

# VIEW POINT

COMMENTARIES ON THE QUEST TO IMPROVE  
THE LIFE CHANCES AND THE EDUCATIONAL  
LOT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

## SCHOOL-BASED BARRIERS THAT LIMIT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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## **SCHOOL-BASED BARRIERS THAT LIMIT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS**

### Introduction

This discourse does not argue that schools alone can cure poverty in America and remedy all of the ill-effects of a starkly disadvantaged status in the social order. Many of the seemingly intractable problems that beset educators in responding to the needs of African American children placed in “harm’s way”, are rooted in the poverty, family instability and turmoil, and crime pervasive in the neighborhoods of America’s urban ghettos. The achievement gap between Black and White students is a functional consequence of the cancerous nature of racism and the resiliency of socioeconomic deprivation in the United States. However, public education in the United States is so full of inequities that it actually exacerbates the challenges of race and poverty rather than ameliorates them (Education Week, 1998). While schools cannot perform the “miracle” of wiping out all of the ill-effects of racism and poverty on the community and family life and the developmental experiences of African American children, the interaction of vulnerable children of color with the content and structure of schooling often exacerbates the alienation and exclusion that they experience in the general society. Educators cannot justifiably cite socioeconomic factors as the reasons why public schools across this nation annually graduate thousands upon thousands of students of color whose cumulative deficiencies in reading and writing skills classify them as functional illiterates. “Effective” educational leadership and “good” teaching can save countless numbers of African American students from experiencing 12 to 13 years of inconsequential public education. To the degree that fundamental features of schooling function to limit the learning opportunities of African American students, educators bear a responsibility for allowing the achievement gap to be as extensive as it is.

African American children do enroll in public schools that no parent would willingly select. African American children do enter schools that hold them to lower levels of expectations, that hold misassumptions about their ability and desire to learn, and that impose tracking practices that relegate them to dead ends in education, career, and life (Stewart, 1993). Insufficient understanding of intelligence and unfair distinctions based on the misuse of tests result in the mislabeling, misclassifying, and miseducating of many African American students. On average, African American students receive programs and offerings that differ in kind and content from those for White students with these differences significantly influencing educational achievement and later educational and career options (College Entrance examination Board, 1985). African American students are disproportionately placed in low-ability; non-college-bound tracks where they receive less socially valued knowledge—usually taught disproportionately by the underqualified and unqualified teachers in a system. Educators do reflect the prejudices of their own lives and those of their class and culture (Gould, 1982). African American students irrespective of their

social class and academic achievement receive no guarantees that they will be accorded equal results for equal efforts. In our racially and socially stratified society, "equal access alone is not the necessary and sufficient condition of equal opportunity." We have not reached that point in the nation's history where it can be said that the belief in the inferiority of African Americans has disappeared from the American heart (Higginbotham, 1996). Schools continue to perform the dual role of aiding social mobility, and, at the same time, working effectively to hinder it (Oakes, 1985). American education continues to reflect privilege and disadvantage. The quality of education that children receive in the United States can be predicted, to a considerable degree, by their parents' race and income (Keating & Oakes, 1988; National Urban League, 2001).

The U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 declared, in part, that public education where the state has undertaken to provide it is a right, which must be available to all on equal terms. Rightfully, African Americans parents believe that within the school, the child's scope of opportunities should be bounded only by the respective potential of the individual. Whether the demonstrated abilities of a student are close to the established norms or vary widely from them, all students are entitled to exposure to educational experiences that faithfully seek to provide opportunities for each student as a learner to develop to his or her maximum potentialities. While no school can guarantee the success of each student, but each school should guarantee each student an educational setting conducive to his or her fullest development. This goal can only be achieved when instructional techniques are demonstrably viable, when educators are ineffective command of these techniques, when the necessary materials and media are readily available, and when the critical support services to students are provided. The path to the improvement of the educational lot of African American students is one that educators must be prepared both philosophically and pedagogically to travel. We will never know the true capacity of public schools to more appreciably "narrow" the achievement gap between the "have's" and the "have not's" in our racially and socially stratified society until educators eradicate school-based barriers that limit the learning opportunities of African American students. Public education by its very intent is illegitimate if it functions as a negative or defeating process. Anything that counteracts progress toward equal opportunity in the United States must inevitably become a factor in the denial of equal opportunity to individuals or groups in the American society.

### School-Based Barriers to Learning Opportunities

In some of the greatest cities in America, hundreds of thousands of students of color spend their days in schools that are a national disgrace (Olson & Jerald, 1998). Urban education has become synonymous with the education of Blacks and other disadvantaged minorities and carries the connotation of failure. Some of the very best teaching in America occurs in mainly minority urban public schools, but also much of the worst teaching in America is to be found in mainly minority urban public schools. Subtle and not so subtle

differences in curriculum, course content and teaching methods, and the qualifications and commitment of school personnel ultimately determine which students receive a true education and which are trained for a permanent role in the nation's underclass (College Examination Board, 1985). Instructional approaches in mainly minority public schools tend to create conditions that increase the difficulty of compensating for initial disadvantages in developmental readiness (Goodlad, 1984). Educators render services in response to needs that are so fundamental that failure to respond to such needs interferes with the quality of life. Educators are in the business of nurturing, developing, and producing student success. Professionalism in education enjoins a commitment to the inauguration of systems of education in which all students are accorded equitable opportunities to attain a quality education. Equity in education means fairness; the real measure of equity is what is done for all students to help them rise to levels of satisfactory academic performance (McKenzie, 1993). The "true" professional educator measures his or her success by the progress of each student toward realization of his or her potential.

Professionalism dictates that educators avoid those things that do not work and demonstrate a commitment to implement that, which does work. Teaching like all other academic pursuits, has a body of knowledge, which is the information that the repertoire of behaviors and skills for practitioners in schools is built. While great strides have been made in the development of the knowledge base in the teaching profession, teaching as a clinical science will probably never be able to match the profession of medicine in "matching treatment to affliction" (Traub, 2000). However, we know far more than we used to about what does and does not work. Yet, the teaching profession suffers from serious deficiencies in getting the findings and conclusions of validated research into professional practice in schools. Critically important advances in the study of the mind and the brain, cognition and development provide a rich context for thinking about teaching and learning (National Research Council, 1999). Teachers tend to be more dedicated to their teaching than to the professionalization of their teaching. Deficits in schooling impact on all students, but such deficits in schooling often erect insurmountable obstacles for those students most affected by social and economic disadvantages (Keating & Oakes, 1988). While many excellent teachers incorporate sound principles of learning into their practice—either by design or intuition—more often than not, teachers do not look to research for guidance.

Schools do not function independent of, or are unaffected by the society they serve. Schools tend to perpetuate the ideology of the dominant groups in the American society; thus, schools, far from being "the great equalizer" tend to help perpetuate the differences in socioeconomic conditions or at the very least, do little to reduce them (Silberman, 1970; Eitzen & Zinn, 1998). In general, the public schools do not create inequality; they transmit inequality from one generation to the next (Thompson & Hickey, 1994). Schools not only reflect but also perpetuate the inequities that exist among groups in the social structure

(HEW, 1972). Black students in both society and the schools are doubly disadvantaged by both race and low income. Grouping and tracking practices in the schools are heavily linked to race and social class and constitute formidable barriers to equal educational opportunity. Educators rather than being agents of social consciousness and reform, often promote the maintenance of the prevailing social, economic and political order.

Public education should successfully fulfill its responsibility to society and to its clientele by contributing significantly to the development of each individual potentiality. Education should prepare students to seek for themselves ways and means of improving their life chances and improving the overall quality of life in the American society. Quality education when applied specifically to African Americans should be a designation used only to describe the efforts of those educational institutions, which provide major assistance to Blacks in fulfilling their legitimate needs and aspirations. Quality education for African Americans must carry with it a commitment to demonstrate that “blackness” is not a regrettable human condition, but the proud heritage of an important segment of the American population. A quality education for African Americans empowers Black students philosophically and intellectually to alter elements of the social structure in order to provide equal opportunity for all members of the social structure. There is plenty of room for improved professional practice in meeting the educational needs of African American students. Educators may not be the preeminent infliction of African Americans in a racially and socially stratified society, but they are more a part of the problem than the solution. Listed below are some of the school-based barriers to equal educational opportunity for African American students.

### The “Hidden Curriculum”

The maintenance of social stratification in the United States depends on legitimacy, which is the widespread popular belief that existing sociopolitical institutions are the most appropriate, the best, or the only viable alternatives (Lipset, 1963). Ideological social control is the attempt to manipulate the consciousness of citizens so that they accept the ruling ideology and refuse to be moved by competing ideologies (Eitzen & Zinn, 1998). A major reason that social hierarchies endure is ideology, cultural beliefs that justify particular social arrangements, including patterns of inequality (Macionis, 2002-04). Because education is looked upon as “the engine of the future,” the formal and informal educational processes and systems seek to conserve and preserve the dominant ideologies, customs, and institutions of the American society (Goldnick et al., 1976). The formal system of education in the United States and all societies is conservative—to preserve the culture and not to transform it (Eitzen & Zinn, 1998). Sociologists use the term, the “hidden curriculum” to describe the unwritten rules, behaviors, and attitudes, such as obedience to authority and conformity to cultural norms that are taught in the schools in addition to the formal curriculum (Gillborn, 1992). The “hidden curriculum” subtly and not so

subtly places the emphasis on learning to be quiet, to follow orders, and to please authority regardless of the situation—to learn to fit in rather than act out against situations that ought to be changed (Eitzen & Zinn, 1998). The “hidden curriculum” communicates different messages to students based on their race, social class, and gender; thus programming them to accept tacitly different roles (Kornbloom, 2003). Schools routinely provide learning experiences according to students’ socioeconomic backgrounds, thereby perpetuating social inequality (Henslin, 1995).

Very often schools are not places where individuals and groups of students can reflectively examine problems, frustrations, aspirations, proposals, and values. Schools need to be human laboratories that help students become increasingly autonomous, self-directing, self-actualizing individuals capable of identifying and pursuing their own aims and objectives within the American society. African American students should not be placed in schools that seek to make them complacent and compliant individuals who will not challenge the status quo. George S. Counts (1932) when he wrote, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*, challenged educators to decide between conflicting purposes and values and to lead society rather than following it. The integrity and viability of the American democracy depend in large measure, on the effectiveness of its schools as agents of social consciousness and reform. Educators should not be “neutral” on the subjects of racism and poverty. In keeping with the basic tenets of the American democracy, the schools have a responsibility to reform society as well as perpetuate it (Scott, 1973). The failure of the public schools to develop the capacity of the majority of African American students to participate intelligently in the control of their society not only emasculates them but assures that decision making is kept in the hands of those who will use such power to increase their benefits at the expense of the poor and powerless. Any consequence of public education that delimits the life chances of African American is dysfunctional and illegitimate (Scott, 2000).

### Eurocentrism

The United States is a nation of increasingly diverse people, drawn from many linguistic and religious origins. In many respects, America is a nation of minorities with each minority attaching some emphasis on its race, its language its culture, its national origin, or some combination of these (Howe, 1990). The society in which Americans interact is highly diversified and complex and consists of many different groups of people with characteristically different ways of life (Havighurst & Neugarten, 1967). Americans, unlike most other peoples, are not bound by a common religion or a common ethnicity; the binding heritage of the nation is its democratic version of liberty, equality and justice and its Constitutional support for the premise that there is no “fixed and final” American (Jackson, 1987; Bridges, 1959). The American culture is a conglomeration of the life styles of all who have participated in the building of America. The American culture belongs to all Americans and is constantly evolving. The public schools

should be committed to engendering values and implementing policies that will enhance respect for individuals and their cultures with an acceptance of the premise that the nation's cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity—America's pluralism—is one of the most valued, significant, and important characteristics of the our democracy (Council of Presidents, 1988).

Being Black in America has not only meant being racially and culturally different but also being treated by many, if not most, White Americans as racially and culturally inferior (Scott, 1997). Higginbotham (1996) noted that we have not yet reached that period in American history when it can be said that belief in the inferiority of African Americans has disappeared without a trace from the American heart. The public schools play a major role in framing the American character. W.E.B. DuBois (1903) expressed concern about Black Americans living in a society that yielded them no true self-consciousness but that allowed them to see themselves only through White Americans. By what it elects to include in its curriculum, an educational institution implies something about what is worth knowing and what is important. Now, more so than ever before, Black scholars and educators are about the serious business of ending the practice in public education of teaching African American students about the contributions of White Americans while observing only minimally and often derisively the contributions of Black Americans in every field of endeavor. Support for the pluralist ideal in public education requires decision makers in the public schools to come to grips with the question of whether or not the ideals of pluralism and equality can find working expression in "institutions so deeply grounded in the traditions of White America" (Committee on Minority Life, 1986). The pluralist ideal gives support to the view that education should not reproduce and reinforce the prejudices of any group. The pluralist ideal advocates curricula for the schools which embrace and understanding of cultures worldwide and which broaden students' understanding of the arts, humanities, and the social sciences beyond the traditional Western cultures. The pluralist ideal rejects any "hierarchy of cultural values which places the achievement of Europe as some classical apex and relegates those of other cultures to a lesser status (Nettleford, 1989).

The quest for a curriculum of inclusion in our public schools is in direct confrontation with the proponents of Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism espouses a form of cultural imperialism in which excellence is narrowly defined in terms of a presumption of Western world supremacy of thought and learning, as well as dominance in civilization (Gordon, 1990). A defining characteristic of Eurocentrism is its general systematic distortions in terms of race and ethnicity (Howard, 1990). Eurocentrism focuses on the contributions of Europeans and distorts or ignores the history and culture of everyone else. The Eurocentric treatment of history serves to denigrate the experiences and contributions of non-Whites to world and American history. The Eurocentric perspective denies others their place in the making of history; it offers a version of history in which Black and Hispanic students, in particular, are taught that their ancestors were mere spectators to history. Through neglect and distortions, the scholarly

monographs and texts authored by many White scholars perpetuated racial stereotypes and myths. White historians generally ignored Black people in their treatment of American history; when they did consider Blacks, their work was impaired by White supremacy (Harris, 1990). No group of scholars were more deeply implicated in the miseducation of American youth and did more to negatively shape the thinking of generations of Americans about race and Black Americans than White historians (Litwack, 1987). While progress has been made in promoting a non-Eurocentric approach to the coverage of history and literature in the public schools, the political need persists for the misuse and abuse of scholarship, and there remain a cadre of scholars dedicated to the belief in the intellectual superiority of Whites over Blacks and others (Hilliard, 1995). Diane Scott-Jones (1995) opined that the rush of many scholars and lay persons to embrace the ideas in *The Bell Curve* written by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray in 1994 reveals a strong desire among many Whites to believe they are born to superior status.

The Eurocentric perspective falsely communicates to students the impression that America's inhabitants of any value and importance are descendants of immigrants from Europe. Eurocentrism goes counter to the need for all students to develop the ability to understand, respect, and accept people of different racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, political, economic, social, and cultural backgrounds. Efforts to promote a curriculum of inclusion in the public schools should not ignore the reality that America is undeniably rooted in a Western tradition. Thus, the ideas and values of the Western tradition should constitute the foundation of the curriculum for the nation's public schools. This reality requires that students have a familiarity with, but not necessarily an adherence to, the philosophies of the Greeks and those of the European tradition. Much of what is taught in the public schools is and should be informed by main currents of European and American history. But intellectual familiarity with the Western tradition does not mean that students need to accept the precepts of Western tradition as absolute truths. In our pluralist democracy, it is essential that students be introduced to scholarship that offers theory, analysis, and description of the perspectives and contributions of peoples who have been marginalized within the European tradition and peoples originating in Africa and Asia or in indigenous cultures of the Americas. In 1991, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) affirmed the importance of injecting more non-Western and feminist perspectives into the study of history in the public schools. A statement issued by the Executive Board of OAH in 1991, in part, noted: "A history that asserts or implies an inherent superiority of one race, gender, class, or region of the world over another is by definition bad history... and should have no place in the public schools."



## Inadequate Coverage of African American History/Culture

Being a “good” American does not require African Americans to become facsimiles of White Americans. Integration is pluralism—rather than assimilation—with respect for differences and is not a desire for amalgamation. African Americans do not desire to disappear as a people or as a culture. Culture consists of the behavioral patterns, symbols, institutions, values, and other human made components of society and is the unique achievement of human group that distinguishes it from other groups (Banks, 1977). While cultures are in many ways similar, a particular culture constitutes a unique whole. The culture of African Americans is a synthesis of African American culture and American-European culture as they interacted under slavery. There are aspects of American-European culture that African Americans subscribe to and have incorporated into their own communities, but there are also distinctive characteristics in major aspects of Black life that set them apart (Young, 1972). The history of African Americans prior to their being heaped upon the shores of America and the Black experience in America have produced an African-American culture. Andrew Billingsley (1974) noted that while Blacks in America are African, they are also an American people. Thus, in being American, African Americans are also, in part, a European people. Each of these three streams of civilization—African, African American, and American—is complex and varied within itself, but each is also highly interrelated to the experience of Blacks in America (Billingsley, 1974).

By what it elects to include in its curriculum, a school implies something about what is worth knowing and what is important. In the struggle to become a more viable, functioning group in a society in which power and influence are the guardians of life, liberty, and happiness, African Americans must become keenly aware of their common history and their common predicament as Black people. African American students need to gain a knowledge of and a pride in their own history and culture in order that they can go on to discover that at the core of every distinct culture are the common imperatives of all humankind (Davis, cited in Hentoff, 1966). Vincent Harding (1973) cautioned that no educator should be permitted to ignore that the acquisition of knowledge and the affirmative of self are the beginnings of the long battle against the systems that have created the domination. Manning Marable (1991) reminded African Americans that oppressed people, who abandon the knowledge of their own protest or fail to analyze its lessons, perpetuate their dominance by others. John H. Clarke (1972) noted that an understanding of Black history and culture tells Black students where they have been, where they still must go, and what they still must be. For African American students, access to their history and culture and the appropriate inclusion of the contributions and African Americans and Africans in the mainstream of the curricula of schools, colleges, and universities are not “pleasant luxuries” but the very “marrow” of survival for African Americans in a racist society. DuBois (1965) was correct: “It is the duty of African Americans to resist oppression and that resistance is tantamount to cultural self-determination.

African American students should be provided a public education that is contributive to their intellectual and political emancipation in America (Ray, 1979). Ignorance of and disrespect for African American history and culture breed low expectations and unhealthy educator assessment of Black students (NABSE, 1984). Black students need more educational leaders who administer schools where excellence is expected of Black students and where Black students are empowered academically, culturally, psychologically, and politically (Smith, 1986).

### Insufficient Understanding of Intelligence

DNA evidence proves conclusively that contemporary human beings are one variable species with our roots in Africa, and from Africa, human beings moved out into a wide range of environments around the world, producing hundreds, perhaps thousands of culturally and genetically distinct populations (Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003). For the past 10 millennia, human beings have been spreading northward and southward and across the oceans to every corner of the globe, and thus, throughout our history, we have been divided into innumerable societies, each which maintains its own culture, thinks of itself as “we” and looks upon others as “they” (Kornbloom, 2003). Races are not biological distinct or biologically meaningful groupings of the human species. There is no such thing as biological race (Eitzen & Zinn, 1998). While there maybe genetic variation between populations, there is no scientific evidence that the possession of a few distinctive genes by any segment of the population has any significant effect on human behavior (Henslin, 1995). Race is a myth, a fabrication of the human mind, and none of the socially constructed races is superior to any other (Henslin, 1995). No racial or ethnic group, in general, is any smarter than any other racial or ethnic group, and we are all equally human (Schaffer, 1999; Macionis, 2002-04).

We all come into the world naked: physically, culturally, and socially. An instinct is a form of behavior that occurs in all normal members of a species without having been learned (Stark, 2001). The human infant is born with few fixed, inherited patterns of behavior, primarily the automatic responses called reflexes (Chinoy, 1965). While we are not all equally endowed genetically and we do not enter the world as blank slates, abilities related to educability are distributed randomly throughout the population (Tesconi, 1975; Keating & Oakes, 1988; Brooks-Gunn, et al., 1996). Human beings by nature are partly equal and partly unequal, but nature is not malevolent. No racial or ethnic group has a monopoly on intelligence or any other positive characteristics of human behavior. Although nature may endow some individuals with greater or lesser innate abilities, despite these differences most people have sufficient abilities to function as a social being (Thompson & Hickey, 1994; Kornbloom, 2003). Sociologists recognize differences between individuals, but most agree that social forces rather than biology are responsible for inequality (Thompson & Hickey, 1994). In most cases, genes do not dictate how a child will develop—the orderly and

lasting changes in children resulting from a combination of learning, experience, and maturation (Light, Keller, & Calhoun, 1989; Eggen & Kauchak, 1999). Our genetic traits unfold and take on form only in the course of experience in a social environment (Chinoy, 1965). How much of a child's potential is realized depends on the environment; the environment is truly a powerful force that may inhibit or facilitate intellectual growth (Schaffer, 1999). For some parts of life the blueprint is drawn by heredity, but even here the environment can redraw those lines (Henslin, 1995). While not discounting the importance of nature, it is nurture that most matters in shaping human behavior (Macionis, 2002-04).

Stephen J. Gould (1982) noted that biology is not destiny. He emphasized that while biology is behind a lot that we do; our abilities are not the result of intrinsic and unalterable heredity. James Comer (1989) wrote that children, at birth, have only biological potentials that must be developed and nurtured. Steinberg and Meyer (1995) emphasized that whether a child grows up emotionally healthy, does well in school, and succeeds in life is grounded in elements outside the child himself or herself. We all have intelligence, a collection of distinctive talents, abilities, and limitations (Woolfolk, 1998). But intelligence itself is not easily defined or measure, and there is no consensus on how to do these things. Webber (1991) believes that intelligence is an abstract concept that has not actual basis in concrete, objective physical reality. Gary Groth-Marnat (1997) argues that the concept of intelligence is like the term "force," it can be known by its effects, but its presence must be inferred. Eggen & Kauchak (1999) state that experts define intelligence as being three dimensional: (a) the capacity to acquire knowledge, (b) the ability to think and reason in the abstract, and (c) the capability of solving problems. Bee & Boyd (2004) state that most psychologists believe that intelligence includes the ability to reason abstractly, the ability to profit from experience, and the ability to adapt to varying environmental context. Unfortunately, many lay persons and many educators believe that intelligence as measured by IQ tests is fixed and inborn. Most experts agree that intelligence can be developed, enhanced, and expanded over time (Steinberg & Meyer, 1995; Woolfolk, 1998; Schaffer, 1999; Bee & Boyd, 2004). However wide differences of opinion persist as to not only what constitutes intelligence but how much of intelligence is genetically transmitted. Most psychologists believe that about half of the variation in IQ scores within any population is due to heredity (Neisser et al., 1996; Rogers, Row, & May, 1994; Schaffer, 1999). Gould (1982) stated that the argument that a single number called IQ could capture the multifarious complexities of the concept of intelligence and that you can rank races, classes, and sexes on the basis of their average IQ scores is fundamentally fallacious. The term intelligence has developed some unfortunate explicit meanings over the years, and this ambiguity has allowed it to become influenced by and framed within a context of different philosophical assumptions, political agendas, social issues, and restrictions (Groth-Marnat, 1997).

Misconceptions abound in the teaching profession about what intelligence is, how much of intelligence is predetermined by heredity, how intellectual potential is distributed among the populations, and how intelligence or perceived deficiencies in intelligence affect academic achievement. Like most other Americans, educators in the schools tend to believe that intelligence is largely genetically bestowed and that intelligence is a property that is static and fixed at birth. Keating & Oakes (1988) argued that because educators typically do not believe that intelligence is complex, multidimensional, and changeable, they have not rethought outmoded conceptions of the role of schooling in developing human potential; educators tend to be concerned with how much fixed potential students demonstrate rather than how to nurture and develop students' intelligence and ability (Keating & Oakes, 1988). Gould (1995) provides what ought to be a professional mandate for all educators: "Biology is not inevitable destiny; education is not an assault on upon biological limits. Rather, our extensive capacity for educational improvement records a genetic uniqueness vouchsafed only to humans among animals." Howard Gardner (1983) developed a theory of multiple intelligences. He concluded that most conceptions of intelligence are too narrow and should be broadened beyond the confines of traditional academic subjects. The teacher's job is not to get out of the way of the learning process, but to take an active part in guiding students through the process (Odden, 1995). To perform this task competently and with sensitivity, teachers must overcome their tendency to "chain the human spirit" by interpreting IQ as a dictate of inevitable destiny rather than a helpful device for identifying children in need of aid (Gould, 1995).

### Misuse of IQ Testing

The first modern intelligence test was published in 1905 by two Frenchmen, Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon. Binet and Simon had only benign intentions for their simple tests and its accompanying scale. Binet and Simon knew that teachers could be bias in their assessments of students, thus, they developed a test intended to be a guide for identifying students in need of help. Binet and Simon believed strongly in educational remediation and rejected any hereditarian reading of the results of their tests (Watson, 1993; Gould, 1995). The IQ test developed by Binet and Simon provided an imperfect but objective way of predicting school success. They held no belief that a single test could adequately measure intelligence, and they strongly disagreed with educators who claimed that a student can "never succeed as a result of inferior biology" (Gould, 1995).

In 1916, Lewis Terman and his associates at Stanford University modified and extended many of Binet's and Simon's original tasks when they translated and revise the test for use in the United States (Bee & Boyd, 2004). Terman and his associates were thoroughgoing eugenicists who believed that their refinement of Binet & Simon's IQ test—now labeled the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test—

could offer incontrovertible scientific evidence of the inherent inferiority of certain groups (Watson, 1993). The updated version of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test is now one of the most widely used intelligence test in schools today. In 1922, Walter Lippmann, writing in the November 15, 1922 issue of *The New Republic*, voiced his concerns about intelligence testing and the elitist's motivations of Terman and his associates. Lippmann stated: "The danger of the intelligence test is that in a wholesale system of education, the less sophisticated or the more prejudiced will stop when they have classified and forget that their duty is to educate..." Terman and his associates believed that intelligence is innate, hereditary, and predetermined. Lippmann asserted that intelligence testing in the hands of men who hold this dogma could not but lead to an intellectual caste system in which the task of education had given way to the doctrine of predestination.

The hereditarians believed that a single number called IQ captured the multifarious complexities of the concept of intelligence and that you could rank races, classes, and sexes on the basis of their average score (Watson, 1993; Gould, 1995). The idea that a host of abilities could be encompassed in a meaningful way by a single number is fundamentally fallacious (Gould, 1995). Intelligence is not the same as what intelligence tests measure. Also, many people mistakenly believe that IQ tests measure the intellectual capacity with which a person is born. Intelligence tests measure what people have learned over the years—the effects of environment—as well as certain aspects of their innate mental capacity (Light, Keller, & Calhoun, 1989). Although IQ tests attempt to measure potential, this is impossible because the testing process must inevitably reflect some of the skills developed during the individual's lifetime. All IQ tests can do is measure certain aspects of what people know or can do at some point in time (Farley, 1994).

At best, intelligence tests measure only a limited range of mental abilities—mainly mathematical and verbal—but little or nothing else of a person's creativity, flexibility, street-smartness, insight, ability to learn from context, or skills with people, music, dance, or design (Light, Keller, & Calhoun, 1989; Sternberg, & Wagner, 1993). IQ tests are good at picking up students who are gifted in traditional academic subjects but are particularly poor at picking up those students—particularly from minority and underprivileged groups—who already lag behind in the educational system (Light, Keller, & Calhoun, 1989). Most social scientists acknowledge that IQ tests do measure something important that we think of as "intelligence," and they agree that individuals vary in intellectual aptitudes. But they reject the idea that any category of people, on average, is "smarter" than any other (Macionis, 2002-04).

Modern intelligence tests compare a child's performance to that of others of the same age; scores above 100 represent better than average performance; scores below 100 represent poorer than average performance (Bee & Boyd, 2004). One of the most powerful factors influencing school performance is

socioeconomic status (SES), the combination of parents' incomes, occupations and levels of education (Eggen & Kauchak, 1999). One of the most reliable findings in the intelligence literature is social class effect: Children from lower- and- working class homes average some 10 to 15 points below their middle-class-age-mates on standardized IQ test (Helms, 1997). There are also racial and ethnic differences in intellectual performance. Children of African-American ancestry score, on average, about 12 to 15 points below their European-American classmates on standardized achievement tests (Neisser, et al., 1996). Also, when the average scores on IQ tests of White children from privileged and disadvantaged homes were examined, the differences between them were equal or even greater than those that existed between White and Black children (Light, Keller, & Calhoun., 1989). When African American and White children are raised under similar socioeconomic circumstances, the achievement gap largely disappears (Brooks-Gunn, et al., 1996; Macionis, 2002-04). Often overlooked is the fact that some 15 to 25 percent of African American children obtain higher IQ scores than many White children (Schaffer, 1999). You cannot predict anything about the IQ or future accomplishments of an individual on the basis of his or her race or ethnicity (Schaffer, 1999).

Students' performance on intelligence tests is one of the most common factors for assignment to tracks (Keating & Oakes, 1988; Light, Keller, & Calhoun, 1989; Lindsey & Beach, 2002-04). Tracking also known as ability grouping sorts' students into different groups of classes according to their perceived intellectual ability. Ability grouping and tracking practices begin with the false assumptions that differences among students diminish instructional effectiveness and that students can be assigned fairly and accurately to intellectually homogeneous groups for instruction (Keating & Oakes, 1988). Ability grouping is synonymous with tracking (Kornbloom, 2003). Some social scientists argue that the differences in the higher percentage of students of color in the lower tracks compared with Whites in the upper tracks are a result of ability differences among racial and ethnic groups, but most others assert that the differences are a consequence of race and class bias (Wolf, 1998). Students who are poor or members of racial minority groups especially black and Hispanic youth, are more frequently placed in low-ability, non-college-bound tracks where they receive less socially valued knowledge, usually taught by a system's most ill-prepared or unqualified teachers (Keating & Oakes, 1988). There is little question that social factors outweigh biological ones in explaining the higher percentage of Black and Hispanic youth in the lower tracks (Kornbloom, 2003). Insufficient understanding of intelligence and unfair distinctions based on the misuse of test result in the placement of students of color in the lower tracks in significantly greater percentages than White students (Keating & Oakes, 1988). Tracking and the myths and misinformation that support these grouping practices constitute a severe barrier to equal educational opportunity (Keating & Oakes, 1988; Kozol, 1992; Eitzen & Zinn, 1998; Lindsey & Beach, 2002-04).

Education is a form of social policy; a means by which society distributes power and privilege. The level of entrance into the occupational world is significantly determined by the level that is attained in the educational world. Gate-keeping, or determining which people will enter what occupations is another way in which schools process students to reflect the social class structure. Despite the controversy over IQ tests and standardized achievement tests, most U.S. schools continue to use such testing to assign students to different types of educational programs—college preparatory classes, general education, and vocational and technical education (Macionis, 2002-04). The labeling of students resulting from their placement in “higher” or “lower” tracks results in a positive self-fulfilling prophecy for some students and a negative one for others (Eitzen & Zinn, 1998). If two students have equal aptitude and motivation, the one whose teacher expects great things is likely to outperform the one whose teacher expects less (Schaffer, 1999). Tracking gives students unequal access to high-status knowledge and pedagogy; consequently, they are unequally prepared to thrive in the labor market (Parker, 1994). Tracking is often a thinly veiled strategy to perpetuate privilege; social background has as much to do with tracking as personal aptitude does (Macionis, 2002-04). Rigid tracking has a powerful impact on students’ learning and self-concept. A school’s decision about a student’s ability influences the kind and quality he or she receives, as well as his or her future life, including whether he or she goes to college, the jobs he or she will get, and his or her feelings about himself or herself (Sexton, 1965; Keating & Oakes, 1988; Eitzen & Zinn, 1998; Macionis, 2002-04).

### Deficiencies of Standardized Achievement Testing

A test represents a set of questions or situations designed to permit an inference about what an examinee knows or can do in an arena of interest. From a policy perspective, a test is an instrument that yields information that can be used for a variety of purposes. The term test is generic and represents many forms and techniques: multiple choice questions, essays, structured interviews, and a variety of products and performances. Assessment is the term used to denote a broader array of devices designed to show what a person knows and can do. Assessment is used in reference to the instruments and methods that require a test taker to supply an answer, a product or a performance and the diverse instruments and methods at arriving at a description, classification, or decision. Standardized achievement tests are designed to test specific information covered in schools, but the student does not end-up with an IQ score; his or her performance is compared to that of other students in the same grade across the country (Bee & Boyd, 2004). IQ tests, on the other hand are intended to reveal something about how well a student can think and learn, while standardized achievement tests tell something about what a student has already learned or not learned.

Reliability in testing generally refers to the ability of a test to measure the same thing every time or the degree of consistency between two measures of the

same thing. How reliable a test is depends on the purpose for which it is used. Validity in testing refers to a test's ability to measure what it purports to measure; it is the single most important aspect of a test (Eggen & Kauchak, 1999). The key issues related to tests and testing in American education are the purposes of tests, the test content and what it measures, and the ways in which test results are presented, interpreted, and used. Respected educators both within and outside of the specialty of mental measurement have proclaimed the limitations and misuse of standardized achievement tests in the nation's public schools. In spite of the criticisms, the use of standardized achievement test in the nation's public schools has reached the point where virtually every student is now tested at least once a year, and many are tested even more (Kohn, 2001; Sadker & Zittleman, 2004). The influence of standardized achievement testing can hardly be overstated; most teachers believe that standardized testing is overemphasized and distracts attention from instruction in the basic curriculum. Many parents of students who are academically able have voiced the criticism that too much testing takes important class room time away from the knowledge acquisition that their children need to compete for the better universities. Minority parents often present the criticism that standardized achievement tests are closely linked to tracking which results in their children being placed disproportionately in the lower tracks, but there are some parents of color who believe that increased testing will lead to improved instruction and increased learning on the part of their children. Standardized testing has its supporters and critics, and the criticisms often contradict the views expressed by others. Standardized achievement testing is considerably more popular among politicians than practitioners and parents.

The view expressed here is that there is too much standardized achievement testing, that less but better testing needs to be developed, that testing often leads to a denial of equal opportunity to students of color, that testing fails to give consideration to the deficits in opportunity to learn standards, that testing is often the instrument of politics than science, that testing needs to be introduced that contributes directly to the improvement of instruction and learning, and that increased testing is often a means to avoid the hard issues of how racism and poverty impact adversely on the community and family life and the developmental experiences of minority group children. Testing from a political perspective is a lot cheaper and asked relatively little of the non-poor than using the taxing and spending powers of government to ameliorate poverty. Increased performance standards for teachers and students will not alone compensate for the fact that the aggregate of negative factors imposed on the life chances of children of color generate academic performance that, on average, will be below that of students—of all colors—from middle-class and upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds. Testing continues to highlight the achievement gap but does little to provide the kind of information that will help teachers teach better and students to gain greater expertise in higher level thinking skills.



Unfortunately, the increased use of and reporting of tests have not been accompanied by increased understanding of how tests can or ought to be used; teachers need to know what the tests can and cannot say about children. They need to be able to evaluate whether decisions made about children (and themselves) are fair and appropriate, and administrators need to know about tests to determine what policy decisions should or should not be pursued. Kohn (2001) asserts that schools under intense pressure have allowed tests to cannibalize the curriculum; administrators have eliminated vital parts of the curriculum in order to provide the time needed for the increased testing. Stiggins (2002) argues that if you wish to maximize student achievement, far greater attention needs to be paid to the improvement of classroom assessment. He notes that both assessment of learning and assessment for learning are essential, but the former is in place and the latter is not. Braun & Misley (2005) argue that testing is deficient in the application of scientific theory as a means of gaining a clear understanding of the purpose of the assessment, a perspective on the nature of the knowledge or skills that are the focus of attention. They believe that far too many critical decisions are being made on “intuitive” decisions about testing rather than decisions predicated on sound theory of testing. Policy-makers need to overcome the habit of using product oriented assessment techniques to measure process-oriented education. Assessments are needed that provide educators with an understanding of how students make sense of instruction and that help students develop higher levels of understanding and intelligence. Traditional tests lack diagnostic and prescriptive validity (Bond, 1986). Some tests do not measure what they purport to measure, and some tests are used to measure factors well-beyond their design and intent. The tests that are the most detrimental and culturally biased are those that are geared to the sorting and labeling of students, that limit exposure and interaction among students with different labels, and that narrow the social and occupational options open to students upon completion of school.

There is no completely acceptable rationale for grading the performance of students in reference to commonly applied standards of expected performance for a heterogeneous school population (Scott, 1973). Politicians and educators have accorded tests higher regard than their history warrants. Testing continues to be used as the major means of identifying the weak from the strong and exerts an undue influence on the determination of course content, performance expectations, and the success or failure of students (Scott, 1979; NABSE, 1984). Virtually all tests fail to meet the rigorous standards of psychometric science and that standardized achievement tests, more often than not, have been the instruments of politics rather than science (NABSE, 1984). The use of standardized achievement tests should be drastically curtailed with resources diverted to the development and use of more subtle, sensitive, educationally useful forms of assessment with the need for comparative data being met in ways that do not carry such massive human and individual cost. The American democracy needs to invest its resources in public education with a greater commitment to the principle that the universal development of all its citizens

requires the kinds of assessment data that inform resource development, not resource selection.

### Conclusion

In 1980. I wrote that schools “consciously and inadvertently discriminate against the poor and powerless” (Scott, 1980). I also wrote: “The causes of the disproportionately higher dropout rate and distribution of lower achievement test scores among Blacks and the poor go far deeper than those effects produced by shortcomings within the education profession...” (Scott, 1980). The failure of school reform efforts to make a significant dent in educational inequality in the United States tells us something about the nature of the school and something about the circumstances that created the inequality in the first place (Traub, 2000). The public schools are not the preeminent infliction of the deprived and disadvantaged in the United States, but the public schools do represent an integration of our society’s most crippling diseases--intolerance, injustice, and inequity (Scott, 1980). Equal educational opportunity is crucial to equal opportunity itself, but the former is a function of the latter (Tesconi, 1975). Educational inequality is a progeny of social inequality in the United States. Social inequalities stand in the way of educational opportunity and thus constitute barriers to general equality of opportunity (Tesconi, 1975). Millions of America’s disadvantaged minorities fail to come up to present school standards because they are victims of discrimination in the general society which is so oppressive and destructive that the public schools, as they are presently financed and structured are incapable of responding adequately to their legitimate educational needs (Scott, 1992). Confronting educational inequality in the United States requires that public policy address the social and economic conditions imposed on children of color, as well as school reform (Rothstein, 2004).

Teaching is a complex task, and dealing adequately on a daily basis with the learning needs of 20 or 40 young minds requires a high level of professional knowledge and skill. You do not have to be a genius to be an effective teacher, but above average intelligence would certainly seem highly desirable. Yet, the best teachers are not necessarily those who are the most intelligent. But equally as certain, the best teachers are not developed from a cadre of individuals who are intellectually short-changed and/or scarred psychologically. It is both the art and science of teaching that sets the effective teacher apart from the pedestrian practitioner. The enormity of the challenges presented to educators who must respond to the adverse consequences of racism and poverty on the developmental readiness of children of color command that they be among the finest in the teaching profession. The educator most suited for placement in mainly minority schools is one who is intelligent, articulate, and humanistic, who clings unequivocally to the principle of equal opportunity, who demonstrates mastery of the applicable content areas; who has the repertory of the pedagogical skills needed for the specific instructional setting, and who measure success by the degree to which students progress toward their potential.

The behavior and performance of students in the schools are a consequence of not only what happens in the school but also what happens outside the school. Educators do indeed shape the kind of instruction that students receive within their classrooms. Some teachers make a major positive difference in the educational life of students; some make a minor contribution; and some do more harm than good. However, it is an illogical leap forward to assert that the Black-White achievement gap is primarily the result of inadequate classroom instruction. At best, superior teaching can narrow the Black-White achievement gap (Scott, 1989; Rothstein, 2004; Evans, 2004; Rotberg, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2002). It is simply unrealistic to expect the schools for the most ravaged victims of discrimination and deprivation to produce performance results that are comparable to those produced for students from more favorable socioeconomic circumstances. Nevertheless, just because schools cannot perform the “miracle” and wipe out all of the ill-effects of racism and poverty does not mean that schools cannot be restructured to become competent educational institutions. Competent to the degree that they send their students out into the adult world with the knowledge and skills needed to be self-directing and self-actualizing individuals capable of pursuing their own aims and objectives in society. Howard University and Pace University are not comparable educational institutions to Harvard University. But all three institutions have earned professional and public recognition for being professionally competent entities. For schools to more appreciably narrow the Black-White achievement gap, there needs to be a “hostility toward” mediocrity in schools that serve children of color. Also, George S. Counts wanted educators to lead society rather than following society (Counts, 1932). For African Americans, in particular, a quality education has to do with the products of those educational institutions whose policies and practices contribute significantly to the intellectual and psychological preparation of students for effective participation in society.

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