

A Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

—LANGSTON HUGHES

In 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois posed the question, “Does the Negro need separate schools?”¹ The question came as a result of Du Bois’s assessment that the quality of education that African Americans were receiving in the nation’s public schools was poor, an assessment that is still true today. Across the nation, a call in our urban centers for alternative schooling suggests that attempts to desegregate the public schools have ultimately not been beneficial to African American students. School systems in such cities as Milwaukee, Baltimore, Miami, Detroit, and New York are looking at experimental programs designed to meet the specific needs of African American boys.² The idea of special schools for African Americans (specifically African American boys) has sparked heated debate about both the ability and the responsibility of the public schools to educate adequately African American students. Why, in the 1990s, after decades of fighting for civil and equal rights, are African Americans even contemplating the possibility of separate schools?

The Current Climate

One look at the statistics provides some insight. African American students continue to lag significantly behind their white counterparts on all standard measures of achievement.³ African

American children are three times as likely to drop out of school as white children are and twice as likely to be suspended from school.⁴ The high school dropout rate in New York and California is about 35 percent; in inner cities, where large numbers of African Americans live, the rate nears 50 percent.⁵ African American students make up only about 17 percent of the public school population but 41 percent of the special-education population.⁶ These dismal statistics hold despite the two waves of educational reform initiated in the 1980s.⁷

These poor education statistics for African American students correlate with some harsh social and economic realities. Nearly one out of two African American children is poor. The rate of infant mortality among African Americans is twice that of whites. African American children are five times as likely as white children to be dependent on welfare and to become pregnant as teens; they are four times as likely to live with neither parent, three times as likely to live in a female-headed household, and twice as likely to live in substandard housing.⁸ More young African American men are under the control of the criminal justice system than in college.⁹ Indeed, an African American boy who was born in California in 1988 is three times more likely to be murdered than to be admitted to the University of California.¹⁰

These poor economic and social conditions have traditionally prompted African Americans to look to education, in the form of the integrated public school, as the most likely escape route to the American dream. In the landmark 1954 case *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Thurgood Marshall argued not only that the separate schools of the South were physically substandard but also that their very existence was psychologically damaging to African American children. Yet now, more than sixty years later, some African American educators and parents are asking themselves whether separate schools that put special emphases on the needs of their children might be the most expedient way to ensure that they receive a quality education.

While I was teaching in California, in the late 1980s, a reporter from another state called to ask my opinion about an African American male immersion school that was under consideration in her city.

"Correct me if I am wrong," I said, "but don't 90 percent of the African American students in your city already attend all-black schools?"

"Well, yes, I guess that's right," she responded. "So what you're really asking me is how I feel about single-sex schools?" I went on.

"No, that's not what I'm asking . . . I don't think," she said, with some doubt. "But now that you've reminded me that the schools really are already segregated, I guess I need to rethink my question."

The concern over African American immersion schools is not really about school segregation. Indeed, schools in large urban centers today are more segregated than ever before. Most African American children attend schools with other African American children. Further, as the whites and middle-income people of color (including African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans) fled the cities, they not only abandoned the schools to the poor children of color but also took with them the resources, by way of the diminishing tax base. In a better world I would want to see schools integrated across racial, cultural, linguistic, and all other lines. But I am too much of a pragmatist to ignore the sentiment and motivation underlying the African American immersion school movement. African Americans already have separate schools. The African American immersion school movement is about *taking control* of those separate schools.

I remember my first days in school. Despite the fact that there were close to thirty other five-year-olds vying for the attention of the one adult present, school seemed a lot like home. Everyone there was black. Several of my classmates were children I knew from my neighborhood. The teacher was an attractive, neatly dressed African American

woman who told us how much fun we were each going to have and how much she expected us to learn. I thought school was a pretty neat place. It was safe and clean, with people who cared about you: again, a lot like home.

If one puts aside the obvious objections to separate schools that they are inequitable, undemocratic, regressive, and illegal and considers the possible merits, the current calls for separate schools may be understandable. First, most inner-city students already attend de facto segregated schools. At the time when a proposal was offered for the Milwaukee African American male schools, African American students in the Milwaukee public school system were already segregated in its inner-city schools. In fact, this proposal had been preceded by a call for the creation of a separate African American school district in Milwaukee.¹¹

Second, the public schools have yet to demonstrate a sustained effort to provide quality education for African Americans. Despite modest gains in standardized test scores, the performance of African Americans in public schools, even those from relatively high-income stable families, remains behind that of whites from similar homes.

Third, some data suggest that African American children attending private and independent African American schools consistently perform at higher levels on standardized measures of achievement [than do those who attend public schools].¹² Of course, one might argue that students who attend private schools are a select subset of the school population and usually have supportive and involved parents, are more motivated, and have other economic and social advantages. However, a closer examination of the African American children who attend private schools reveals that large numbers of them are successful in these schools after having been unsuccessful in public schools.¹³

Historically, African Americans have wrestled with the problems of a quality education and integrated schooling. For some, a quality education does not necessarily mean attending

schools with whites. As far back as the post–Civil War era there were African American champions of separate schools. At the constitutional convention of North Carolina, one African American delegate said: “I do not believe that it is good for our children to eat and drink daily the sentiment that they are naturally inferior to the whites. . . . I shall always do all that I can to have colored teachers for colored schools. This will necessitate separate schools as a matter of course, wherever possible, not by written law, but by mutual consent and the law of interest.”¹⁴

However, not all African Americans believe that separate schools are the answer. In her study, Irvine found that many African Americans believe that resources and quality follow the white students.¹⁵ When they look at the physical facilities and the instructional materials and other resources of middle-class white schools and compare them with inner-city schools, African American parents cannot help but surmise that where white children are there is educational excellence. Irvine found that middle-income African American parents who voluntarily sent their children to suburban white schools for purposes of desegregation routinely commented that these schools were of higher quality because they had more computers. Similarly, W.E.B. Du Bois initially felt that separate African American schools had little to offer: “The well-equipped Jim Crow school is a rare exception. For the most part, such schools have been run on wretchedly inadequate resources, taught by ignorant teachers; housed in huts and dumps; and given just as little attention and supervision as the authorities dared give them.”¹⁶

But after witnessing the persistent mistreatment of African American students in desegregated Northern schools, Du Bois turned his efforts toward making the separate African American schools quality schools that offered equal education, not integrated education.

Certainly at the college level Fleming has demonstrated that African American students attending historically black colleges

and universities (HBUCs) have significantly higher graduation rates than those attending predominately white institutions.¹⁷ Further, the graduates' ability to function successfully both in the workplace and at predominately white graduate and professional schools is not compromised by their having attended African American undergraduate schools.

Indeed, some argue that school integration has come at considerable cost to African American students. Researchers investigating the performance of African American students in desegregated schools indicate that they fare no better than those attending segregated schools.¹⁸ Lomotey and Staley suggest that school desegregation plans are deemed successful when white parents are satisfied, despite low academic performance and high suspension and dropout rates for African Americans.¹⁹ The figures for African American males, in particular, are quite disturbing because of their overrepresentation in the suspension and dropout rates.

This assessment—that success of desegregation is determined by the white community's level of satisfaction—is consistent with a fictionalized account (based on actual reports of school desegregation) in law professor Derrick Bell's *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*.²⁰ In his discussion of the impact of school desegregation laws, Bell argues that the real beneficiaries of school desegregation are the schools, the white communities, and the white students. Desegregation often brings big dollars to a school district, which go toward instituting new programs, creating new jobs, providing transportation, and supporting staff development. Each of these means more personnel and better salaries. When white students are bused to African American schools, "desegregation money" is used to transform them into "magnet" schools—schools that attract students from throughout the district because they offer exemplary programs in mathematics, science, technology, the performing arts, and so on. Unfortunately, these magnet schools sometimes operate under a two-tiered system, virtually resegregating students within the so-called desegregated

schools. Thus the white students who come to the schools benefit from the special program while the African American students remain in the low-level classes.

Lomotey and Staley report additional perks in the form of free extracurricular programs—such as after-school care, pre-school programs, and camping or skiing trips—to entice white students to attend these schools in African American and other nonwhite communities. These extras are open to all students, but the nature of these special enticements often makes them of less interest or importance for African American students. For example, few low income African American students have the resources or the equipment to enjoy camping or skiing.

McPartland²¹ concluded that only when individual classrooms are desegregated is there an improvement in the achievement levels of African American students. This suggests that the classroom itself, where students come face to face with others who are different from themselves, is the place for real integration. When they are in the same classroom, all students can take advantage of the benefits and instructional expertise that may have been reserved previously for “upper-track” (that is, white middle-class) students.

Separate Schools or Special Schooling?

As a member of the baby boom generation, I went to urban schools that were bursting at the seams; every classroom had at least thirty students. Further, almost all of the children and most of the teachers were black. But the important thing was that the teachers were not strangers in the community. We students knew them and they knew us. We saw them at church, in the beauty parlor, in the grocery store. One of the sixth-grade teachers had served in the Army with my father. Most importantly, the teachers knew our families and had a sense of their dreams and aspirations for us.

Let us suppose that the legal, moral, and ethical concerns about special separate schools could either be suspended or reconciled with the American ideal of equality. Let us further suppose that every major urban center with a large number of African American students would set about developing separate schools for these children. One fundamental question would remain. Who would teach the children?

The uproar over separate schools has masked the debate about the quality and qualifications of the teachers who teach African American students. There is very little reliable literature on preparing teachers for diversity.²² And almost nothing exists on teacher preparation specifically for African American students.²³

Although the 1960s produced a large body of literature on teaching the “disadvantaged”²⁴ and the 1970s produced a body of literature about “effective schools,”²⁵ none of it was aimed specifically at preparing teachers to meet the needs of African American students. Even today some of the more popular educational innovations, such as cooperative learning and whole-language approaches to literacy, were developed and refined to improve achievement among “disadvantaged” students. Unfortunately, the relationship of these practices to African American learners is rarely made clear.

Elizabeth Cohen, a Stanford University sociologist, is one of the pioneers in the research of cooperative or small-group learning. Although her work in designing such classroom structures has received critical acclaim throughout the educational community, its link to her early work in facilitating school desegregation in Northern California is rarely acknowledged.²⁶

When I searched the ERIC database for the years 1980 to 1990 using the descriptors “teacher education” and “black education,” a mere twenty-seven cites emerged.²⁷ These cites included seven journal articles, ten conference papers, six reports, one book, and three teaching guides. Nine were based on empirical research.

Not one dealt specifically with preparing teachers to teach African American students.

One of the greatest hindrances to finding literature that addresses the needs of teachers of African American students is the language used to describe public school attempts to educate African Americans. As already mentioned, the literature of the 1960s and 1970s is filled with works about teaching the “culturally deprived”²⁸ and disadvantaged.”²⁹ Even when the goal was to improve both student and teacher effectiveness, the use of such terms contributed to a perception of African American students as deprived, deficient, and deviant. Because of this, many proposed educational interventions were designed to remove the students from their homes, communities, and cultures in an effort to mitigate against their alleged damaging effects.³⁰ Educational interventions, in the form of compensatory education (to compensate for the deprivation and disadvantage assumed to be inherent in African American homes and communities), often were based on a view of African American children as deficient white children.

When I was a child, Johnny Cromwell was one of the poorest children in our neighborhood. His parents worked hard at a number of menial jobs but there never seemed to be enough money to go around for him and his two sisters. He often showed up at school unkempt and unwashed. With the cruelty of children, we teased him and called him names. “Hey peasy head. Where’d you get them peas in your head? Is your father a farmer? He’s gonna have a big ole crop of early June peas to pick, just pickin’ at your head!” Although such teasing was very much a ritual of African American childhood, our teachers had a keen sense of when it hit too close to home. Regularly, Johnny was whisked into the teachers’ room where his hair was combed, his face washed, and his disheveled clothes made more presentable. Our teachers understood the need to preserve the little dignity as a student that he had.

By the 1980s the language of deprivation had changed, but the negative connotations remained. According to Cuban, the term *at-risk* is now used to describe certain students and their

families in much the same way that they had been described for almost two hundred years. Cuban further suggests that “the two most popular explanations for low academic achievement of at-risk children locate the problem in the children themselves or in their families.”³¹ Even the Educational Index continues to cross-reference African American student issues with the phrase “culturally deprived.”

Given the long history of the poor academic performance of African American students one might ask why almost no literature exists to address their specific educational needs. One reason is a stubborn refusal in American education to recognize African Americans as a distinct cultural group. While it is recognized that African Americans make up a distinct *racial* group, the acknowledgment that this racial group has a distinct *culture* is still not recognized. It is presumed that African American children are exactly like white children but just need a little extra help. Rarely investigated are the possibilities of distinct cultural characteristics (requiring some specific attention) or the detrimental impact of systemic racism. Thus the reasons for their academic failure continue to be seen as wholly environmental and social. Poverty and lack of opportunity often are presented as the only plausible reasons for poor performance. And the kinds of interventions and remedies proposed attempt to compensate for these deficiencies.

“When you sing in our school choir, you sing as proud Negro children” boomed the voice of Mrs. Benn, my fifth-grade teacher. “Don’t you know that Marian Anderson, a cultured colored woman, is the finest contralto ever? Haven’t you ever heard Paul Robeson sing? It can just take your breath away. We are not shiftless and lazy folk. We are hard-working, God-fearing people. You can’t sing in this choir unless you want to hold up the good name of our people.”

It never occurred to me in those days that African Americans were not a special people. My education both at home and at school reinforced that idea. We were a people who overcame incredible odds.

I knew that we were discriminated against but I witnessed too much competence—and excellence—to believe that African Americans didn't have distinctly valuable attributes.

Hollins has looked carefully at programs and strategies that have demonstrated a level of effectiveness with African American students.³² Her examination suggests that these programs fall into three broad categories—those designed to remediate or accelerate without attending to the students' social or cultural needs; those designed to resocialize African American students to mainstream behaviors, values, and attitudes at the same time that they teach basic skills; and those designed to facilitate student learning by capitalizing on the students' own social and cultural backgrounds.

Falling within the first category are programs like the Chicago Mastery Learning Reading Program, where the focus is on remediation or acceleration in the basic skills.³³ Hollins suggests that such programs, while they pay close attention to pacing, monitoring of instruction, and precise sequencing of objectives, virtually ignore the social or cultural needs of students.

The widely publicized New Haven, Connecticut, program entitled "A Social Skills Curriculum for Inner-City Children" is an example of a program that fits into Hollins's second category.³⁴ This program represents an explicit attempt "to resocialize youngsters viewed as outside the mainstream and to inculcate in them mainstream perceptions and behaviors."³⁵ The philosophy behind such programs resembles that of the compensatory educational models of the 1960s and 1970s in that the children's academic problems are seen to be rooted in the "pathology" of their homes, communities, and cultures. Thus if the children can be removed or isolated from their culture of "deprivation" then the school can transform them into people worthy of inclusion in the society.

Programs in the third category attempt to capitalize on students' individual, group, and cultural differences. Rather than ignoring or minimizing cultural differences, these programs see the differences

as strengths to base academic achievement on. Cummins suggests that students are less likely to fail in school settings where they feel positive about both their own culture and the majority culture and “are not alienated from their own cultural values.”³⁶ The work of Au and Jordan in Hawaii is an example of teachers’ use of the students’ own culture to improve their reading performance.³⁷ Hollins argues that Chicago’s Westside Preparatory School is an example of a program that uses African American culture to improve the students’ academic performance.³⁸

Even putting these programs with underlying agendas to resocialize African American students aside, there is some evidence to suggest more generally that when African American students attempt to achieve in school they do so at a psychic cost.³⁹ Somehow many have come to equate exemplary performance in school with a loss of their African American identity; that is, doing well in school is seen as “acting white.” Thus if they do not want to “act white,” the only option, many believe, is to refuse to do well in school.⁴⁰ Thus they purposely learn how not to learn. In contrast, the opportunity to be excellent academically, socially, and culturally underlies the thinking in many African American immersion schools.⁴¹ When schools support their culture as an integral part of the school experience, students can understand that academic excellence is not the sole province of white middle-class students. Such systems also negate the axiomatic thinking that if doing well in school equals “acting white” then doing poorly equals “acting black.”

I was sent to an integrated junior high school that was not in my neighborhood. I describe it as “integrated” rather than “desegregated” because no court mandates placed black children there. I was there because my mother was concerned about the quality of our neighborhood school.

There were a handful of African American students in my seventh-grade class, but I knew none of them. They lived in a more affluent neighborhood than I did. Their parents had stable blue collar or white

collar jobs. They had gone to better-equipped elementary schools than I had. The white students were even more privileged. Their fathers had impressive jobs as doctors, lawyers—one was a photojournalist. Most of their mothers were homemakers. In contrast, my mother and father both worked full-time. My father often even worked two jobs, yet we still lived more modestly than most of my classmates did.

In seventh grade I learned what it means to be competitive. In elementary school my teachers did not seem to make a big deal out of my academic achievements. They encouraged me but did not hold me up as an example that might intimidate slower students. Although I suspect I was a recipient of a kind of sponsored mobility—perhaps because my mother always sent me to school neat and clean and with my hair combed—I don't think this preferential treatment was obvious to other students. But in my new surroundings the competition was very obvious. Many of my white classmates made a point of showing off their academic skills. Further, their parents actively lent a hand in important class assignments and projects. For example, one boy had horrible penmanship. You could barely read what he scrawled in class, but he always brought in neatly typed homework. I asked him once if he did the typing and he told me that his mother typed everything for him. She also did the typing for his cousin, who was also in our class and had beautiful penmanship. The teachers often commented on the high quality of these typed papers.

I had come from a school where children learned and produced together. This competitiveness, further encouraged by the parents, was new to me. I could attempt to keep up with this unfair competition and “act white” or I could continue to work my hardest and hope that I could still achieve.

A Study of Effective Teaching for African Americans

This book examines effective teaching for African American students and how such teaching has helped students not only

achieve academic success but also achieve that success while maintaining a positive identity as African Americans. It is about the kind of teaching that promotes this excellence despite little administrative or collegial support. It is about the kind of teaching that the African American community has identified as having its children's best interests at heart. It is about the kind of teaching that helps students *choose* academic success.

This book is based on my study of successful teachers of African American students, which was funded by a 1988 postdoctoral grant from the National Academy of Education's Spencer Foundation. I conducted this research during the 1988–89 and 1989–90 school years, with an additional in-depth study of two classrooms in the 1990–91 school year. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position, policy, or endorsement of the National Academy of Education or of the Spencer Foundation.

I make a distinction between *excellent teaching* and *excellent teachers* purposely. Although each of the teachers who participated in my study are superb individually, this book looks at a teaching ideology and common behaviors, not at individual teaching styles. By choosing this path, I lose some of the distinctive and rich personal qualities of these marvelous individuals. However, I sacrifice this richness in favor of a focus on “the art and craft of teaching.”⁴² This focus is important because it minimizes the tendency to reduce the research findings to individual idiosyncrasies and to suggest a “cult-of-personality” explanation for effective teaching. Looking carefully at the teaching, while offering the teachers as exemplars, provides a useful heuristic for teachers and teacher educators who wish to take on the challenge of being successful with African American students.

This book is about teaching practice, not about curriculum. Much of the purported reforms and the debate about our schools focuses on curriculum: What should we teach? Whose version of history should we offer? What priority should different subject

matters be given? But it is *the way we teach* that profoundly affects the way that students perceive the content of that curriculum.

My notions in this domain are strongly aligned with Giroux and Simon's thoughts on critical pedagogy:

Pedagogy refers to a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular sets of social relations. It can be understood as a practice through which people are incited to acquire a particular "moral character." As both a political and practical activity, it attempts to influence the occurrence and qualities of experiences. When one practices pedagogy, one acts with the intent of creating experiences that will organize and disorganize a variety of understandings of our natural and social world in particular ways. . . . Pedagogy is a concept which draws attention to the processes through which knowledge is produced.⁴³

Because of this pedagogical view, I went into the classrooms intending to examine both "the political and the practical." I wanted to see not only why a certain kind of teaching helped the students to be more successful academically but also how this kind of teaching supported and encouraged students to use their prior knowledge to make sense of the world and to work toward improving it.

In the next chapter, I begin to examine the concept of culturally relevant teaching and how it can improve the educational lives of African American students. As is true of most researchers, it is my hope that this research will find broad applicability and be seen as useful for teaching students of any race or ethnicity.

