

# **The State of African Education**

**by**

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American Educational Research Association Plenary Presentation  
Commission on Research in Black Education  
April, 2000  
New Orleans, LA

It took Lerone Bennett several decades to write his newest book, Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream, meticulously documenting Abraham Lincoln's white supremacy beliefs. Bennett shows that Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation" was a conscious and necessary deception that did not free a single enslaved African. Bennett then shows the carelessness of historians, and even the cover-up of the record by some, in order to let the myth survive. How ironic that many tears have been shed by those who choose the Lincoln Memorial as a symbolic site to celebrate African liberation, while oblivious to those who truly sought to free Africans, not the least of whom were Africans themselves. Instead we honor an opponent of equality who openly espoused white supremacy views until his death. Then we accept a myth that is the opposite of the truth.

In many ways, the persistence of the myth of Abraham Lincoln as a liberator of Africans is a symbol of the contemporary response to the state of education of African Americans and of African people worldwide. So much of what we believe about our state is false. How do we account for this myth of the "Emancipator" and of "emancipation." It is in the curriculum and in the culture at large, a belief in the face of all evidence to the contrary. And so, until this very time, we have a whole nation in deep denial.

For the record, it was really the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution that outlawed slavery or involuntary servitude, except, except as punishment for a crime. In view of the current escalation of criminalization of African men in particular, and of privatization of prisons and the use of prison labor in private businesses, we can see that there are apparent limits to event the protection of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. We actually have virtual slavery for some existing today. Moreover, it took the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to guarantee equal protection of the laws to all citizens.

So how can so many of us join in the perpetuation of such a curriculum myth about Lincoln freeing Africans from slavery and also believing in the political equality of “the races,” and still be certain that we can be real when we approach the design of education/socialization for our children? Are we habituated to myths? Can we see the true condition of our people, the masses of them? Can we see, as Carter G. Woodson saw, the miseducated though highly schooled among us, whose orientation is “alien self” or even “anti-self” as Dr. Naim Akbar has said? What is the state of African education?

There are also some potent common myths about African learners, myths about low ability, cultural deprivation, myths about poverty causing learning problems, and myths that school treatments are equitable for all children. These myths persist and are even adopted by many members of the African community, even though we are a community with a long history of creating powerful transforming educational and socialization institutions, both in Africa and in the diaspora. We above all ought to be able to detect myths right away.

To grasp the real state of education of African people everywhere, including in America, we must examine the intersection of culture and power. A global system of power distribution has dictated and continues to dictate the nature of the education and socialization processes. Slavery, colonization, apartheid/segregation and the rationalizing ideology of white supremacy are centuries old challenges, really aspects of a global hegemonic system. That system interrupted and largely destroyed the flow of thousand

of years of powerful and independent African education/socialization excellence, about which most of us are totally uninformed.

Above all, we must understand that the structure of society and the embedded structure of education/socialization systems in hegemonic societies are designed to maintain hegemony. It is the structure, including especially its ideological foundation that controls possibilities for African education/socialization, even today. Hegemonic structures and ideologies cannot acknowledge or respect our traditions in education/socialization, profound though they are. Moreover they shape the beliefs and the behaviors that guide miseducation, while blaming victims. No matter how much progress we appear to have made, more degrees and higher paying jobs for a few of us, there has been no shift in the power structure at all, anywhere in the African world. Even “liberated” and “independent” African nations, lack control over real economic and military power. Few even have more than minimal control over their education institutions. These institutions still mimic those of former colonial masters in most cases. Some still have governance of education in the hands of former colonial masters.

While African people globally are entitled to justice, including of course reparations, if any people were ever entitled to them, and while we may have friends and allies, there will be no saviors for us by others from these structural conditions. Nothing in history suggests that non-African benefactors will rescue us. Purely and simply we must emancipate ourselves from hegemonic structures; including especially the foundation beliefs that support those structures. We must challenge these things at every turn. We must pose and construct alternatives to them. We will definitely get those things that we construct! We also will definitely get those things that others construct for us in the absence of our own efforts to construct our future.

So, the state of “black education” cannot be separated from the state of African people generally. It is a fundamental error of major proportions to limit our analysis of this matter to Africans in America. Africans all over the world were controlled by the same hegemonic structures, and still are. Globally, our position remains on the bottom of

virtually all meaningful indices, even as other ethnic families, including new ones to the United States, one after the other, lift themselves up, without saviors. Even former colonial nations, not African, have entered the competition as producers in the international mainstream.

Recently, I was forced to consolidate some of my thinking on the nature of the problem of African people, within which the problems of education/socialization are situated. I was invited to present a paper at the Interdenominational Theological Seminary in Atlanta on the topic, “The Spiritual State of Black American.” I identified “12 Challenges for African People” in my response to this theme. The big picture for Africans is the same everywhere in the world, because hegemonic structures are global. Even now, enormous power is being consolidated everywhere, with no priority on African development, e.g., The European Community (EC), North Atlantic Free Trade Association (NAFTA) and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) (GATT). Equally important is globalization in the business arena.

1. We are unconscious, with no global view of African people and no global view of successful ethnic groups. We experience ourselves as local people in a global world. Some of us experience ourselves only as individuals without any connection even to a local African community.
2. We have acute amnesia, with no valid memories or awareness of ourselves as a historical people evolving through time and spreading throughout the world. We are episodic in our experience of ourselves.
3. We are disintegrating as a people and disorganized. We have lost our solidarity. Many of us feel no bond of identity with our people.
4. We are not raising our own children. We have no systematic socialization structures for the masses of our children. They are raising themselves or they are

- being raised by others. We have forfeited one of the most vital functions of a people, the responsibility for intergenerational cultural transmission.
5. We have a growing loss of independent faith communities, becoming more subordinate in institutions that we do not control.
  6. We have no long-range strategic goals, plans and mobilization. Without these things nothing positive will happen for us.
  7. We do not have an adequate comprehension of wealth production and accumulation. Many of us make money. Few of us make wealth. Our consumption appetites make us prime sources for exploitation by others.
  8. We do not have an adequate comprehension of how to nurture health and prevent illness. We do not have healthy diets. We do not monitor and control our environment. We do not have a critical orientation about these things.
  9. We have no major independent, self-funded think tanks to help us to define and to resolve our problems. We do not see how successful group fund and rely upon ideas based upon research and reflection (Edwards, 1998).
  10. We do not have an adequate African Centered Higher Education. Definitions, assumptions, priorities and above all our worldviews must reflect us.
  11. We do not have sufficient cultural centers, movements, monuments, and celebrations to highlight important experiences and to shape directions. These things offer us the opportunity to be reflective and to develop a more firm vision of the future.

12. We have no regular independent communication capabilities, such as serious national and international periodicals to address our serious and continuing problems. This is shameful. It is not really a matter of resources. It is a matter of consciousness. Appropriate socialization will produce an appetite among the masses of our people for appropriate information.

I cannot amplify these points in the time available here. However, it should be clear that if we begin with these challenges while reflecting on our geo-political status as a people, they call for very special approaches to education/socialization, approaches that can only come from us. It should also be evident that something far beyond the common school experience is required for our children, even though most of our children will continue to attend common schools. Moreover, we must insure that this common school experience taps the genius of our children and stops disabling them through structured mis-education. Many of us rely totally on the common school experience. That will not meet our complete needs. The socialization of the masses of our children can only be done through structures that we develop and control.

Most of the 12 Challenges mentioned above are tied directly to our task of education/socialization, affecting directly the aim, methods and content of education/socialization. However, out of all of these high priority challenges, the first, becoming conscious, and the fourth, the matter of control over the education/socialization of our children are critical. Hegemonic structures were created to mis-educate enslaved and colonized people, and people who were victims of white supremacy influenced structures of domination. Indigenous and independent systems were destroyed. Colonial and slave structures as well as apartheid and general white supremacy structures, were created, including boarding schools, to separate children from parents and communities and cultures, and especially mission schools to destroy the worldviews and to stigmatize colonized and enslaved people as savages, primitives, and pagans. The recent “culture wars” over the school curriculum is a continuation in a newer form of ideological structures of hegemony that follow the old path of separating children and communities from their traditions. (Schlesinger, 1998) (Bloom, 1987) (Ravitch, 1996) (Hirsch, 1987).

So we see the denial of African culture, the denial of the significance of African culture, the assertion of the supremacy of western culture and the containment of teaching about African culture, even the distortion and destruction of African history and cultures.

Perhaps the worst of all is the recent accelerating drift in the control of the education/socialization structures, making our communities even more remote from the power centers in education which follow their own agenda. The grip of others who control our young people is becoming tighter. Among the obvious controls are as follows:

1. There are trends toward removing control of schools from local elected school boards, to mayors, governors, state departments of education and even judges. Urban schools no longer tend to have Superintendents who are close to the communities served. Corporate CEO's, generals from the military, business managers, and even prosecuting attorneys, without roots in the culture or the community, are placed in charge of the large urban schools where most of our children are. Whatever the weaknesses of local control at the board level, there was at least a modicum of potential for community influence. As our children are being managed and even exploited for profit, our communities are more alien than ever from the process.
2. Privatization is growing in the public sector through standardized curriculum using cyber technology. There is a corresponding loss of community control over what is generally minimum competency, non-culturally responsive curriculum and methodology. Private for profit corporations have discovered the lucrative urban market. They are bringing industry practices to the creation of "education maintenance organizations" (EMO's). We have no control over them with their minimum competency efforts. In fact some of us are selling these things to our own community.

3. More and more we see publicly funded, large scale off the shelf, cookie-cutter standardized programs for public schools, mainly urban, mainly minimum competence, mainly non-culturally responsive. They see the Title I dollars and other funds in urban education. Policy makers increasingly have abandoned the belief in regular teachers and schools. They now shop for large-scale “research based” programs. We have virtually no control over these services. Some of our best educators look to these programs as saviors for our children, even though the programs do not have excellence track records. They are minimum competency at best. We are truly at risk.
  
4. The control over more than one million men in the prisons and jails is appalling. Prisons are also places for “teaching and learning,” mostly the wrong lessons. We do not control them. Many of them have virtually abandoned the self-improvement courses and have become torture chambers, or sources of below minimum wage cheap labor. Of what value to our communities will young men be when they return?

When we combine the formal system trends with the control of informal socialization through movies, videos, audios, advertising and television, where is the space and time for our community to carry out its responsibility for intergenerational cultural transmission? Our whole community is in virtual lockdown. I do not expect anyone outside of our community to see these matters as critical problems. Certainly we have heard nothing about this threat so far. It is not on the radar screen, not even for many Africans. However, so many within the African community itself, perhaps because of their own alien socialization and mis-education, are not alert to this problem. Therefore they do not see it as a priority for action. Therefore, we are not mobilized to deal with these matters. Moreover, many of us have become experts at implementing the most damaging parts of systems of structural inequity. For example:

1. We assist in the non-beneficial use of mental measurement and assessments that falsely label our children as impaired.

2. We manage tracking systems that result in the disproportionate placement of our children in low tracks.
3. We teach non-culturally responsive curricula that leave our children ignorant of themselves.
4. We sell privatized services and schools to public schools, mainly in urban areas that enrich entrepreneurs with no real benefits to our children.

It is clear to me that a major effort is required to make any substantial meaningful and positive change in the education/socialization of African children. However, no such change is even remotely possible until we can effect a fundamental change in the dialogue about education/socialization. This is first and foremost an internal dialogue within the African community. After that we can address both the common school experience with others and the African community's responsibility for the broader socialization approaches.

Currently the heaviest emphasis in the education research community in general is on children, how “intelligent” they are, which “intelligences” they have, how “motivated” they are, and on “special methods,” etc. I think that the emphases are misplaced. By now it should be clear that, for the most part, our children are geniuses with capacities to go far beyond any current school requirements. They respond very well to quite a variety of well-executed methods and techniques. There is no mystery about how to teach any of them. The priority that needs more emphasis is the deep study of the quality of services that we offer to students, the unequal distribution of those services and the structures of inequity such as tracking and inappropriate special education, still existing in the school. Why do our children fail to get access to the many educators who are not puzzled about how to teach them?

Our children's manifest problems in public education virtually all have to do with opportunity to learn. The evidence for this conclusion is overwhelming, if we only raise and try to answer the right questions. There is a growing body of powerful conclusions from literature focusing on high poverty, high achieving students. Results by Schmoker (1996), Closing the Gap by Kati Haycock (1998) and Value Added Evaluation by Saunders and Rivers (1998) are but three of the newer citations adding to what Ron Edmonds and his associates showed us long ago. It is clear that ordinary public school teachers, with unselected regular classrooms, serving poor children, without specialized standardized programs, can move students to the highest academic levels in a short period of time. It is not the children or their parents, poverty, culture or bilingual status (correlates that explain little or nothing) that determine academic success. It is good teaching.<sup>1</sup> It is also clear that poor and minority ethnic groups tend to get a lower quality of instruction for many reasons, including high teacher turnover, experienced teachers choosing more desirable neighborhoods, high rates of substitute teachers, high rates of teachers teaching out of their fields and a host of other factors that combine to produce what Kozol documented and called Savage Inequalities (1991), also documented by other researchers. These are realities not myths. This suggests to me where the education researchers' focus should be, primarily on the quality of service and its distribution.

Our preoccupation with the analysis of the victims of savage inequalities in the schools exhausts our resources and our energies and may well impede progress toward valid teaching. Because African children's academic performance averages are usually low, our attention turns to "multiple intelligences," "whole language or phonics," "site based or central management," off the shelf "cookie cutter programs," etc. However, these things do not address our basic problems, given the state of African people with respect to opportunity. We do not have to wait for new discoveries on how to teach. As Ron Edmonds has said: "We already know more than we need to know." At least some do.

In my opinion, the basic problems are elsewhere. I believe that there is a prerequisite to any approach that would attempt to address the problems that are basic. Most of the 12

Challenges that I cited earlier are challenges that have education/socialization components. Almost none of the 12 Challenges influence the aims in schools that serve our children. But worse, even if they did, the ideas about education/socialization that should serve as a foundation for our work have been well articulated over the years, even centuries, yet these ideas that come from deep thinkers of the African community are unknown or marginalized. Therefore, the prerequisite for problem solving is to do the homework that is necessary to understand the works of those who have already done much homework for us. These ideas are fundamental conceptions about problems and solutions.

Some examples of the indispensable works that must be considered as the starting point for change in education/socialization of African people are as follows:

Carter G. Woodson	<u>The Miseducation of the Negro</u>
W. E. B. DuBois	<u>The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques</u>
Marimba Ani	<u>Yurugu: An African Centered Critique of European Thought and Behavior</u>
Mwalimu Shujaa	<u>Too Much Schooling: Too Little Education – A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies</u>
Molefi Asante	<u>The Afrocentric Idea</u>
Jacob Carruthers	<u>Intellectual Warfare</u>
John H. Clarke	<u>Africans at the Crossroads: Notes for an African World Revolution</u>

Amos Wilson	<u>Blueprint for Black Power: A Moral, Political, and Economic Imperative</u>
Kwame and Akia Akoto	<u>The Sankofa Movement: ReAfrikanization and the Reality of War</u>
Chinweizu	<u>The Decolonization of the African Mind</u>
Ayi Kwei Armah	<u>Two Thousand Seasons</u>
Matthew Arnold	<u>Steve Biko: Black Consciousness in South Africa</u>
Ben-Jochannan	<u>Cultural Genocide in the Black and African Studies Curriculum</u>

Of course, there are other important better known references. However, these are writers who call upon our community to develop an independent vision, a vision that is grounded in our cultural and historical reality as well as in our present political and economic condition, a vision that is based upon an understanding of hegemony and education in its direct and indirect forms and the structure that it creates, a vision that is rooted in our excellence tradition of education/socialization, one of the most awesome traditions in the world. (Hilliard, 1998)

Our problems persist because we are not asking the right questions and are being diverted and consumed by the wrong ones. The state of education for African people will remain at its low level, in a rut, unless and until there is a return to an independent consciousness among our leadership in general and our educational leadership in particular. By this I mean that African leadership, guided by a deep grounding in our cultural heritage and guided by a sense of destiny, must frame courses of action and must design the essential education/socialization direction for our people. Having done that,

we can then determine what must be done in our communities and what can be done in common schools, as well as how to make common schools culturally responsive.

I am not calling for something strange. In fact, I have outlined the very thing that successful global ethnic groups do now. Such groups take responsibility to define and control the core education/socialization processes for their ethnic families, with cultural transmission held as the prerogative of the family. They may be and most often are enrolled in public schools with other groups. They know that no one outside their families will place the highest priorities on highest quality socialization. Our problem is that our oppressors prefer to see us as individuals, not as an ethnic family. Worse, many of us have fallen victim to this way of seeing ourselves.

One thing should be crystal clear by now. There is no sense of crisis and no high priority being placed on the problem of education/socialization for African people. There is no major mobilization in place or being planned to get us out of the hole that we are in. Nothing in place or publicly contemplated offers any prospect that our general position in the global society will improve.

Yes there are a few who claim that African students have been emancipated, who claim to be able to serve them well. They have tricks galore, standardized, mass marketed, minimum competency, public and private businesses; mainly plying the urban market. Our children and others are their commodities. They stuff the children with advertising. Schools buy “teacher proof” software and “programs” for them. Our children are still a part of the giant shell game, bussing them from one place to another, chasing reluctant whites, moving from outside segregation to inside segregation through tracking and special education. We do not have efficacious processes in place, even for the common school requirements.

The 400-year struggle for African people has been for a legitimate education for the children, a high quality, culturally appropriate, truthful education/socialization for our children. (Hamilton, 1968) It has been a struggle against hegemony and for control over

socialization of our own children. We begin the new millennium with the same issues that we have always had, just new faces and new forms. Who can be pleased with what we see as we observe our people all over the world?

We know that at its base, our problem is a simple one. Can we place our children in the care of well-prepared wise educators who love them and who have the will to teach them? We need educators and leaders who are oriented towards our destiny because they are rooted in a deep understanding of our culture and traditions, educators who identify with and are a part of us, educators who see our children as their own. Those who love our children and who have the will to teach them will make whatever sacrifices are necessary to raise our children up where they belong. Now is the time for the real liberators to come forward. Some educational researchers already serve in this role; more can by destroying myths. There is heroic work for educational researchers as a part of this process.

1. Document and disseminate information about the many educators who are not at all puzzled about how to raise achievement of all children to high levels, educators who get excellent achievement now!
2. Evaluate the efficacy of tracking and special education services, especially in the high incidence categories, services that hold so many of our able students in custody, with little if any benefits, and sometimes with harm. (Heller, Holtzman and Messick, 1982) (Skyrtic, 1991).
3. Document and disseminate information about savage inequalities in services.
4. Study the availability of appropriate African ethnic specific materials to enhance our understanding of all curriculum areas.

**We must destroy myth and illuminate reality. We cannot call oppressors liberators and cry with gratitude at their tombs.**

Contrary to some popular opinion and even some professional opinion, educators and systems are extremely powerful. We can choose either powerful positive or powerful negative effects, and we can bring either into being. The futures of children truly are in our hands.

What will we do?

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