

Are American Public Schools Inherently Biased?

By Mary Tedrow

I was 13-years-old in 1968 when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law. Having literally grown up during the Civil Rights Movement, I have always considered myself—52, white, female, public school teacher—enlightened when it comes to issues of race. But an event at my high school concurrent with the Barack Obama-Jeremiah Wright national discussion left me feeling uncomfortably aware that I may not have fairly acknowledged or explored issues of race in America.

At school, a student challenged her English teacher for reading the “N” word aloud in class. They were reading *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It stimulated a discussion in our English department and led me to wonder if the student was expressing a deeper dissatisfaction with schooling in general. Then, a few nights later, I heard Jeremiah Wright talk with Bill Moyers for an hour on *The Bill Moyers Journal*. He spoke of how his church connected the youth to their strong African background in an attempt to balance the narrative of African-American as victim (which is about all we teach in English classes). It seemed to make sense to me and I wondered if there were other ideas I’d not been exposed to.

The Achievement Gap Persists

In the 40 years since integration, the African-American achievement gap in education stubbornly persists, even though other racial groups have arrived as immigrants, been assimilated, and demonstrated more educational progress. In terms of percentages, African-Americans far outweigh others in their representation in the prison population. Why is it that our fellow citizens continue to figure so largely on the statistical bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder? If education is the way up and out of poverty and social stagnation, why have we continued to fail to bring this group to the table?

After a recent reading of the 2003 book [*Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*](#) (2003), by leading African-American theorists Theresa Perry, Claude Steele and Asa Hilliard III, I reached two conclusions: This is a deep thoughtful study of the causes and cures for the African-American achievement gap; and the ideas and potential solutions embedded in this book have gone on largely unacknowledged by the ruling class—white Americans.

My own experience with arguments for an inherent bias in the system of schooling have been filtered through the popular media where issues like Ebonics, test and IQ bias, the stigmatization of stereotyping, “acting white,” and urban schooling are treated superficially. Sneering and scoffing remarks by mainstream commentators often follow media reports that touch upon these topics.

Those charged with the education of all American students must reach beyond this cursory treatment of the problem and grapple with the debate from all sides. *Young, Gifted, and Black* is a compilation of three essays by leading thinkers in the area of African-American education: Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and the late Asa Hilliard III. This slim book deserves a place in the professional libraries of teachers and schools, and in the pre-service education of all teaching professionals.

Perry’s essay was most useful to me in outlining the debate in its historical context. Perry explores the psychological stance African-Americans, over several centuries, have adopted to justify the activity of educating oneself. Historically, education for black Americans has demonstrated to have no predictable tie to economic advancement, no matter what level of schooling the student achieves. In order to succeed, black Americans must answer for themselves: *why sacrifice yourself to the pursuit of an education when the color of your skin is likely to close as many doors as your studies promise to open?*

Perry’s essay goes to the cultural roots of the first black schools for the answer to this question. African-American communities have always been able to encourage academic pursuits by the young by reminding them that freedom is rooted in literacy and that a strong literate base is necessary for the work that will achieve racial uplift, cement the community, and result in leaders who can speak for the group as a whole. These purposes are, to my knowledge, rarely overtly acknowledged by school systems.

Excluding and Including African-Americans

In the book’s longest essay, Perry explores and explains how school systems often work to exclude African-Americans. A telling detail is Perry’s comment that many inner-city blacks feel so alienated from the public schools that they refer to them as “they schools.” I especially appreciated Perry’s clear explanation of the history and debate surrounding ideas like minstrelsy, Ebonics, and Black English.

Her essay also introduced me to the educator Carrie Secret. Secret, a gifted teacher who has worked in inner-city Prescott Elementary in Oakland, Calif. her entire career, was at the center of the 1996 Ebonics debate. Her students achieve at high levels in her classroom where she honors the home language while encouraging her students to adopt standard English for use in the wider world. My curiosity peaked and I further researched Secret online and discovered a wealth of student-centered activities, books, and a teaching philosophy adaptable to my own classroom. I also discovered new titles in Afro-centered literature to engage students in literacy activities.

The book’s second essay, by Claude Steele, is a straightforward social-science study on the effects of stereotype-threat on student achievement. The negative effects of stereotype-threat—and other preconceived notions affecting all students, including gender bias and other cultural

biases—is supported by Steele’s research. It explains, in part, why immigrant Africans go to great lengths to distinguish themselves from African-Americans by displaying flags and other cultural icons.

In the final essay, Asa Hilliard dismisses outside intervention in closing the achievement gap and encourages readers to begin a study of achievement by looking at educators who are already making great gains in African-American achievement. Hilliard’s argument hinges on improving teaching skills to address the gap rather than trading on pre-packaged formulas that only make minor gains on test scores. He calls all the tests that attempt to measure achievement into question as well, asking what is being measured, by whom, and for what purpose.

Missing Pieces

The extent to which the above arguments are dismissed by the white mainstream can be exposed in my own history. Though I had a nodding acquaintance with some of the theories presented above, I had no knowledge of the leading black educators referred to in this book, among them Dr. J. Arthur Jones, Ph.D., who is notable for being personally responsible for teaching over half of all the African-Americans who hold a Ph.D. in mathematics in the U.S. I gathered these educators (and the authors of this book) are all well known to the African-American education community.

What’s more, no one in my professional life has ever discussed the benefit of connecting African-American students to their rich cultural background outside of precursory discussions that literature might be expanded to reach beyond the European-centered canon.

In this short space it is impossible to do justice to the complexity of the arguments presented in this important book. Indeed, I hesitated in reviewing this book for fear of adding to the body of superficial thinking on these important matters. Yet it is clear from my reading that the issues of race and education are complex and nuanced and must be considered in depth by all committed teachers and other education leaders.

Each of the essays in *Young, Gifted, and Black* concludes with practical strategies for combating systemic bias through a number of measures. Together, they achieve what is desirable in a professional development book. Teachers are encouraged to think and to revisit classroom practice, and the book’s fresh perspectives spur our curiosity for further reading.

We are 40 years into our efforts to fully integrate education. Many more challenges lie ahead in an increasingly global world. I feel personally challenged by Barack Obama’s urging for America to re-open the discussion of race, and I hope other teacher leaders, with their rich background in theory and practice, will join me in re-opening our minds and hearts to this discussion. It could well determine our future success as educators in a society increasingly colored by questions of race and class.

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