Educators as "Seed People" Growing a New Future

by Lisa Delpit

In the following text of her Dewitt Wallace-*Reader's Digest* Distinguished Lecture at the 2003 AERA annual meeting, Lisa Delpit argues that educators must look beyond standardized test scores and scripted instructional programs if their desire is to educate all children. Educators must cease questioning the capacity of low income, students of color and, instead, create rigorous, engaging instruction based on knowing who the students are, including their cultural, intellectual, historical, and political legacies. Furthermore, they must look to pre-integration African-American institutions where "counternarratives" were developed to affirm Black intelligence and provide the motivation for students to achieve.

Scene I (A Fictional Tale): The year 2092. *The 100-year-old man lies on his deathbed, contemplating his long life. His children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren surround him. He has lived a good life—there have been good times and bad times; he has accomplished much that he is proud of and had many experiences that he'd prefer to forget. One of his favorite grandsons looks into his eyes and asks, "Grandpa, is there anything you regret in your life?" The old man closes his eyes. Just when his family thinks he has drifted off to sleep, he opens them again and says, with an expression of deep, wistful longing, "Son, I just really wish with all my heart that I could have scored higher on the state-mandated achievement tests."*

The absurdity of that scene isn't lost on us. And yet, we in education often allow politicians to push us to act as if the most important goal of our work is to raise test scores. Never mind the development of the human beings in our charge—the integrity, the artistic expressiveness, the ingenuity, the persistence, or the kindness of those who will inherit the earth. The conversation in education has been reduced to a conversation about one number.

Civil rights leader Victoria Adams-Gray has said that we educators should be "the seed people of the world" (personal communication, 1999)—those who prepare the ground and plant the seeds of the future. We have somehow abdicated our responsibility. We have forsaken our crops and we have abandoned our seedlings to attempt to gain nourishment from the poorest of all possible soils.

It seems as if the education enterprise is determined to do three things right now: question children's capacity, produce questionable numbers about capacity, and proliferate limiting pro-

grams to produce questionable numbers. None of these makes for educating those who will inherit the earth.

The effect of such reductionism on the work we do in schools is mind boggling. When we strip away a focus on developing the humanity of our children, we are left with programmed, mechanistic strategies, designed to achieve the programmed, mechanistic goal of raising test scores. Nowhere is the result more glaring than in urban classrooms serving low-income children of color, where low test scores meet programmed, scripted teaching. The reductionism spawned has created settings in which teachers and students are treated as non-thinking objects to be manipulated and "managed."

Scene II (An all-too-real occurrence): The year 2002. *The inner-city classroom is filled with excited African-American 5th graders. The teacher is deeply committed to her work and deemed excellent by all who have observed her. Although significantly constrained by the strictly enforced standardized program the school has adopted, she always tries to connect what the students are studying to the aspects of their lives and history. On this day she announces to the students, "Okay guys, today we're going to talk for a few minutes about some laws called Black Codes. The Black Codes were racist laws enacted after the Civil War. They were designed to keep African Americans 'in their place.' For example, a Black man without a job could be charged with vagrancy and end up in jail. Just think for a moment. Can you imagine how horrible it would be in jail?"*

"Yeah," responds one of her charges, "I guess it would be kinda like being in school."

"Come on," she responds, startled by his words, "you don't mean that."

"Oh, yes I do!"

The teacher is left to ponder that exchange for the rest of the day, not wanting to believe that her students honestly saw parallels between a prison and school, and wondering if her efforts and ideals could ever overcome the instructional and disciplinary programs mandated to "raise test scores."

Herb Kohl (in press), in a recent not-yet published essay called "Stupidity and Tears," speaks of the terrible dilemma we've allowed ourselves to be drawn into—being forced to act in ways that defy our common sense. He differentiates between plain stupidity (the kind of stupidity inherent in some of the decisions made by individual teachers as well as systems) and the kind of stupidity that is a "form of institutional and social coercion that traps people into acting in ways which they consider to be stupid and, in the context of teachers, counter to the work they feel they must do to help their students. . . . [including] confinement to insane norms of educational programs that restrict creativity and have clearly not worked" (Kohl).

An example of the former might include a series of Internet conversations I've recently had with one of my daughter's teachers. The teacher regularly administered multiple-choice tests on which students "bubble" responses on answer sheets. When the tests were returned to students they only received the answer sheets with items marked right or wrong and a final grade. I asked the teacher if the students might be given the questions so that they could know which items they missed. Her response was, "I can't share the test because I use it every year." In a follow-up interchange I asked if it might be possible to go over the tests in class so that students would gain some knowledge from having taken the test. The response was again negative. "No," she replied, "we don't have time to go over it in class. We have too much to cover."

Then there was an urban school system's recent refusal to continue funding a writing project that teachers across the district praised. At a school district meeting teachers from many different schools testified that the project saved them from burnout by helping make their instruction powerful, engaging, and effective. Even though the teachers were able to show how students in their classes improved their scores on mandated writing tests, the project was defunded because the teachers couldn't show that an *entire school's* test scores went up because *one* of the school's teachers participated in the writing project.

Kohl (in press) also cites New York's highly touted plan to reduce teacher shortages. With great fanfare it was announced that the city had "attracted" 8,000 new, "qualified," certified teacher candidates to fill its crippling teacher shortages. However, these newly certified teachers had been found by lowering the requirements for certification.

As examples of the second kind of stupidity, Herb Kohl (in press) tells the stories of exasperated teachers. There is Rosa, a bilingual teacher in San Francisco who has been doing amazing work with her Spanish-speaking students. Through her creative instruction the children were learning a great deal of the curriculum as well as beginning to learn some English. During testing, however, she was forced to give all instructions to the test in English, although she knew the children couldn't understand the language. She was not allowed to answer their questions in Spanish, even if the questions had to do with how to go about taking the test. She, of course, knew that she was complicit in setting her students up for failure and it was tearing her apart. She was in tears when she said to Herb, "I have never felt so stupid in my whole life" (Kohl).

And there is Roger, whose students did extremely well in class, who were very creative, *and* did well on the state's high-stakes tests. He was ordered to give up his thoughtful, imaginative, and effective practice in order to conform to following the script of the mandated *Open Court* (SRA/McGraw Hill, 2002) literacy program. Although he protested that his students were already achieving beyond the district's expectations, he was told he had to fall in line. He could not incorporate any of his motivating curriculum under the watchful eye of the "*Open Court* police," former district curriculum supervisors assigned to monitor compliance. Roger told Herb Kohl (in press) that he "got through the whole thing by pretending he was on stage, when, holding the script in his hand, he saw how to help a child by throwing the script out." It left him feeling like screaming or crying.

My friend, colleague, and sometimes co-author, Paula White-Bradley, has been moved to tears in her classroom, where she believes that the school-wide Success for All curriculum is based on the assumption that urban students can only achieve through repetition of small steps that require primarily rote answers and little or no critical thinking. It also seems to assume that if teachers' and students' words and actions are not scripted and strictly controlled, then no learning can take place. The program, Paula has written, "is meticulously proscribed, hopelessly predictable, and timed to be executed uniformly regardless of the characteristics of the teacher or the students being served" (Delpit & White-Bradley, in press).

One mandated feature of the packaged classroom management program used in Paula's school is the "go-around-cup." Ostensibly designed to promote egalitarian selection of student speakers in the classroom, the name of each child is placed on a wooden craft stick and placed in a cup. The teacher must then choose a stick randomly from the cup as the teacher questions students. The strategy presumably eliminates the confusion that comes from eager voices and flailing hands vying for attention and assures that all students have the opportunity to participate and engage in the learning environment. Nonetheless, it has become the bane of some students' existence (Delpit & White-Bradley, in press).

"Ooh, I hate the go-around cup," says Freddie as his teacher picks a student's name that once again is not his, "I'm gonna hide it, Ms. Bradley. Either that, or I'm gonna throw it out!" Even as she tries to remind Freddie that eventually his stick is bound to be picked, it does little to quell the excitement and ensuing anger that he is feeling as his teacher enacts a rule that has not accounted for the fact that he is more interested in solving the math problem today than are most of the other children. He is bursting to share his division strategy, to show the class how he got the problem right. Here is yet another example of prison-like "order" being the rule of the classroom, with teacher and students expected to behave in robotic, mechanistic and scripted ways (Delpit & White-Bradley, in press).

How do we capture sanity in a setting gone so far into delusion that those of us who think, must also think that we've gone mad? Jules Henry (1973) concludes his essay, "Sham," by saying, ". . . sanity is nothing more than the capacity to deal with falseness in a false world" (quoted in Kohl, in press). Singer Aretha Franklin is more direct in "Border Song" (1994): "Holy Moses, we have been deceived!" How did we get to this dismal place, and how do we get out? I believe we must begin by fighting for an absolutely different way of looking at our students.

An Alternative View

I have been informed by studying the traditional African view of education, and I believe that in our educational world of numbers, reductionism, mechanistic "human-proof" curricula, and robotized interactions, the African worldview could provide our salvation. Asa Hilliard's *SBA: The Reawakening of the African Mind* (1997) provides a discussion of the tenets of traditional African education. African pedagogical systems emerged thousands of years ago. Many of the ancient practices still exist in traditional culture on the African continent, and in many places in the diaspora. Traditional African thought holds that the cosmos is divine, and that humans, as part of the cosmos, also have the

potential to become divine. The goal of education must be to assist individuals in their quest for divinity or perfection, by fostering a deep understanding and guided practice of the principles of "correct" living.

The aim of African education for the mind could not be separated from education for the body. The body was seen as a divine temple, housing a spirit. As a result, the education for mind and body was also linked to education for the spirit. Therefore, in the African tradition, it is the role of the teacher to appeal to the intellect, the humanity, and the spirituality in their students. However, in order to make such an appeal, a teacher must be convinced of the "inherent intellectual capability, humanity, physical capability, and spiritual character of students" (Hilliard, 1997, p. 102).

Pierre Erny tells us in *Childhood and Cosmos* (1973) that the search in most African societies is to determine "who" and not "what" the child is, indicating that the child is a unique entity. On the other hand, this very special, divine gift, this child, is also seen in Africa to be a part of a collective, a family, a community. For Africans, the self is incomplete without being incorporated into the larger family. Thus, African traditional education prepared students to work with and be an integral part of a social group. The African saying, "*I* am because *we* are," expresses this sense of connection to and responsibility for the group.

Hilliard (1997) cites his interview with Professor Umeh, a traditional healer and university professor from Nigeria, who spoke of the quest in African education to "eliminate foolishness." It is foolishness that keeps a person from learning, and not the Western notion of mental capacity. Africans assume that people have the mental capacity to achieve, but they are concerned about the "software" that allows brilliant people to misuse the capacity. More often than not, the impediments to learning for Africans are expressed as character deficiencies rather than mental deficiencies. There is no doubt that all humans are *capable* of learning.

It would not take much analysis to see the superiority of this kind of thinking to the reductionist, mechanistic, numbers-driven farce we inflict upon our children and their teachers on a daily basis.

Interestingly, we have historical precedence in this country in which students were educated to achieve individual cognitive growth, physical development, spiritual and pragmatic connection to their communities, and where no students were considered to lack the capacity to learn. In the 1960s, when students boycotted or were locked out of Mississippi schools during the Civil Rights movement, "Freedom Schools" were created by activist teachers and community workers. I quote extensively from an archival document produced at the time, a mimeographed page entitled *Overview of the Freedom Schools* (undated):

> The purpose of the Freedom Schools is to create an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives—ultimately new directions for action. . . . The Freedom Schools will present an intensive curriculum designed to meet several different needs:

> An academic curriculum which will . . . sharpen the students' abilities to read, write, work mathematical problems, etc., but will concentrate more on stimulating a student's interest in learning. . . .

The Citizenship curriculum which will concentrate on a study of the social institution which affect the students, and the background of the social system which has produced us all at this time. The various sections will be: the Negro in Mississippi, the Negro in the North, Myths about the Negro, the Power Structure, the Poor Negro and the Poor White, Material Things versus Soul Things, and The Movement. In these sections, the student will be encouraged to form opinions about the various social phenomena which touch him, to learn about his own particular heritage as a Negro, and to explore possible avenues for his future. Special attention at the end of the unit will be devoted to the Civil Rights Movement—the historical development to this point, the philosophical assumptions underlying pressure for social change, and the issues which are currently before the civil rights movement.

Recreational and cultural curriculum which will be a large part of the day will try to provide the students with relaxation from their more intensive studies and also an opportunity to express themselves in new ways. The program will include dancing and sports, arts and crafts, dramatics, music, etc.

A First Step: Believe in the Children

So what can we do today to bring some of the rationality expressed in African traditional thinking and the Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights movement to the enterprise of educating those children school systems have typically failed? I believe the first step, as Hilliard (1997) suggests, is to become convinced of their inherent intellectual capability, humanity, physical ability, and spiritual character.

Our nation's educational enterprise continues to be obsessed with the notion of intellectual capacity. In a recent graduate seminar, Asa Hilliard reminded students that for millions of years animals and humans have been teaching their young what they need to know to survive. Not one mother has tried to find out if her bear babies or her cat babies or her human babies had the capacity to learn—they just taught them what they needed to know! Over and over we now try to find out what is wrong with the children or their families that stunts their learning, without paying sufficient attention to what does or doesn't happen *in classrooms*.

One example that has been cited frequently in the "No Child Left Behind" campaign, is the research by Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995). Their research was conducted over 2¹/₂ years and recorded 30,000 pages of transcripts collected from monthly visits to American families of varied incomes with 1- and 2-year-old children. Their data showed that children from low-income families heard many fewer words than children of professional parents and that this disparity in language experience was tightly linked to differences in child outcomes (Hart & Risley).

Hart and Risley (1995) were led to the study, they say, by struggling unsuccessfully to close the language gap between poor and middle-class children. All of their efforts in pre-school were washed out by kindergarten. Therefore, they attempted to do the study in order to understand why. What they found was that a child from a professional family would hear 11 million words during a year while a child in a welfare family would hear just 3 million. Or put another way, a child from a professional family could start kindergarten having heard 32 million more words than their poorer classmates. As solutions, the authors suggest that there is a need to teach parents and child-care workers to talk more to children of poverty (Hart & Risley).

It is interesting to think of all the consequences of having heard 43 million words from your parents before kindergarten. I have Asian- and Native American friends—all of whom are highly literate—who would consider that much talk directed at a child as nothing less than child abuse! I cannot help but wonder if these are the children who grow up to be the colleagues at faculty meetings who can take a 10-minute issue and turn it into a 3-hour meeting!

I am also led to remember my own daughter's attempts to stifle my "professional-family" speech to her on numerous occasions. When she was 2, I discovered a program called "Potty Training in Less Than a Day." The directions indicated that I should let her know every 20 minutes or so about how proud her aunties and uncles, grandmother, various friends, and I would be of her if she was a big girl and used the pot like big girls do. After about 6 hours of this, I was praising once more. "Maya," I said, "you are such a big girl. Auntie Billie is going to be so proud that you used the pot. Mimi is going to be so very proud that you used the pot. You are so wonderful and such a big girl when you use the pot." She looked at me with 2-year-old exasperation and said, "Shub-up, mommy!"

Then, when she was 3, I would regularly do my professional family language routine in the car: "Maya, do you see those trees. Do you know what color they are? Do you know how they get to be green? The plants grow in the soil and get nutrients and then the sun shines on them and causes them to make a green color. That's called photosynthesis. Can you say that big word, . . . etc." My child looked at me and said with great firmness, "Mommy, get out of my mind!" And so, I gained my understanding that part of raising a sane child is to allow her to have her own thinking time, not always being bombarded with adult language.

But back to the study under question. I can only imagine how a professional family would act when being observed for language use by a researcher. Like most of us, the parents would tend to talk more to show how well they interact with their children. I can also imagine how a poor family would react. The parents might very possibly talk less so as not to say things that they thought might be embarrassing.

But, no matter. Even if the research is completely accurate, the reality is that no matter how much language the parents use with their children, appropriate instruction in school can resolve the problem. But the solution cannot be some "quick fix" initiated only in pre-school or kindergarten, but a continued effort that involves a completely different kind of instruction. Educators have proven this over and over again. Black teachers in the pre-integration South regularly educated children of poverty to levels that allowed them to successfully enter universities and indeed to become local and national leaders. More recently the Marcus Garvey school in Los Angeles, California; the Chick School in Kansas City, Missouri; Harmony-Leland in Cobb County, Georgia; and the Prescott School in Oakland, California (Hilliard, 2003), among many others, have all educated low-income African-American children who have performed at higher levels on mandated standardized tests than even some of the schools serving the most affluent students in their respective districts.

Sankofa Shule, a public, African-centered, charter school in Lansing, Michigan, has produced low-income African-American students who are reading two to four levels above grade level, who are doing algebra and calculus in grade school, and who outscored Lansing School District and the state of Michigan on the state accountability test (MEAP) in 2000 in mathematics and writing. The school was called "an educational powerhouse" by *U.S. News and World Report* in the April 27, 1998, issue (Rivers, 2003). These educational institutions and individual teachers realize that there is no pre-school "vaccination" that can help poor children who do not have access to the culture of power be successful in later school years. Only a consciously devised, continuous program that develops vocabulary in the context of real experiences, provides rigorous instruction, connects new information to the cultural frameworks that children bring to school, and assumes that the children are brilliant and capable, and teaches accordingly, can.

Second Step Toward Sanity: "Fight Foolishness"

The second task we must accomplish, if we wish to truly educate the children we have heretofore failed, is to, in the words of Professor Umeh, (Hilliard, 1997), "fight foolishness." Or, as Herb Kohl (in press) would say, "fight stupidity." We have to cease attempting to build "teacher-proof" schools with scripted low-level instruction and instead seek to develop (and retain) perceiving and thinking teachers who challenge their students with high-quality, interactive, and thoughtful instruction.

I am reminded of Paula White-Bradley's description of how her school requires teachers to enact the Success for All reading block. During this time, the students are supposed to work in teams. Teachers are instructed to "manage" the teams by awarding team points for students' behavior, including getting along together, collectively participating, and completing tasks. The group work is to be painstakingly timed by the teacher, regardless of the amount of time actually needed for students to complete the tasks. Therefore, teams are typically awarded points for non-academic tasks like being the first to stack their books in the center of the table or being the first to transition quickly from one activity to the next. Each team is to begin the reading period with zero points. They must then work their way up to "earning" a maximum of 20 points. Thus, much of both the students' and the teacher's time is spent on "housekeeping" tasks related to keeping order, with no time for deep discussion about anything children (or teacher) want to explore. Furthermore, the classrooms are monitored by the program's consultants, whose work is to ensure that all the rules be followed exactly (Delpit & White-Bradley, in press).

If we want children from low-income families to achieve at high levels, this kind of instruction can only be construed as "foolishness." To expend so much of a teacher's energy on keeping track of "points" related to non-instructional tasks, and to prevent any kind of deep instruction about what is being studied, can only lead to the lowest of academic development. This is the reason we *never* see these pre-packaged "teacher-proofed" programs in affluent schools, only in schools serving low-income children and children of color.

Kohl (in press) quotes Jules Henry on the issue of sanity:

Sanity . . . can take three forms—to believe sham to be the truth; to see through sham while using it; or to see through sham but fight it. . . . We are now in the stage of believing sham to be the truth, while entering the stage of seeing through sham while using

it. The third stage is understanding sham and knowing how to fight it. The fourth stage is a world without sham.

It will likely be a while before we get there! Kohl (in press) rightly says that the sham, the stupidity, is disheartening, but it can also be a call to resistance and the rebirth of teacher—and let's hope researcher—militancy.

Rather than spend time on such "foolishness," what teachers should be doing is developing the knowledge of the outside world that children from less privileged families might lack. The "fourth grade slump" that poor children encounter in schools is well documented (Campbell, Hombo, & Mezzeo, 2000; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). What those who have been successful teaching these children to achieve at high levels know is that they do not need to "fix" the language of the parents, or to devise some pre-school intervention that will "fix" the children, or to "dumb-down" instruction with scripted instruction. Rather, students need focused instructional strategies throughout their school years that are designed specifically for their cultural and academic backgrounds.

In my work in dozens of successful classrooms, effective teachers of low–income students of color take every opportunity to introduce children to complex material. While children are learning to "decode," teachers read complex information to children above their reading level and engage in discussions about the information and the advanced vocabulary they encounter. Students are involved in activities that use the information and vocabulary in both creative and analytical ways, and teachers help them create metaphors for the new knowledge that connects it to their real lives. Students memorize and dramatize material that involves advanced vocabulary and linguistic forms. Students are engaged in thematic units that are ongoing and repeat important domain knowledge and develop vocabulary through repeated oral use. Students are asked to explain what they have learned to others, thus solidifying new knowledge. Not only do the teachers and schools who are successful with low-income children practice these strategies, but some other researchers (Beck et al., 2002; Hirsch, 2003; Stahl, 1991; Sternberg, 1987, to name but a few) have documented the efficacies of the strategies as well. Successful instruction is constant, rigorous, integrated across disciplines, connected to students' lived cultures, connected to their intellectual legacies, engaging, and designed for critical thinking and problem solving that is useful beyond the classroom. Never do the successful teachers of these children believe that students have learned enough or that they cannot learn more.

Make no mistake, when we fail to provide such instruction, when we fail to educate children in inner-city schools, the students are quite aware of our failures to teach them. Despite their purposeful attempts to "not learn," as Herb Kohl (in press) calls it—enlisting various forms of classroom disruption and disengagement to thwart the system that disrespects them, and that assumes their intellectual inferiority—they are saddened and, indeed, brokenhearted with the results.

Frustrated with not knowing how to succeed and with continued failure and no supports from the school, one student, Reginald, said, "I'd rather be defiant and stupid in class than let the teacher call me a failure. My friends know I'm not dumb and we laugh at the teacher together" (Kohl, in press).

The lyrics of a song popular a year or so ago tell the story well:

City High Anthem

They just gave up on our entire generation
So we were all pushed to the side
Cuz we didn't see the world through our teachers' eyes
When all we needed was a little bit of motivation
But because we wore our pants saggin'
Y'all labeled us gangsters
And said we wasn't worth the time.

There are so many things I never asked you
There are so many things I still don't know
There are so many things you never told me
And still so many things that I will never know
And why, cuz I went to City High.

. . . There are so many things you never showed me,
There are too many things you let slip by,
How can I face a world that doesn't know me
A world that doesn't care whether I live or die
And why, cuz I go to City High.

. . . And there were so many things that needed explaining
But you said it was too late for me to learn
You were supposed to be my shelter when it was rainin'
But instead you left me out here all alone
So I gotta make it on my own.

. . . For people who did believe
what we could do to change our future
You knew the world was in our hands,
Help build them strong so they can withstand
All the prejudice
And the others who were sure we couldn't fight the stress in life
For those of you who didn't believe us
Listen to my words for you,
Listen to your children sing to you:
We don't need your education
We don't want no pacifier
We are the leaders of your nation
We're gonna make sure the world survives
There ain't no justice, there's "just us"
What happened to the meaning of
"In God we trust"
So as we get older and our children grow up
We ain't gonna teach them what y'all showed us.

(*City High*, 2002)

A Third Step: Learning Who Our Children Are and the Legacies They Bring

The third element we must incorporate into our educational system if we are to truly educate poor, African-American children is that we must learn *who* the children are, and not focus on *what* we assume them to be—at risk, learning disabled, behavior disordered, etc. This means developing relationships with our students, and understanding their political, cultural, and intellectual legacy.

Despite some of the beliefs of today's scholars and general public—Black and White—people of African descent have an exceptionally long history of educational excellence. In my rudimentary study of African history, I have learned that there were

centers of higher education in Africa long before European penetration into the continent. From the major centers of higher education in Timbuktu and Mali, to the Sokoto Empire in Nigeria and the Congo, African peoples developed the earliest of advanced educational systems. Education remained a valued commodity during and subsequent to African enslavement. Enslaved Africans risked life and limb to learn to read and write the English language. After legal enslavement ended, the first goal in African-American communities was to create schools.

Theresa Perry (2003), in *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*, points out that even though there was no expectation of being rewarded for advanced education in the same ways as Whites in the larger society, African Americans pursued educational achievement with a vengeance for its own inherent rewards (Perry). She poses several interesting questions. Why should one make an effort to excel in school if one cannot determine if the learning will ever be valued, seen, or acknowledged? Why should one focus on learning in school if that learning will not affect, inform, or alter one's status as a member of an oppressed group? She looks to Jim Anderson (1988), historian of African-American education, to find an answer from African Americans themselves. She concludes, "For African Americans, from slavery to the modern Civil Rights movement, the answers were these: You pursued learning because this is how you asserted yourself as a free person; how you claimed your humanity. You pursued learning so you could work for social uplift, for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people" (Perry, p. 11). These answers are a far cry from those we give our children today.

In an attempt to develop a theory of Black achievement, Perry (2003) offers an analysis of why education was such a clear goal for educational attainment in the past, and why that goal has become so much murkier in today's society. From the period of African enslavement until America's present, the dominant belief system has denigrated the academic competence, even the academic capacity, of African Americans. This belief system has sometimes been relayed as genetic inferiority, more recently as "the culture of poverty," and even more recently, as a dearth of spoken words. This is and was the ideology of White supremacy, most overtly visible in Jim Crow and the pre-Civil Rights era. Historically, Black institutions organized themselves to counter this hegemonic belief. In Perry's words:

> Most, if not all of the historically Black segregated schools that African-American children attended were intentionally organized in opposition to the ideology of Black inferiority. In other words, in addition to being sites of outcomes that not only promoted education—an act of insurgency in its own right—but also were designed to counter the ideology of African Americans' intellectual inferiority and ideologies that saw African Americans as not quite equal and as less than human. Everything about these institutions was supposed to affirm Black humanity, Black intelligence, and Black achievement. (p. 88)

In Black schools, churches, clubs—indeed, all Black community institutions—everything focused on this one goal. In all settings there were intentional activities and opaque belief systems designed to ensure achievement, including rituals that included uplifting songs, recitations, and performances; high expectations; extensive academic support in and out of school; and regular assemblies of students to express the expectations of the adults around them that they must work hard to be free.

Consequently, educational achievement was not for the White world, but for our own community, our own pride. It was for something greater than oneself. It was, as in traditional African belief systems, to ensure that the individual was socialized as an integral part of the family, and to make it perfectly clear that everyone in the family developed, in Perry's (2003) words, "identities of achievement."

Today's schools, integrated or not, seldom develop the same kind of intentional communities. In the post-Civil Rights era, most public schools are de-ritualized institutions. Certainly, they are institutions that are not intentionally organized to counter inferiority myths—and the reality is, because of that kind of institutional space, Black students today, as perhaps never before, are victims of the myths of inferiority and find much less support for countering these myths and embracing academic achievement outside of individual families.

When I spoke recently at Southern University, a pre-service teacher approached me to say that she was so happy I had touched on these issues. She relayed an incident that had left her wondering what she should do to support her students. During her student-teaching practicum one of her eighth grade African-American boys approached her and asked, "So, Ms. Summer, they made us the slaves because we're dumb, huh?" She was left speechless at the thought of what she might say to counter this belief her student had obviously internalized.

I had been equally shocked many years ago when my nephew was in high school. Although I was only 6 years his senior, because of that age difference I had spent the majority of my school years in segregated, Black-run institutions. He, on the other hand, had spent most of his school years in newly integrated settings. I was berating him for making a "D" in chemistry. His response to me was, "Well, what do you expect from me, the *White* kids get Cs!"

Part of truly allowing the brilliance of our children to shine forth would be to consciously organize institutions and instruction that expose them to their intellectual legacy; clarify their position in a racialized society; ritually express expectations for hard work and academic, social, physical, and moral excellence; and create alternative reasons for success other than "getting a good job"—for our community, for your ancestors, for your descendents. Many more schools of this type than I have previously mentioned presently exist. Asa Hilliard has identified and documented schools serving low-income urban children that produce some of the highest standardized test scores in their respective school districts. The Agency for Instructional Technology (1993) has created a video series of Hilliard's findings.

Interestingly, despite their excellent test scores, the focus of each school is *not* to raise scores, but to develop a style of education that draws upon, whether consciously or not, traditional African educational thought about how children should be viewed and how they should be socialized intellectually, physically, and spiritually.

In her most recent book, *In Search of Wholeness*, Jackie Irvine (2003) collaborates with successful African-American teachers of children of color and graduate students who observed and interviewed them. Irvine summarizes the book's findings by pointing

out that the African-American teachers studied not only viewed teaching as telling, guiding, and facilitating mastery of mandated content standards, but they also defined teaching as a calling, not a job. (A friend, colleague, and brilliant teacher, Georges Vilson, who teaches in a low-income area of Brooklyn, once told me that he has to consider teaching a calling because, "they don't pay me enough to consider it a job!" [personal communication, 2003]) Irvine's teachers conceived of their jobs as "other-mothering," caring, believing, demanding the best, and providing the discipline to succeed in life, all reflections of those elements that would be included in the traditional African model.

What Excellence Might Look Like

One of the best examples of the kind of teaching I refer to is embodied in Oakland, California, elementary school teacher, Carrie Secret. Carrie's students consistently are among the top scorers on district-wide tests, outperforming those in many more affluent schools. Carrie uses both the lived culture and the intellectual legacy of the African-American students she teaches. She provides a rigorous curriculum. She talks of each of her charges as a spiritual being, whose spirit she has the honor of nurturing. Hilliard (2003) describes her classroom:

> In public performances, the children . . . present spirited interpretive renderings of great African literature, the poetry of Ilyana Vansant [sic], the sermons of the great Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the thirty-four-hundred-year-old Egyptian teachings of Ptahhotep, creative essays researched and written by Secret, among other writings. The short public presentations cannot capture the essence of the hours of study that the teacher and students must do in preparation. Students are not permitted merely to do rote presentations.

> To visit Carrie Secret's class is to enter a truly intellectual world, and a very spiritual one as well. The walls are covered with charts, art, and short selections of masterpieces of literature. . . . The faces are predominantly African; however, a child of any ethnic background is honored by having the whole class learn about his or her cultural background. These materials are incorporated seamlessly into the regular classroom work in all disciplines. . . . Secret's children engage in the classroom in critical analysis and commentary on [serious, culturally significant] matters. . . . Secret's classes are full of movement and action, much of it collective. The children sing and dance to serious themes. They do art and write stories and essays. . . . All of these things are for a purpose. (pp. 152–153).

Secret reads from African and African-American texts too difficult for elementary students to decode, as she develops their vocabulary and their understanding of themselves and their people so that they may learn new grammatical structures, vocabulary, and the use of sophisticated literate forms not often present in materials simple enough for primary students to decode.

Secret also teaches mathematics, social studies, values, and instructional independence (children work all afternoon on independent individual and collective projects) in the context of traditional African methodologies. She never assumes there is a child who cannot learn. Many of her students were labeled as needing special education, but when she treated them as scholars they behaved like scholars. Indeed, she once told a group of my graduate students that so-called "crack babies" were only difficult because they were so smart and so fast. She says that their

brains work so fast that we are just unable to keep up with them. When we can go nearly as fast as they do, we can learn to teach them. (For a fuller description of Carrie's teaching, see Perry and Delpit [1998].)

In closing, we *can* educate all children if we truly want to. To do so, we must first stop attempting to determine their capacity. We must be convinced of their inherent intellectual capability, humanity, and spiritual character. We must fight the foolishness proliferated by those who believe that one number can measure the worth and drive the education of human beings, or that predetermined scripts can make for good teaching. Finally, we must learn *who* our children are—their lived culture, their interests, and their intellectual, political, and historical legacies. Like Carrie Secret we must create Perry's "intentional communities," designed around a counternarrative—one that affirms Black brilliance both to the students themselves and to their communities.

Then, we can begin to educate the inheritors of the planet.

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