

AFRICAN AMERICANS' QUEST FOR EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM: A CASE STUDY IN NEWARK'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The United States of America with its “superpower” title that has the capacity to project dominating power and influence anywhere in the world in this global hegemony seems to have everything ahead of other countries. Yet, there are plenty issues that still constrain the people of America in that free country. An equality in education for all citizens is one of them. The pursuit of freedom does not belong to certain minority groups and African Americans is one of them. In this century, it is the racial achievement gap in education that seems to chain African Americans back to their seats without being recognized as the American legal citizen. Thus, not having an opportunity to education due to their skin colors represent a continuing holdback for the pursuit of freedom. This main idea of this essay is inspired by a quote saying, “Education makes us free. The world of knowledge and of the intellect is where all people can meet and converse. Education liberates people from prejudice. It frees the human heart from its violent passions” and discussed by the writer with some approaches; such as historical approach, political approach and a specific perspective of African American presence and influence based on the writer’s background as a graduate student of American Studies program. Thus, education as freedom in the African American historical context is the proper evidence of this journal. The writer narrows down this journal into a certain historical context of the United States of America to give evidence and example of African American thinkers, educators, scholars, and activists have resisted slavery and other forms of oppression through literacy.

Keywords: African Americans, education, freedom

Introduction

African American’s educational history is the story of a conflict between two races due to their historical subordination in the United States of America: Blacks and Whites. This educational history of African Americans started when their ancestors were forced to be enslaved to the New World for nearly 400 years ago. Slaves were kept ignorant to the fact that there were ways in which they could be freed because they didn’t have the resources they needed educationally. The nation of the United States considered Blacks to be inferior because they were not educated and they were treated as merely a property.

Constitutionally, enslaved Africans in the American colonies were classified as “non-persons,” as sub human property, equivalent to livestock. However, nonsensically, there were also laws throughout the American colonies that made both teaching a slave and a slave learning to read, to write, and do math illegal (Foster, 1997). The ability to educate themselves as slaves was revolutionary for it was counted as a crime against the law made by White Americans.

Educated slaves might endanger the owners for those slaves would be able to reclaim a sense of humanity in the face of inhumane circumstances and develop skills of resistance and liberation (Anderson, 2009). This conflict between the races happened because they both knew that slavery was an integral part of the colonial economy in both the North Especially in New York City, economic wealth was primarily dependent upon slave labor and the products produced through slavery until the Civil War and South (Alderman, 1972). From this early educational freedom of African Americans, we can determine that educated slaves could converse their thoughts and rights properly in America.

The search of freedom has shifted following the new “American colonies,” although racism through slavery is no longer allowed, yet African Americans are still facing the similar conditions nowadays. To have an equality in education is a continuous struggle, a discrimination towards skin colors has not vanished yet. It is just changing into another form in our modern world; a conflicted racial gap of achievement based on quality of education.

Quoted from *Black Education: A Transformative Research and Action Agenda for the New Century*, Black education is synonymous with underachievement and academic failure for their fundamental roots of the crisis in Black education in the U.S. This stereotyping is taken from the painful reality that African Americans are historically delayed and forced to be less human, therefore less educate compared to the White Americans.

American Dream Values with a Gap

American society has been introduced to an ideal concept namely *American Dream* since the eighteenth century which was taken from *the Declaration of Independence*. The term of this American Dream promotes that all men are created equal, endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Therefore, American

Dream brings out the most important value in American society that is the liberty of American people that they could reach anything as they will without differentiated by any kinds of family and economical background. As long as they are eager to work hard, they may change their condition from the common man into the superior one. This concept finally becomes the character traits of American society which emphasize on perseverance, industry, frugality, sobriety, punctuality, reliability, thoroughness, and initiative (Dinurriyah, 2010).

Many years have passed through various struggles for an equality of American citizens, yet the reality of American society is still reflecting the same conflict. The conflict is represented by the wealth gap between White and Black families in the United States of America. According to Heather Beth Johnson in her work entitled *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth: Choosing Schools and Inheriting Inequality in the Land of Opportunity*, she explained that

The concept of an increasing Black-White wealth gap in the present-day United States is a hard pill for college students to swallow, not because it reveals that inequality exists—they know that it does—but because it implies a fracture in the American Dream, a recognition of real advantage and disadvantage being passed along categorically to each new generation (Johnson, 2006).

Thus, it can be defined that the racial gap in the United States has contributed to disparities in education. With lower

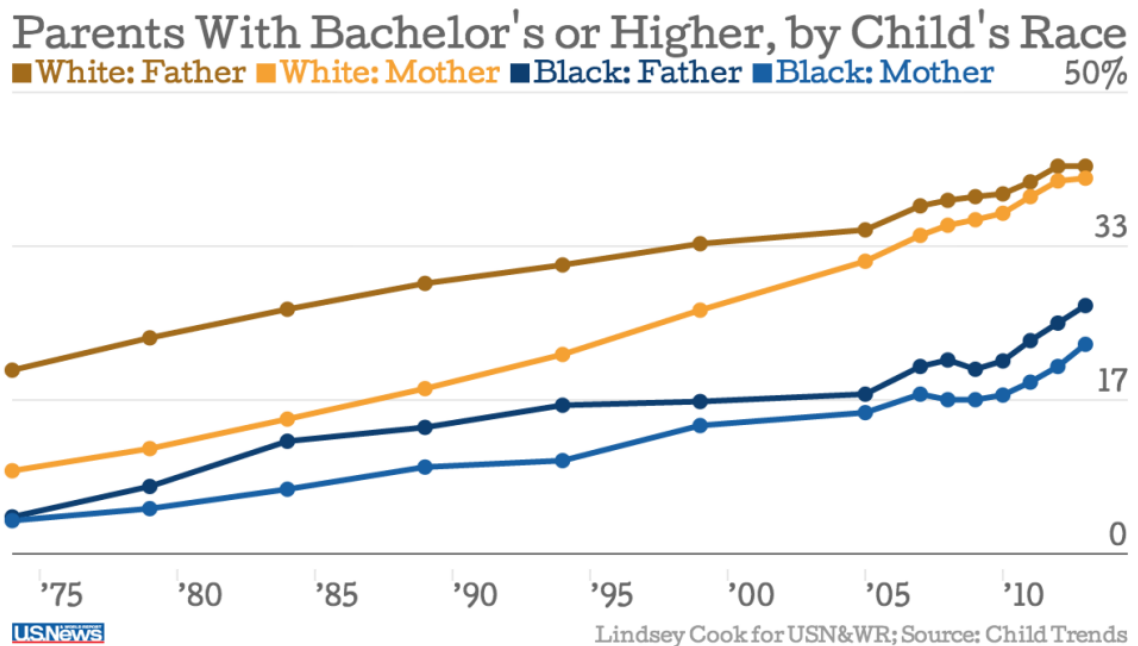
wealth, lower health, lower parental education levels create a perfect storm that leaves Blacks without the same educational opportunities as Whites (Cook, 2015).

U.S. Education: Still Separate and Unequal

The notion “U.S. Education: Still Separate and Unequal” is quoted from Lindsey Cook, the data editor for news at U.S. news & world report whom made an article about the inequality of American education towards minority group, African Americans to be exact. Compared to other countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD), the United States has spent significantly more on education for spending 39 percent more per full-time student for elementary and secondary education than the average for other countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

However, Cook said that the money does not translate to better educational outcomes. The reality bites as American education is still rife with problems, starting with the gaping differences between White students and students of color: more than 60 years after Brown vs. Board of Education, school systems in the United States are separate and unequal. According to Child Trends, the America’s leading nonprofit research organization focused exclusively on improving the lives and prospects of children, youth, and their families, by 2022, the number of Hispanic students in public elementary and secondary schools is projected to grow 33 percent from the 2011 numbers. The number of multi-racial students is expected to grow 44 percent.

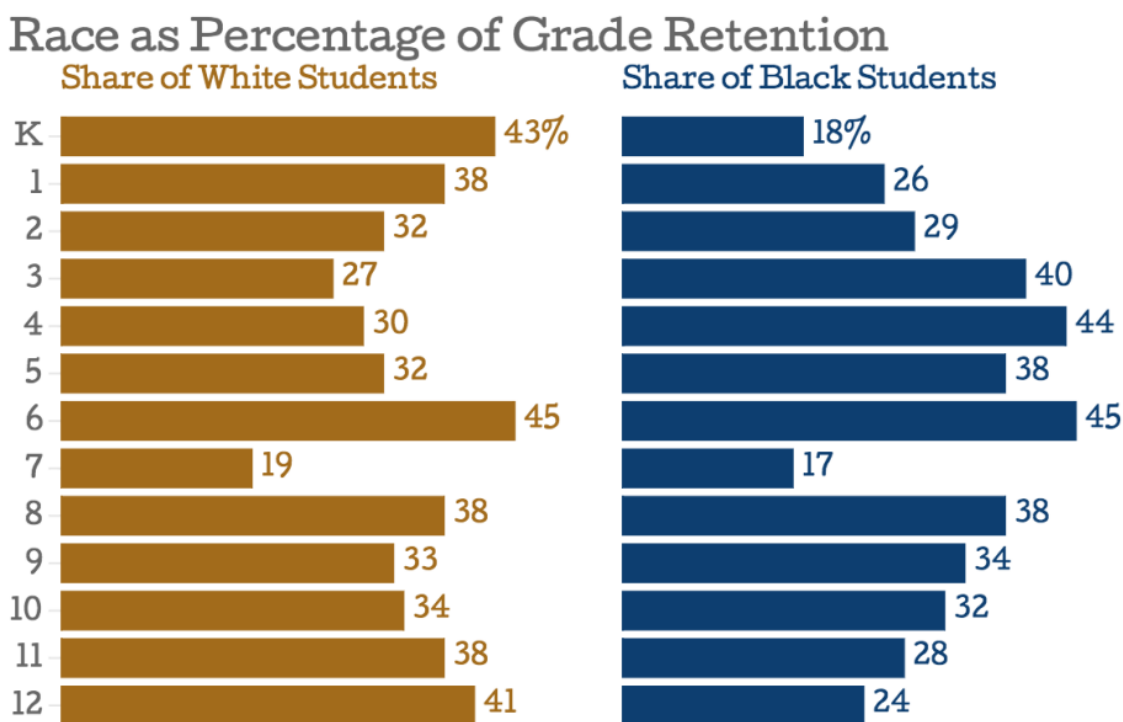
Figure 1: Parental education level based on child’s race



As in realities, disparities are shown and started much early, in kindergarten. A report from the *Forum on Child and Family Statistics* elaborates that black students entering kindergarten for the first time score lower than their counterparts in reading, mathematics, science, cognitive flexibility and approaches to learning and every category was tested. Unfortunately, the educational gaps persist throughout schooling, at fourth, eight and 12th grades. Moreover, on the SAT, black students had a mean

score of 428 for critical reading and 428 for math, compared with mean scores for white students of 527 for critical reading and 536 for math (Cook, 2015).

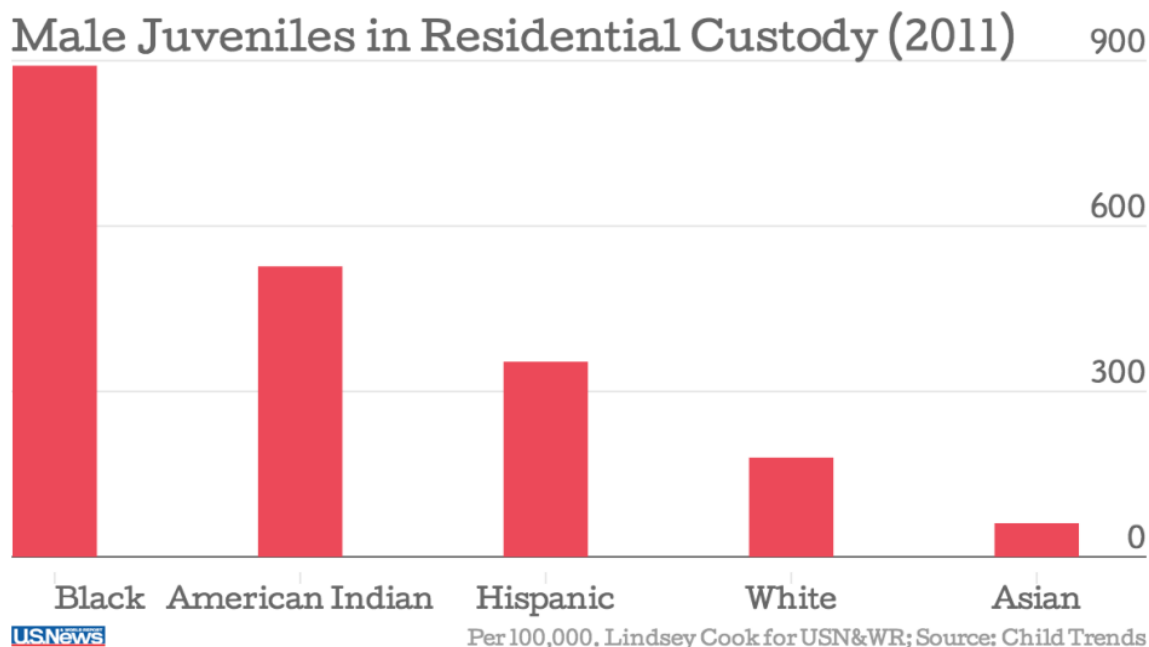
Figure 2: Both White and Black students in many grade levels



USNews

Lindsey Cook for USN&WR; Source: U.S. Department of Education

Figure 3: Racial disparities of male juveniles in residential custody



USNews

As a research center that tracks data about children, Child Trends has brought us an ugly truth about this racial gap which is actually rooted from a different starting line. An increasing Black-White educational gap in the present-day United States is not only about certain individuals who own less or have achieved more than others, in Johnson's opinion, it is also about admitting that the whole groups of people are increasingly privileged or constrained by their families' wealth histories meaning that

inequalities are somehow happening systematically. The wealth gap then leads to many life aspects, especially to education which historically had helped African Americans to be free from American bondage in the slavery era. The importance of education then has showed us numerous life-changing events to this oppressed community.

Black parents with their less opportunities in the earlier years to study, get a job and have proper civil rights, do not expect their children to attain as much education as White parents expect due to their own uneducated experiences in American education. Black parents may have less access to materials, have less time because of job and family obligations or be less comfortable reading. While the average number of words read correctly per minute for White adults with basic reading skills was 102, for Blacks it was 85. Children's books also may not be as interesting to Black children (or their parents) because of the lack of diversity in them: While about half of children under 5 are non-White, characters in children's books are overwhelmingly White.

Even though the civil rights battle has been passing by over 50 years ago, but the fact that race and class inequality is still happening systematically, and that in fact an historic cleavage such as the racial wealth gap is getting deeper shows significant sociostructural problems have yet to be solved, and to suspect that there is something wrong with the system (Johnson, 2006).

Case in Newark, New Jersey

African Americans have been fighting for their rights in a very long and perpetuating history of racism in America. From the rights to be a citizen who is free from slavery to the rights to have quality education in this century. Nonetheless, being an African American at this moment is nothing much different from the history of segregation in the 1960s back then. One of the great historical events of African Americans was represented through Civil Rights Movements where Black Power movement was established bigger and stronger and Newark was actually a big part of it.

Newark has been known for hosting the first-ever Black Power Conference in 1967 which had 1,300 representatives of 190 African American organizations gathered to discuss the state of Black America, foster unity among the disparate groups coming from thirty-nine states, and plot a course for empowerment (Allen, 1969). Thus, Newark should have had better opportunities for Blacks to earn their rights to education. However, Newark has been facing up an inconvenient truth: poorest neighborhoods, disproportionately African American, contain some of the lowest-performing public schools in the country for a long time (Anderson, 2014).

Cami Anderson, a state-appointed superintendent of Newark public school system, said that Newark is failing miserably due to its achievement gap that separates economically disadvantaged students and students of color from their more advantaged peers is real and the facts in Newark are especially stark. The disadvantages are social and economic where most of Black students live in poverty with a host of associated conditions which contribute to depress student performance. This reality is taken from Richard Rothstein's publication in *Race and Social Problems: The Racial Achievement Gap, Segregated Schools, and Segregated Neighborhoods – A Constitutional Insult*:

Schools that the most disadvantaged Black children attend are segregated because they are located in segregated high-poverty neighborhoods, far distant from truly middle-class neighborhoods. Living in such high-poverty neighborhoods for multiple generations adds an additional barrier to achievement, and multigenerational segregated poverty characterizes many African American children today (Rothstein, 2014).

The segregated housings lead to segregated schools which means that education policy is constrained by housing policy. This policy reminds us about how the ignorance of nation's racial history has become so conventional for policymakers to assert that the residential isolation of low-income Black children, based on Rothstein to be "de facto," the accident of economic circumstance, demographic trends, personal preference, and private discrimination.

In Newark, Fewer than half of all Newark students are reading on grade level. George Tillman described Newark as "the strange new world where faraway strangers with private money determine the future of public education (Braun, 2014)". This daily life event is quoted from Bob Braun's investigation through his *Bob Braun's Ledger* website where Tillman's five children are being dispersed to five different schools for Newark and Essex County's rotted infrastructure of school segregation. As an African American father of five children in Newark, Tillman announced lawsuit against state-operated school district and state-appointed Cami Anderson to create a regionalized school district where Black and White children attend school together, and end forever the scam of charter schools, private schools created to buy off the damage done by keeping Black school children isolated and away from resources that could guarantee them educational equity.

Figure 4: George Tillman, father of five children in five different schools because of Cami Anderson



This case was known as *Carole Graves vs. the State Operated School District of Newark, and Cami Anderson*, state superintendent of schools—and probably will be known in the future the shorthand caption, *Graves vs. Anderson*, an historic name given Carole Graves role as the president of the Newark Teachers Union from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s (Rothstein, 2014). Being a superintendent, Anderson was sued for her implementation on “One Newark” plan which was supposed to “reform” public schools by closing neighborhood schools and replacing them with privatized charter or other schools—some of them called “renew” schools.

What really happened was that the closure of those neighborhood schools had huge impacts on African Americans more than any other ethnic group because African-American students made up 53.4 percent of the student enrollment in 2011-2012 school year. The closing of a neighborhood school is tantamount to neighborhood busting as the local school is much more than a center for learning, it’s a symbol of sociability, vitality and permanence for many families. The failure of this program was located at the proper calculation of Newark’s population which were dominated by African Americans at the neighborhood schools. The number of minorities were not being counted for properly for certain reasons. Then it comes to another prejudice whether the government just made another mistake towards African Americans’ need or the issue of racism is still there, thus being ignorant was a form of racism over African Americans.

Furthermore, the lawsuit against Newark’s superintendent implied the state-operated district’s failure to follow the law creating charter schools to replace the diminished neighborhood schools and seek to end the relentless conversation of public neighborhood to privately operated charter schools, most of which are operated by national chains like the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), a nationwide network of free open-enrollment college-preparatory schools (under charter schools laws) and Uncommon Schools, a non-profit charter public school managed and operated in the United States that starts and manages urban schools for low-income students (Uncommon Schools, 2016).

Newark’s Mayor Ras J. Baraka has been asking the superintendent, Cami Anderson, to resign from her job in Newark’s public school district. Baraka wrote a letter on January 12th, 2015 to Anderson, asking her to resign because of her “blatant disregard” for the Newark community she serves (Nix, 2015). Baraka wrote about Anderson’s manipulation of state control of Newark Public Schools to usurp the rights of Newark residents to have input into the governance of the public schools in Newark.

The Mayor’s criticisms of Anderson’s leadership of the school district including the failure to provide adequate services to students with disabilities, not working with the Newark Public Schools Advisory board, and creating a “hostile” environment for district employees. This hostile environment was led to education which often to be a highly politicized issue to our civilization (Paige & Witty, 2010). Education has not only been a tool for liberating human existence and African Americans have been trying to educate their children and fought to discredit the lies that Blacks were an “indolent and shiftless” race (Anderson, 2009), but also as a politicized weapon to oppress Blacks through an educational freedom.

Ras J. Baraka, the Mayor of Newark, has been trying to see the need of education from his perspective where other races seem to be ignorant to see and comprehend African Americans. This is where African American leaders is required to put forth a concerned effort to truly understand the problem of Blacks education in “White” America (Paige & Witty, 2010). Experiencing many social and political movements regarding education, African Americans now are trying to illuminate the power of ideas and actions for the advancement of Black education in the United States and abroad (2009).

Therefore, the goals of racial equality and social justice in America is better be responded by acknowledging that the Black-White achievement gap and then continued to do something about it to emphasize the need to go deeper than just merely

awareness. Just like the lawsuit against Newark's superintendent Anderson and the firm demand on a letter resignation to the state through its political actor, such as the state appointed superintendent Anderson.

The Rise of Black Identity and Black Consciousness from Educational Freedom

The end of Civil War in the United States marked an end to slavery in 1865. However, the education for Blacks was still very difficult to earn until Booker T. Washington, an African American educator appeared. Washington did what no one had done before him; he helped create an educational system for Blacks in the South. He helped to establish the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute and it was the main voice of the Black community until his death in 1915. The Tuskegee Institute helped to create many teachers and skilled craftsman who could hand down their skills to younger generations. Booker T. Washington's vision for the future was very brilliant in seeing that the main way for Blacks to gain more freedom was by obtaining more education in their community.

Not only did African Americans grow more economically stronger, but the Tuskegee Institute helped to sow the seeds of change. A new generation of activists for change grew to become more educated and helped to inspire change after Booker T. Washington such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and W.E.B. Dubois. These men would have never had the opportunities they had if it were not for the things that Booker T. Washington did for the African American community's education. This new generation eventually became the civil rights movement, which turned the entire United States segregationist movement on its back and changed the politics of America to finally consider African Americans' rights to vote and had official rights (Mosley, 2009).

Up to nowadays, African Americans have been making strong public arguments about the value of education to their community and they also have been exhibiting that value through their own achievements. The intellectual and institutional contributions can be appreciated clearly through Barack Obama, the first Black President of the United States.

As the first Black President of the United States, Barack Obama showed and proved that the acquisition of education has changed the fortunes of African Americans in the United States. He has reached the highest position in the country because of the great education he has received at the several institutions, including Harvard, which he has attended. His education would never have been possible without all the things that his predecessors did to get African Americans where we are today. Obama has also shown America what an African American can do when he or she gets a great education. Therefore, for Blacks, the fight for education has led them to free themselves from the horrible past of slavery, liberates them from negative stereotypes given to the Blacks and let them meet their American dream.

Conclusion

As Paige and Witty mentioned in their work entitled *The Black-White Achievement Gap: Why Closing It Is the Greatest Civil Rights Issue of Our Time*, the African American unfinished journey from chattel slavery to racial equality and social justice in America has been, and continues to be a long and arduous struggle. This journey is just taking into another form of barrier, which is the Black-White achievement gap. When Americans talk about their achievement gap, the main issue is actually located on African Americans' acceptance to recognize their gap as a civil rights problem. This problem is forming into a school desegregation struggle for Blacks.

School desegregation struggles have been said by one of the originators of critical race theory, Derrick Bell, to be an emblematic of conflict and competition over resources as they are about the quest for racial justice through education. The United States of America was founded on the creed of establishing and protecting liberty; democracy, including the idea that all people should be given equal rights before the law. However, American history has given quite complicated politics of protest in education where there is a greater push for Black schools with curriculum and teaching centered on supporting excellence and positive racial identity (Anderson & Kharem, 2009).

Therefore, African Americans educational freedom means the struggle of African American rights which they have been seeking through education in order to establish a way out of today's crisis in American education based on their skin color. This study is also supported by Joyce E. King, who mentioned in the Preface of *Black Education: A Transformative Research and Action Agenda for the New Century*, this African Americans quest to freedom is related closely to their truthful, equitable, and culturally appropriate education as education in this globalized culture is understood to be a basic human right. Not only as a condition of Black people's individual success and collective survival but is also fundamental to civilization and human freedom.

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