

Executive Summary

The State of Knowledge about the Education of African Americans

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The two-part paper presents a critical examination of research on how people learn and implications for the education of African American children and adolescents. The goal is not to provide an extensive literature review. Rather, it is to explore how the state of research knowledge on learning intersects with the cultural orientation of many researchers of color and ways that conceptions of race inform how educational research considers the education of Black youth. A central argument is that the current state of what some have come to call “the science of learning” is consistent with many of the principles that African American culturally responsive educational researchers and philosophers have advanced.

The main issues this paper grapples with in Part I is the state of research knowledge in Black education defined along two dimensions: systematic efforts to teach Black children, particularly in the public sector, and the quality of education the African American community has historically organized itself around while considering issues of cultural responsiveness and community political empowerment. Antecedents of current calls to link the cognitive goals of schooling with cultural and political empowerment goals are illustrated in the historical background presented on the education of African American children and adolescents.

Part II addresses a line of research that is rarely discussed in mainstream literature on cognition: the construct of coping. How to cope with adversity has been and continues to be a necessary staple in the socialization of African American students and a parallel prerequisite correlate with academic learning.

Historical models of self-reliant education within the African American community, which have attended not just to cognitive but to affective, social and moral development as well, provide evidence that learning can occur despite poverty and limited resources. Moreover, academic achievement for African Americans has and continues to be intricately linked to issues of political and economic empowerment, not simply for individuals but for the national African American community. Interventions like The Algebra Project and the Comer Project, that take community organizing and community partnerships as foundational to school reform, are cited as models in need of further investigation and funding in order to address the tremendous challenges of achieving equality in schools.

A critical summary of emerging paradigms about learning rooted in the cognitive sciences and in sociocultural theory is presented next. The multi-disciplinary framework referred to as the “learning sciences” includes cognitive science, anthropology and linguistics, particularly sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. Key findings of two recent reports from the National Research Council that capture current understandings about how the mind works and how best to design environments to support learning are discussed. Emergent themes from this body of research view learning as dynamic, interactive and situated in a sociocultural context versus traditional conceptions of intelligence as finite and static. The former body of research implies that no class or group of people can be classified as unable to learn because of innate capabilities, however, assumptions about a possible genetic basis of Black and White IQ differences are still at issue in the U.S. Arguing from the construct of race to the construct of IQ in this way, as the author points out, leads to the problematic circle of research that questions the very humanity of Black people.

On the other hand, current theories that acknowledge that the mechanisms for learning are innate in all human beings suggest a dynamic construct of ability that is tied to experience and effort. Within the cognitive literature, this understanding of the crucial role of experience in supporting or constraining learning, which is largely couched as prior knowledge, becomes racially problematized in relation to Black students. One aspect of this cultural model of deficits within African American cultural experience is the extensive literature on the low expectations many teachers hold of African American students.

Also described is the silencing of the dissenting voices of African American scholars and activists and educational researchers with a leftist political orientation, whose scholarship attributes educational inequities to political and economic factors. This silencing is reflected in the low percentages of: tenured African American faculty in major research universities, articles published in major research journals (including all the AERA journals), citations within the recent National Research Council summaries of the state of the science of learning and the low percentage of Africans American researchers being funded by the major private and public funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI). An operative principle appears to be the citing of the work, usually uncritically, of a small constellation of African American research stars, and conversely, the use of one important finding about Black students as learners as a placeholder in ways that obfuscate the need for further research.

Another broad premise emerging from current views of the science of learning emphasizes the importance of the social contexts in which learning is constructed. Examples of intervention research based on these views of cognition and learning that take culture into account are discussed. It is suggested that these views of learning are not inconsistent with the frameworks invoked by African American educational researchers and others who have argued that

culture, as defined by the experiences of ethnicity and language use, are valuable levers to support learning.

The third section of the paper discusses research programs in which African American scholars serve as principle investigators of projects with direct links between domain specific cognition and culture. The Algebra project, developed by civil rights activist Bob Moses, addresses the domain of mathematics, and The Cultural Modeling Project headed by the author, Carol D. Lee, focuses on student response to literature. These examples demonstrate the usefulness of attending to culture and the relevance of students' prior knowledge in the design of learning environments for African American students, and by extension, for other students as well. Also, several studies by African American researchers focusing on technology, culture and cognition demonstrate how powerful computer based digital technologies function as tools to support African American student learning and community development.

The African American community is and has been under political and cultural assault since Africans were kidnapped, enslaved and brought to the Americas. While the dimensions of the struggle for freedom have changed over time, the need for continuous struggle has not. Education that is rooted in a cultural orientation takes into account explicitly the need to educate African American children to participate in and understand the history of that struggle. Issues of identity and community calling are very much at the heart of such instruction. Differential benefits between culturally responsive ways of teaching and other more generic ways of teaching are addressed.

Also presented are seminal research programs of Euro-American scholars that are grounded in cognitive theory, that take issues of culture and equity into account and that include effective interventions with African American and other students of color. For example, the QUASAR program has incorporated a cultural orientation in their mathematics teaching through the use of rap to promote classroom communication and the use of West African mathematical games such as Ware and Mancala. The work of the Chèche Konnen Research group supports ESL students, including Haitian Creole and Cape Verdean Creole speakers, to become scientifically literate. These students learn to use the conditional language of scientific reasoning of practicing scientists and the disciplinary discourses of rigorous academic knowledge in addition to appropriate English syntactic structures and vocabulary.

It is also noted that Black people represent an international multi-lingual group that includes speakers of African American Vernacular English, portions of Latino populations in the U.S., including Puerto Ricans, Black populations in Cuba, Panama, Brazil and countries in Central and South America as well as the Caribbean.

Finally, this paper is a call to focus on the development of analytical tools and culturally responsive conceptual frameworks that take into account the dynamic interactions among cultural funds of knowledge, activity structures and the intentional maneuvering of individuals through learning activities across contexts and domains of knowledge. Present paradigms in the science of learning offer meaningful ground for dialogue among research communities that have been largely separate. For the problems in education are not so much with students from diverse populations, or with their families or with the communities in which they live, but rather with those who assume formal responsibility for the education of the poor and the education of teachers as well.