tool for our communities, our nation, and humanity at large for generations to come.