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The Education of Black Americans: An Historic Example

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Public education in America is receiving pervasive attention as a result of several reports recommending reform. The best and most persuasive of these include *A Nation At Risk*, *Making The Grade*, and *Action For Excellence*.¹ While each of these documents directly assesses the state of education nationally, the role and contributions of education for Black Americans are ignored. The diversified and compelling record of Black people for excellence in education goes unnoticed and unacknowledged in the present surge of interest in our nation's schools.

Given this void, it is fitting and highly pertinent to study Black Americans' faith in education as a key to the future and their appreciation of education as a "core value." The purposes of this essay are to explore the concept of education as a "core value" for Black people and to apply this concept to an historic era, the post-Civil War period of 1865-1900.

In his book, *Black Self-Determination*, V. P. Franklin maintains that Black Americans have developed a distinct "core Black culture" that found its roots in slavery. Certain values "remained relevant . . . and . . . became 'core values' of the Afro-American experience."² These include freedom, resistance, self-determination, and education, where education became linked with an aspiration for liberty. "Freedom and education were inextricably bound together in the cultural value system that devel-

oped among Afro-Americans enslaved in the United States."³ Frederick Douglass eloquently expressed the importance of literacy to the slave when he wrote that education was "the pathway from slavery to freedom."⁴

The core value of education for Black people was addressed in the period from Emancipation to 1900; it was during this time that industrial education was both highlighted and challenged. The ascendancy of Black educators who favored industrial rather than academic education reflected the persistent notion that education was meant to be utilitarian. The education of Black people after the Civil War was a major issue which derived its urgency from the need to integrate large numbers of former slaves into American society.⁵

On a September day in 1895, a young Black teacher emerged from the South offering a solution. With one stroke, with one speech, Booker Taliaferro Washington was able to captivate the American people and become "the national Negro leader."⁶ Speaking in Atlanta, Georgia, during a period of degenerating racial relations, Washington not only spoke to the white concerns about social equality, but he also asked Black people to "cast down your bucket in agriculture and mechanics." He argued that there was "as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem." Washington offered an economic means to achieve status for his people through industrial education: "Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour and put brain and skill into the common occupations of life . . ."⁷

The core value of industrial education for Black people had a long history even before Washington emerged as

a national figure; evidence is found as early as the latter part of the eighteenth century. Sentiment for this type of education was stimulated by the emergence of the Negro Convention Movement (1831-1858). Beginning in 1831, free Blacks in the North met annually in state and national conventions to discuss their problems and formulate plans for racial equality. In 1832, a national convention supported a manual labor college and at the 1848 Cleveland convention, Frederick Douglass called upon Black people to "get your sons into mechanic trades." Five years later Douglass urged his people to "Learn Trades or Starve."⁸ In phraseology remarkably similar to that of Booker T. Washington a half-century later, Douglass urged:

We must show that we can *do* as well as be; and to this end we must learn trades. When we can build as well as live in houses; when we can *make* as well as wear shoes; when we can produce as well as conserve wheat, corn and rye—then we shall become valuable to society. . . . The fact is, the means of living must precede education; or in other words, the education of the hands must precede that of the head.⁹

The pre-Civil War sentiment for industrial education for Blacks was part of a national movement toward vocational education and industrial training. Included were manual labor colleges in the 1820s and 1830s and early technical schools such as Rennselaer in New York State (1824), the Lawrence Scientific School founded at Harvard in 1847, and the Sheffield School established at Yale University in the same year.¹⁰ The Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862, providing for federal aid to agricultural and mechanical colleges, boosted industrial education, but its direct effect upon education for Black people was delayed. Only four Black schools received land grant funds before 1890, when a second Morrill Act mandated that such institutions receive a share of the assistance made available to each state.¹¹

After the Civil War, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, created in 1865 to centralize the federal responsibility for the care of newly freed slaves (freedmen), and various missionary societies also pleaded the cause of industrial education. The Freedmen's Bureau, as it was commonly called, operated thirty-five industrial schools for Blacks in the South by 1867.¹² As early as 1864, a number of missionary societies established industrial schools in the South where trades were taught to foster independence and self-reliance. Prominent among the missionary groups that advocated industrial education during the Reconstruction period was the American Missionary Association (AMA) founded by abolitionists in the Congregational Church in 1846. The AMA inaugurated "ambitious programs of industrial education" in three of its sponsored schools between 1868 and 1871, including an influential effort at Hampton Institute.¹³

Hampton Agricultural and Normal Institute was founded under AMA auspices by Samuel Chapman Armstrong at Hampton, Virginia in 1868. He was born in 1839 and reared in Hawaii where his father, a missionary, conducted the Hilo Manual Labor School for native Hawai-

ians. Armstrong came to the United States in 1860, became a colonel of a Black regiment in the Civil War, and agent of the Freedmen's Bureau after the war.¹⁴ The AMA appointed him principal of its new school at Hampton, which became an independent normal and industrial school in 1872, the year that Booker T. Washington entered as a student.

In implementing the manual labor idea, Armstrong initially established a farm and several industries. These work situations gave students manual labor experience and also provided them the opportunity to earn all or part of their school expenses.¹⁵ This practice underscored the school's pithy formula—"Salvation by work".¹⁶ Armstrong placed especially strong emphasis on agricultural education. He believed that "The race (Black people) will succeed or fail as it shall devote itself with energy to agriculture and the mechanic arts."¹⁷ The Principal of Hampton Institute passed his concept of education on to his student, Booker T. Washington. Historian James McPherson maintained that the "Hampton idea became in the 1880s also the Tuskegee idea," while August Meier also concluded that "in pedagogical matters . . . Washington derived his inspiration directly from Hampton Institute and Samuel Chapman Armstrong. . . ."¹⁸

It was apparent, then, that some Black, assisted by white religious groups, had espoused and supported industrial education well before Washington founded Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881. By 1890, the "ascendancy of industrial education" had been established and by 1895 Washington had become "great and powerful not because he initiated a trend, but because he expressed it so well."¹⁹ Washington established an industrial education curriculum and became a noted spokesperson of education for race advancement with an emphasis upon "the concrete as opposed to the abstract and on the real problems of living. . . ."²⁰

The historical continuum of industrial education as personified by Washington reflects the importance of context to the intrepere of Black American education. Ronald Butchart notes that "Too frequently, the findings and interpretations of black education are discussed in an historical vacuum, as though there was no connections between the educational ideas that shaped black education and those that shaped white education. . . . White and black education developed within certain historically conditioned intellectual, educational, and social contexts. . . ."²¹

However, serious criticism of Washington and industrial education did develop from some Blacks who believed that only the kind of education that cultivated intellectual talents would lead to the liberation of the race as a whole. Debate on the issue of what kind of education was best for Black people polarized by the late 1890s around Washington and W. E. B. Dubois. Dubois was born free in 1868 in western Massachusetts and, unlike Washington, had been educated in classical fashion at Fisk University (1885-1888) in Nashville, Tennessee, a Black college that prided itself on its academic orientation, and at predominantly white Harvard where he received his Ph.D. in

1895—the year that Washington delivered his famous speech in Atlanta.²²

Dubois argued that a classical education would develop knowledgeable, insightful leaders who would plan the social elevation of the larger proportion of Black people. His concept of education was geared towards the nurturing of a Black “talented tenth” that he described as “exceptional men, the best of the race.”²³ He was convinced that Black equality meant developing Black leadership to the same intellectual, social, and political level as whites. Nothing like that was attainable through Washington’s industrial education model. As historians Jane Browning and John Williams put it, “For Dubois, industrial education required blacks to give up political power, abandon their insistence on civil rights, and withdraw demands for the education of black youth.”²⁴

Dubois sketched the broad outlines of the “talented tenth” concept in 1898 when he told a graduating class at Fisk University, his *alma mater*, that “We have workers enough, brawny and willing. . . . But what we do lack . . . is the captain of industry, the man who can marshal and guide workers in industrial enterprises, who can foresee a demand and supply it. . . .” Dubois expected much from Fisk graduates, since they were trained “in the liberal arts and subjects in that vast kingdom of culture that has lighted the world from its infancy. . . .”²⁵

In 1903, Dubois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* appeared, two years after Washington’s famous autobiography, *Up From Slavery*. In the preface, Dubois noted that “I have criticized candidly the leader who bears the chief burden of his race today.” The criticism was found in a chapter entitled “Of Booker T. Washington and Others.” The Harvard Ph.D. undercut the Hampton Institute graduate as a race leader, claiming that Washington was a “compromiser willing to surrender . . . civil and political rights . . . for larger chances of economic development.”²⁶ Dubois also listed the components of a “triple paradox” that faced the founder of Tuskegee Institute. Washington strived to make “negro artisans, businessmen and property owners” but “workingmen and property-owners could not defend their rights without the right of suffrage.” He insisted on “self respect but counseled a silent submission to civic inferiority.” Washington, lastly, advocated “common school and industrial training” for Blacks, but the school that he wanted could not “remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges. . . .”²⁷ In effect, Dubois thought Washington’s plan was unworkable and Black people would gain little and lose much.

While the debate between Washington and Dubois reflected differences of educational emphasis, both appreciated and adhered to the “Afro-American value of education for advancement.”²⁸ Their debate added luster to the diversity in approach and premise that has characterized education for Black people in America. While the differences between these two leaders illustrated that a monolithic approach to educational practice was not possible after Emancipation, it is important to emphasize that both men articulated a faith in education based upon a

cultural core value that emerged from the Black experience.

The values and ideologies underpinning the core value of education for Black Americans have been conditioned by certain intellectual and social forces. In the case study provided, the structure of Black education after the Civil War was profoundly affected by the historical continuity of industrial education, the consistency of an adherence to education as a core tendency, and by the debate over the key issues of the kind of education needed after Emancipation.

Recent educational reports underplay the historic attachment that Black America has to education. The significance of education points towards the decisive role that Blacks have played in formulating strategies for their own advancement. A study of selected episodes of the Black American faith in education as a key to the future offers a window to the past that educational policy makers need to peer through as the present patterns, problems, and practices of schooling in America are being challenged.

FOOTNOTES

¹*A Nation At Risk*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983); *Making The Grade* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1983); and *Action For Excellence* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1983).

²V.P. Franklin, *Black Self-Determination. A Cultural History of the Faith of the Fathers* (Westport, Ct.: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1984), p. 4.

³*Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁴Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), ed. Benjamin Quarles (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 64.

⁵Earle H. West, *The Black American and Education* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1972), p. 61.

⁶August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 99. Italics in the original.

⁷Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1901; reprint ed., Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1929), pp. 219-220. Washington delivered his speech on September 18, 1895, at the Cotton States Exposition. The title of the speech was “The Uplift of the Negro Race.”

⁸Cited by August Meier, “The Beginning of Industrial Education in Negro School,” *The Midwest Journal* 7 (Spring 1955): 24.

⁹*Ibid.* Italics in the original.

¹⁰John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1976*, 3d ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 61.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 62-64; Meier, “The Beginning of Industrial Education,” p. 29. The four Black schools that received land-grant funds before 1890 were Hampton Institute (Va.), Claflin College (S.C.), Alcorn College (Miss.), and Prairie View A & M (Tex.).

¹²Henry Allen Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South from 1619 to the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 22; Meier, “The Beginning of Industrial Schools,” p. 31.

¹³James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy from Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 153. See also August Meier, “The Vogue of Industrial Education,” *The Midwest Journal* 7 (Fall 1955): 241-266 for an account of industrial education for Blacks in AMA schools in the 1880s.

¹⁴McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy*, p. 217.

¹⁵Stephen J. Wright, "The Development of the Hampton-Tuskegee Pattern of Higher Education," *Phylon* 10 (December 1950): 337.

¹⁶Cited by Meier, "The Beginning of Industrial Education," p. 39.

¹⁷Cited by Meier, "The Beginning of Industrial Education," p. 39.

¹⁸McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy*, pp. 217-218; Meier, "The Vogue of Industrial Education," p. 265.

¹⁹Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, p. 99.

²⁰West, *The Black American and Education*, p. 63.

²¹Ronald E. Butchart, "The History of Afro-American Education: An Assessment of Ninety Years of Scholarship," paper presented to the History of Education Society, Chicago, Ill., 20 October 1984.

²²Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, pp. 190-206.

²³W. E. B. Dubois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem* (New York: James Pott and Co., 1903; reprint ed., Miami, Fla.; Mnesysne Publishing Inc., 1969), p. 33.

²⁴Jane E. Smith Browning and John B. Williams, "History and Goals of Black Institutions of Higher Learning," in Charles V. Willie and Ronald R. Edmonds, eds., *Black Colleges in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), p. 77.

²⁵W. E. B. Dubois, "Careers Open to College-Bred Negroes, an Address to the Alumni of Fisk University, 1898," cited by Leonard A. James, "The Educational Attitudes and Strategies of Black Leadership, 1895-1925: A Documentary History" (Ed.D. dissertation, Columbia University Teachers College, 1981), pp. 238, 242.

²⁶W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903; reprint ed., New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), pp. 8, 49-50.

²⁷Ibid., p. 52.

²⁸Franklin, *Black Self-Determination*, p. 9.

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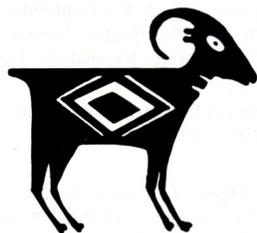
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