

T H E R E S A P E R R Y

UP FROM THE PARCHED EARTH: TOWARD A THEORY OF AFRICAN- AMERICAN ACHIEVEMENT

Sylvia was strikingly beautiful. She had dark chocolate skin, coal black hair. She was built, too. The fact that she was smart had undoubtedly eluded her as she made her way through one of the city's public high schools. Her beauty and shapeliness hadn't. She was now a go-go dancer at one of the night spots in her Midwestern town. The story goes that one night, as she came down from the stage where she was dancing, she spotted the admissions counselor for the Educational Opportunity Program at one of the city's large private universities. "I want to go to school," she said. He responded, "You'll have to come and see me in my office to talk about how you can apply for the program." Five years later, this woman, who had graduated sixty-ninth out of eighty from what was then known as one of the worst high schools in the city, would have to decide between acceptances at the master's of public health programs at Yale, Harvard, and Boston University. She chose Yale, and upon graduation she became the first director of minority health care for her state.

I knew Tanya as a student when I taught at one of the two Black Catholic high schools in Birmingham, Alabama. My most persistent image is of her alternately checking out her pimples and fixing her hair, both with the aid of a small handheld mirror. I also knew that her family was often on the run from her abusive father, packing up in the night and going somewhere—anywhere—to get away. Thirty years later, at a reunion of graduates of the Educational Opportunity Pro-

gram, now a professor of communications at a community college, she speaks, still with her southern accent, about how the program saved her life. She reminds us that at the time when her father was abusing her mother, nobody was talking much about domestic violence, especially in our southern Black community.

When Janice was about to go to law school, her oldest sister was about to go off to prison. We—that is, most of the program staff—had put money together (I think it came to five hundred dollars) so she could buy clothes for law school. “I got a nerve to be trying to go to law school with no clothes,” she said, even as she excitedly showed us the clothes she had bought. She did attend and graduate from a top-twenty law school. She is now a practicing attorney. We now know that she could have also become a world-class runner, as we have over the years watched her consistently win track meets in her age group. But running was not then on her radar screen or ours, except as an activity she was attracted to as she tried to emulate the life and style of one of the program staff. At the same thirty-year reunion, the lawyer/runner reminisced about the wonderful events that came with being a member of the program’s prelaw society. And more than once she reminded us that it was not simply the prelaw society, but the Third World Prewlaw Society.

He was steadfast, hardworking; he wanted to be a doctor. His first-semester grades would have convinced most students and college faculty that, for him, being a physician was nothing more than a pipe dream. A summer at the New York City Department of Health working with a research team; participation in the Harvard Health Careers summer program (all arranged by program staff), along with supplementary instruction in math and science; a healthy dose of program rhetoric (“You guys are going to be the leaders of this community”); and five years later Jeremy enrolled in Harvard Medical School. His is now one of the largest community-based health clinics in his city. As he had always dreamed of doing, he is providing excellent health care to Latinos in the city, to his people.

There are the brothers, one a gynecologist, the other a history professor; Dwayne, the brilliant and compassionate assistant principal of an alternative high school; Gloria, by most accounts the most

effective and the most progressive state legislator; John and David, entrepreneurs, one local, the other national. I could go on—but you get the point. The program these young people participated in, the Educational Opportunity Program, normalized high academic achievement for students who were mainly African-American, all first-generation college students, some of whom before entering the program did not have the skills, behaviors, beliefs, or identities required for high academic achievement. What was there about this program, this carefully constructed environment, that made it possible for program staff to routinely participate in the transformation of students into high academic achievers? How did the program help students redefine who they were and who they wanted to be? And perhaps most important, what were the tacit understandings, embraced and enacted by program staff, of what it would take for the mainly African-American and all first-generation college students to be high achievers?

I write this essay not only because of my experience as one of the individuals who worked in and helped to shape aspects of this program, but also because there are schools and programs all over the United States in which African-American youth routinely achieve at high levels. At these institutions, being working-class or poor, having parents who have not gone to college, being poorly prepared academically, being African-American—these variables are not impediments to academic achievement. Why are these institutions able to promote academic achievement among African-American students while so many other institutions are not? This is one of the questions that I will attempt to address.

I am also interested in trying to understand African-American school achievement, from the inside out, from the perspective of African-American youth as thinking, feeling, and social and intentional beings. What are the extra psychosocial and cognitive competencies that are required of African Americans, precisely because they are African-American, in order for them to achieve at high levels in school?

This essay is exploratory in nature. It will focus on the development of a theory of African-American achievement with sufficient power to explain and predict achievement across different environments. It is concerned with the development of a theory of African-

American achievement that is grounded in and predicated on an understanding of what it is we are asking African-American youth to do when we ask them to commit themselves, over time, to academic achievement in the context of the American school. In other words, I would argue that before we can theorize African-American school achievement, we need to have an understanding of what the nature of the task of achievement is for African Americans *as African Americans*.

For many educators and scholars, understandably, particularly those individuals who are committed to rejecting specious arguments about Black inferiority, this question is rarely addressed. It could even be a dangerous question. The focus on the specificity of the task of achievement for African Americans could easily be recast as a conversation about the intellectual deficiencies of African-American youth, and equally problematic, could undermine the liberal notion that progressive educational practices are color-blind.

The prevailing assumption among many educators is that the task of achievement for African Americans as a group is the same as it is for any other group. African-American children have to be able to do what all other children have to be capable of doing in order to achieve in American schools. These individuals proceed on the assumption that beyond individual differences—which they usually willingly concede particularize the task of learning—if you know what works for the white child, then you know what will work for the Black child. Indeed, there are generalizable competencies required of and embedded in the learning tasks students are asked to perform in school. But since learning is fundamentally contextual, I would argue that there are extra social, emotional, cognitive, and political competencies required of African-American youth, precisely because they are African-American, if they are to be able to commit themselves over time to perform at high levels in school. My argument is that the task of academic achievement for African Americans in the context of school in the United States of America is distinctive. In this essay, I will argue that the following dilemmas that many African-American students face make the task of achievement distinctive:

How do I commit myself to achieve, to work hard over time in school, if I cannot predict (in school or out of school) when or under what circumstances this hard work will be acknowledged and recognized?

How do I commit myself to do work that is predicated on a belief in the

power of the mind, when African-American intellectual inferiority is so much a part of the taken-for-granted notions of the larger society that individuals in and out of school, even good and well-intentioned people, individuals who purport to be acting on my behalf, routinely register doubts about my intellectual competence?

How can I aspire to and work toward excellence when it is unclear whether or when evaluations of my work can or should be taken seriously?

Can I invest in and engage my full personhood, with all of my cultural formations, in my class, my work, my school if my teachers and the adults in the building are both attracted to and repulsed by these cultural formations—the way I walk, the way I use language, my relationship to my body, my physicality, and so on?

Will I be willing to work hard over time, given the unpredictability of my teachers' responses to my work?

Can I commit myself to work hard over time if I know that, no matter what I or other members of my reference group accomplish, these accomplishments are not likely to change how I and other members of my group are viewed by the larger society, or to alter our castelike position in the society? I still will not be able to get a cab. I still will be followed in department stores. I still will be stopped when I drive through certain neighborhoods. I still will be viewed as a criminal, a deviant, and an illiterate.

Can I commit myself to work hard, to achieve in a school, if cultural adaptation effectively functions as a prerequisite for skill acquisition, where “the price of the ticket” is separation from the culture of my reference group?

These are some of the dilemmas that African-American children, youth—and yes, even adults—face as they attempt to commit themselves to high academic achievement. It is these dilemmas, and more, that fundamentally alter the nature of the task of achievement for African Americans, rendering it distinctive, requiring extra social and cognitive competencies.

The task of achievement, I would argue, is distinctive for African Americans because doing school requires that you use your mind, and the ideology of the larger society has always been about questioning the mental capacity of African Americans, about questioning Black intellectual competence. The task of achievement requires investment over time, being “in there.” It essentially demands that you be capable of bringing to the task who you are socially and emotionally and physically. And the only way you can do this is to bring your full

sociocultural person to the task. The task of achievement requires that you and others believe that the intellectual work that you engage in affirms you as a social being and is compatible with who you are.

Further, and perhaps most important, evidence from history and the African-American narrative tradition suggests that African Americans have understood the distinctive nature of the task of achievement. And out of their lived experience, from slavery to the dismantling of segregated schools, they have developed and enacted a philosophy of education that was capable of providing answers to some of the aforementioned queries. This philosophy was freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship, and leadership.

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND THE CONTEMPORARY CONVERSATION ABOUT AFRICAN-AMERICAN ACHIEVEMENT

Writing on African-American school achievement at this time necessarily inserts one into the national conversation about the achievement gap. Many individuals, Black and white, practitioners, activists, educational leaders, and policy makers—situated in urban school districts; in progressive college towns; in upper-income, multiracial, liberal communities; in state houses and at the federal level—are engaged in a conversation about Black school achievement. The more things change, the more they stay the same—which is to say that the contemporary public conversations about Black school achievement, like virtually all past conversations about African-American school performance, remain focused on underachievement. Today it is termed the *achievement gap*.

There are aspects of the contemporary national conversation about the achievement gap that are problematic. Most prominently these include the failure to include alongside the data about African-American underachievement information about environments that promote high achievement among African Americans; the failure to acknowledge that this experiment with democracy, as it is applied to African Americans, is only about thirty years old. For if one considers the long and persistent denial and limiting of educational opportunity to African Americans, and African Americans' corresponding achievements, the historically grounded and educationally useful

question is, “How have African Americans, over generations, succeeded in maintaining their commitment to education and producing a leadership and intellectual class?”

The contemporary conversation about the achievement gap can be characterized as follows: On whatever measure one uses, from the SAT to the Stanford Nine, in school districts and schools across the country, irrespective of political orientation, demographic characteristics, or per-pupil spending, there exists a gap between the academic performance of Black and Latino students on the one hand and white and Asian-American students on the other. This gap exists even between Black and white children who ostensibly come from similar social-class backgrounds and who attend the same school. As a matter of fact, in a report prepared by the College Board, the most recent analysis of SAT scores reveals that middle-class Black students perform no better than poor white students. This analysis also reveals that the gap between Black middle-class and white middle-class students is larger than the gap in the performance between poor white and poor Black students (College Board 1999).

To make matters worse, especially for die-hard integrationists, school districts that have prided themselves on being liberal, politically progressive towns, multiracial communities, good places for Blacks to live, with excellent school systems, report the same achievement gap. Some of these communities, twelve to be exact, acknowledging the problem and determined to find and share solutions, have organized themselves into what has come to be known as the Minority Achievement Network. The group includes college towns Amherst, Massachusetts; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Madison, Wisconsin; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Evanston, Illinois; Berkeley, California; as well as Oak Park, Illinois; Shaker Heights, Ohio; Montclair, New Jersey; and others. In the Nyack, New York, school district, which has many of the same demographic characteristics as the districts that are part of the Minority Achievement Network, a group of Black and white parents who for years have been trying to get the district to pay attention to the gap in achievement recently released a report that documented the underenrollment of Blacks in honors and advanced-placement classes, their disproportionately higher rates of suspension and enrollment in special-needs classes, and significantly lower grade point averages.

Policy makers at the state and federal levels have also gotten into the mix. As a way to develop policies that might compel communities to address the achievement gap, several states, following Texas's lead, are considering requiring that school performance data be broken out by race and class. Further, and this is the rub, they are considering requiring that schools be evaluated not simply on average performance scores, but on whether a school has been able to promote achievement among Black, Latino, and poor children. The requirement that states and communities break out achievement data according to these criteria recently became an issue in congressional discussions about a proposed education bill, with members of the Senate worrying that a requirement to report data in this manner would cause schools that had previously been known as *good* schools now to be assessed as *underperforming* schools.

Notwithstanding the seemingly good intentions, the desire to improve African-American school performance, and the common-sense notion that the first step for a district committed to improving African-American academic performance is acknowledging that there is a problem, this conversation will almost surely reinforce the national ideology about Black intellectual inferiority. And, as such, the conversation is likely to be the location of yet another narrative that further undermines how African-American students are seen by others and by themselves. As Tasha Persaud noted in a *New York Times* article about the achievement gap (November 14, 1999), "If your doctor told you you can't run anymore, would you go out and run? If someone says again and again that you can't achieve, you don't even try." Although this conversation does not explicitly assert that Black students can't achieve, it is about their underachievement, and in a society where the dominant ideology is about Black intellectual inferiority, the conversation could have the effect that Tasha speaks about.

Furthermore, a review of newspaper articles about the achievement gap reveals that even as some of these articles identify tracking and teacher expectations as possible causes for underachievement, most give greater attention to variables that reside in Black families, students, and communities. The achievement gap is attributed to a peer culture that doesn't value achievement, and worse, one that associates school achievement with being white. Black students don't achieve because they spend less time doing homework and more time

watching television than their white and Asian counterparts. Just as hip-hop culture is blamed for violence, it also is identified as one of the possible reasons for the achievement gap. The collective message is unfortunately similar to the assertion of a White Nyack parent, who in response to the report on Black underachievement commented, “The Nyack schools and [their] professionals are not responsible for the failures of the home, the conduct of absent child-bearers, or irresponsible and immoral and criminal parents . . . What are the homes like? What are the parents like? Do kids get a hot meal at the end of the day?” We have to face the fact that if we are going to have this public conversation about African-American student achievement, it will inevitably become a conversation that blames Black parents, Black students, and the Black community. The danger is that it will become yet another location for the recycling of the ideology of African-American moral, cultural, and intellectual deficiency.

The conversation about African-American achievement is problematic because it fails to begin with a careful examination of all aspects of the school, with an eye toward understanding *how* the school’s day-to-day practices participate in the creation of underachievement. As a grandparent of a Head Start student in rural Louisiana observed years ago, “If the corn don’t grow, nobody don’t ask what’s wrong with the corn.”* We need to examine how race affects the reproduction of inequality in an allegedly open and integrated setting.

Which leads me to one of the possibilities contained in this conversation. As flawed as this conversation might be, it could provide a space for the introduction of race into public discussions about school and school reform. The conversation could provide a context that allows us to grapple with the notion that not all racial minorities occupy the same political position in this society, that their respective cultures have different meanings, that racial minorities occupy different spaces in the American psyche. The conversation might force an examination of the particular ways in which racism is embedded in “liberal” integrated educational settings. It might prompt discussions about Black achievement that foreground the racial and cultural identities of African Americans, discussions that do what I am attempting

*This story was told to me many years ago by Lisa Delpit. It emerged from her work with Head Start in Louisiana.

to do in this essay: focus on the particular nature of the task of achievement for African Americans, given our history, culture, and political location.

In part 1 of this essay, I will argue that over generations African Americans understood that the task of achievement was distinctive, and that out of their lived experience they developed a theory of knowledge and a philosophy of education that was capable of responding to the dilemmas of achievement embedded in this task. I will maintain that the philosophy of education—freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship, and leadership—over the years has been encoded in the African-American narrative tradition. This philosophy of education was, at the same moment, both transcendent and grounded, and powerful enough to provide answers to those enduring dilemmas that plague African Americans as they have attempted to commit themselves to academic achievement.

In part 2, I will engage in a critical analysis of two theoretical models that have been used in discussing the school achievement of racial minorities: the cultural difference and social mobility theories. Like the philosophy of education developed by African Americans, these models foreground social group identity in discussing school achievement. The purpose of this analysis is to identify aspects of these theories that can be used in developing a theory of African-American achievement.

In part 3, after contrasting the task of achievement for African Americans in the pre- and post-Civil Rights eras, I will present an outline of a theory of African-American achievement. I will finally discuss the implications of this theory for educational practices and for families, schools, community-based organizations, and churches.