

An Inside Look at Education and Poverty

Carol M. Swain

The lower economic people are not holding up their end of the deal. These people are not parenting. They are buying things for their kids—\$500 sneakers for what? And won't spend \$200 for "Hooked on Phonics." . . . People marched and were hit in the face with rocks to get an education, and now we've got knuckleheads walking around.

—Bill Cosby

Comedian Bill Cosby's remarks presented on the anniversary of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation case were directed at a subgroup of the black population who were not present to hear his remarks.¹ His remarks, however, are just as applicable to the lifestyle choices of more affluent blacks, whose children are also often failing to reach their potential for reasons that cannot easily be dismissed as racism. Like the lower-classes, too many of the middle-class suffer higher than normal rates of dysfunction when it comes to incarceration rates, crime, drug abuse, illegitimacy, and other social ills. My concern here is with educational achievement and competitiveness. Unfortunately, not enough blacks at any socioeconomic level are faring as well as they should. The black middle-class is treading water and missing the mark.

There is a well-documented black/white achievement gap in educational performance that affects every economic level. Black children reared in families earning \$50,000 a year score no better than whites and Asians reared in families earning from \$10,000 to \$20,000 per year.² These stark differences in achievement levels manifest themselves during the K–12 years. Tests sponsored by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) show a familiar pattern of blacks lagging behind other groups. Studies have shown that by senior year, the average black high school student functions at a skill level four years behind the skill levels of white and Asian students.³ This pattern occurs even in top school districts where blacks lag behind and often complain about

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having difficulty understanding their assignments.⁴ Something other than white racism and sub par schools must be contributing to black underachievement.

A part of the problem must lie in parental expectations and societal messages that reinforce the negative stereotypes that blacks are less capable and less likely to benefit much from the application of higher standards imposed by teachers and institutions. It is too often the case that well-intentioned teachers and counselors reinforce black students' affirmations that they are not able to make it academically, and when difficulties do arise, the parents are quick to blame teachers and the educational system rather than properly attributing lapses to what is not being said and done at home.⁵

This essay speaks to issues involving middle-class and lower-class African Americans. I cast my lot with those observers who see cultural norms and lowered expectations as being partially responsible for the fact that blacks lag behind other racial and ethnic groups in academic achievement. In some cases, I believe that the situation has been worsened by the existence of certain forms of affirmative action that have not made distinctions among minorities of different socioeconomic classes. Indeed, for decades, society has signaled to blacks that it is okay for them to be less competitive than other groups. I believe this has had a harmful impact on the aspirations and self-confidence of many blacks who have internalized these very wrong negative messages.

Relevant to this discussion is my non-traditional background as a high-school dropout who, despite the odds, earned a Ph.D. and tenure from two elite universities. Like the veteran teacher cited above, I have had more than 20 years of exposure to the problem about which I now write. Time in the trenches as a student and a professor informs this discussion. I focus on the black underachievement gap because of its persistence, because of my kinship with African Americans, and because of my deeply held beliefs that racial preferences have been a mixed blessing for our nation.

Let me support my position with some observations. As an older undergraduate student in the 1980s, I often encountered other black college students struggling with grade point averages at or below a 2.00 on a 4.00 scale who voiced aspirations of wanting to become lawyers and doctors. If I challenged them directly by responding, "But I thought you needed a 3.0 to get into law or medical school"—almost invariably the student would respond, "Oh, they have to let us in. They have to let us in, because of affirmative action." Now, I don't believe that many of those students were actually admitted to professional schools, but the misinformation led some genuinely to believe that traditionally white professional schools were obligated to take them, regardless of their less-than-stellar performance. This perception, I believe, affected how hard these students trained. The knowledge of affirmative action's double standards no doubt caused some to neglect burning of the midnight oil.

Could such attitudes affect the level of exertion that a person puts forth towards the achievement of goals and aspirations? Could such beliefs be a factor in the well-documented fact that black students in college *underperform* their SAT scores—that is, black students with the same SAT scores as whites exhibit a considerably lower performance in college than white students.⁶ Racism and the difficulty of adjusting to the social environment are common explanations for the discrepancy.

Affirmative action has affected students in other ways as well. I have often encountered black students who seemed immobilized by the belief that “we” were incapable of competing effectively with whites. Some had internalized white racist notions of black inferiority. I came away from many conversations fully convinced that the people with whom I was talking did not have a clue as to how hard successful people often work to attain their goals. In an effort to draw the knowledge gleaned from my roots as a high school dropout and one of 12 children raised in rural southern poverty, I have pulled together some ideas of what I think can be done to address aspects of the current black/white achievement gap at the secondary level, where it all starts. It is my hope that with concerted efforts we can nip some of the problems in the bud. Perhaps, in a few years, the felt need for racial preferences in higher education will increasingly fade as more and more minorities become competitive in all areas of life.

Addressing the Problems of Middle-Class Blacks

Perhaps the easiest problem to address is the situation where middle-class black students are not achieving as much as they should, given their resources. Here the choices may be a matter of values. Parents have the resources to become aggressively involved in the education of their children. One of the easier things that parents can do is to be aware of the content of curriculum and the level of difficulty of the courses chosen by students and guidance counselors. One study explaining the black/white test gap showed that black students who took the SAT had not followed the same academic track as white students. The white test-takers were far more likely to have completed courses in geometry and higher-level mathematics such as trigonometry and calculus.⁷ Black students took fewer literature and honors writing courses. They were also less likely to invest in such test-coaching courses as Kaplan and the Princeton Review: known to raise scores by 100 points or more. Clearly, these are areas where a more pro-active stance can yield greater positive outcomes.

Middle-class parents can hire private tutors, they can restrict the amount of time their children watch television and play sports, they can monitor peer-group associations, and they can make sure that their offspring take full advantage of all enrichment opportunities offered by schools and other institutions. A dramatic increase in the number of black parents willing to

push their children as though affirmative action programs never existed and no longer do would result in positive achievement outcomes.

The Very Different Situation of Lower-class and Underclass Blacks

“They’re standing on the corner and they can’t speak English. I can’t even talk the way these people talk: ‘Why you ain’t.’ ‘Where you is.’ And I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. And then I heard the father talk. . . . Everybody knows it is important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can’t be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth,” spouted Bill Cosby.⁸ Indeed, sympathies are with the lower-class blacks that were not in the room with Cosby. Until I was a student at the community college where I earned my first degree, I used the vernacular black English of my parents. “He don’t,” and “she don’t” rolled effortlessly off my tongue, because that was how we talked at home. Fortunately, I was eventually corrected by one of my black classmates in a most gentle manner. “Oh,” she said, “I think you meant to say that she doesn’t have a car.” That was enough to correct that particular grammatical problem for me, but others persisted, such as subject/verb disagreements that still occasionally crop up.

My parents were uneducated. My father had a third-grade education, my mother, an intelligent woman, dropped out in the tenth grade, and my stepfather had no apparent education at all. None of my siblings—seven brothers and four sisters—ever graduated from high school. Although I too dropped out of school after completing the eighth grade, by the grace of God I managed to earn five college and university degrees from an array of institutions.⁹ I was by no means the smartest of the 12—I was just the one who escaped.

Ignorance is rampant among the poor. Before I dropped out of school, I believed that my situation was hopeless and that only rich people could go to college. For a number of reasons, I dropped out of school and married at 16 years of age. Affirmative action and scholarships were totally outside of my sphere of knowledge. For families like mine, affirmative action might as well not have existed. When I did enter college, such need-based programs as Pell Grants, federal loans, and work study enabled me to move to the next stage where race and merit worked together to create opportunities for poor minorities who defied the stereotypes.

Talented students from disadvantaged families like mine are dependent on the goodwill of adults outside the family who can give them hope and steer them toward programs and courses that can be of assistance to them and their families. Students whose parents will not take full advantage of available options and resources should not be penalized by rules and requirements that often limit opportunities in the best programs to students whose parents are actively involved in the school. Few of the children of the truly poor will have parents able and willing to work in the schools and participate in parent/teacher conferences. Why not let willing adult mentors fill the gap by serving

informally as surrogate parents when it comes to certain types of involvement? Even the most disinterested parents would probably welcome the input from a concerned volunteer.

It is also important to steer some students into alternative educational programs. We must accept the fact that not all smart students are college bound. There are students who have no interest in college. Many struggle to master basic reading, writing, and math skills. Some students should be steered toward appropriate vocational programs or community colleges that offer remedial education, vocational training, and opportunities to transfer credits to four-year colleges and universities. What is needed are new focused and concerted efforts linking teachers, guidance counselors, and concerned adults to identify and encourage students to stay in school, work hard, and avail themselves of resources to improve their life chances. How many potential leaders, scientists, and university professors are trapped in poor schools and desperate family situations?

Many factors affect the performance of students from poor families. In my family we missed school because we lacked proper clothes for the weather and because we did not have alternative transportation to school if we missed the bus. I can remember times in which I attended school without deodorant or sanitary napkins. What most people take for granted is often not available to the poor. Abusive alcoholic parents, disconnected utilities, and overcrowded homes can all affect whether a student stays in school and is able to learn the material. Often, there is a need for children to find work outside the home as soon as they reach a certain age. In other cases, such as my own, the need to escape a bad situation at home leads to teenage marriage, childbirth, and eventually the responsibilities of being a single parent. Students will make better choices if given mentorship and encouragement by caring adults of any race. Growing up in impoverished circumstances can be devastating to the self-esteem of the brightest students who suffer the taunts of their peers.

One adult who genuinely cares about a child can make a dramatic difference in life chances. Some of us can remember the first person who ever told us that we were smart and that we were valuable and capable of attaining success. Words of encouragement cost us nothing, yet when they are sincerely offered, they are priceless. Words can change despair into hope and defeat into victory. *Proverbs* 18:21 states, "death and life are in the power of the tongue." An aptly spoken word from an authority figure can change lives forever.

Patsy Partin, a veteran school teacher from Nashville, Tennessee, has found that "low-achieving students often come from a culture of unstable families with poverty, drugs, unwed mothers, and the absence of the father in the home. These non-virtuous characteristics are unacceptable in *any* culture. Such internal, cultural factors work against student achievement." She has mentored many children from such backgrounds, who have gone on to achieve unexpected success because she held them to high standards and failed to stereo-

type them or reinforce the messages they received from home about their lack of worth.

Unfortunately, the needs and concerns of disadvantaged minorities often seem insurmountable. But as a person who has escaped the worst of lower-class life and emerged on the other side, I am optimistic that collectively we can turn things around. It may take many, many Patsy Partins of all races. But it can be done and it must be done. Some of the problems plaguing lower-class Americans include:

- Dysfunctional, abusive homes where education is not valued;
- A lack of parental involvement because of disinterest or work obligations;
- A failure of students to develop effective study skills;
- Negative peer pressure about the value of learning;
- Environmental conditions such as living in a high crime, high noise area, or not having a quiet place and time to study;
- Poor nutritional factors that affect ability to concentrate as well as IQ and motivational levels.

Some of the above factors are difficult to address without involving a host of social and governmental organizations that might be able to intervene with varying degrees of success. We might be able to bring about more success through innovation and greater experimentation. After consultation with a few educators, I humbly submit the following policy recommendations for improving the K–12 educational experience for low-income students.

- *Smaller Classes and Devoted Teachers.* It would be helpful to have smaller classes taught by teachers who believe in the students and their ability to learn the material expected of students at their grade levels. A belief in the student's ability to learn is essential for educating and motivating them to exert the efforts likely to yield results.
- *Gender-Based Classrooms.* Placing some students in a gender-based classroom during the adolescent years would reduce distractions associated with having the opposite sex in the same room. Public school principals and teachers should have greater discretion to make such decisions with or without school board approval.
- *Vocational Education.* Steering some students towards vocational educational programs is essential. Not all students are college material. But all students need job training to survive in today's world. Community colleges and broader high school curriculums could be utilized to meet these goals.
- *School Uniforms.* Reduces the stigmatization of poor children, who cannot afford the latest styles.
- *School Choice.* Voucher programs, charter schools, and magnet schools offer a viable solution for a small percentage of students. These should be utilized and expanded if oversight is in place to ensure that they maintain high standards of quality. Although greater school choice will not solve the larger problem of black underachievement, it will give parents more flexibility and might encourage public schools to become more accountable.

In conclusion, we all have much work to do to solve these problems. No single group is responsible for current conditions and no single group has the correct solution. A varied approach is needed. Changing demographics and the fact that blacks are no longer America's largest minority group complicates the educational situation by increasing the pool of people who compete at the margins for a narrowed set of opportunities. The magnitude of the task ahead includes how to integrate growing numbers of non-English-speaking students entering schools across the nation, where even greater challenges are posed to teachers and school boards struggling to meet the requirements set by federal and state governments. It behooves us to unite and collectively work toward a solution that will aggressively address the problem of all under-achieving youth.

Notes

1. Bill Cosby as quoted by Joel Dauben, "Bill Cosby was 100% Right," *The Ellis County Press*, 3 June 2004.
2. Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, and Uneven* (New York: Random House, 1992), 146; Nicholas Lemann, "Taking Affirmative Action Apart," *New York Times Magazine*, 11 June 1995, 66.
3. Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gaps in Learning* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2003), 12–15.
4. Ronald F. Ferguson, "Responses from Middle School, Junior High, and High School Students in Districts of the Minority Students Achievement Network," as cited in Thernstrom and Thernstrom, *No Excuses*, 22.
5. This latter observation came from conversations with Patsy Partin, a veteran public school teacher in Nashville, Tennessee.
6. In a study of over ten-thousand undergraduate students who entered eleven highly select colleges and universities in 1989, Fredrick Vars and William Bowen found that controlling for SAT scores and other academic attributes, black students with similar academic qualifications as whites wound up in the class rankings of their schools an average of 17.4 percentile points behind their white counterparts. This is a huge difference. See "Scholastic Aptitude Test Scores, Race, and College Performance in Selective Colleges and Universities," in *The Black/White Test Score Gap*, ed. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 475. In the even larger study involving 28 highly selective colleges and universities that participated in the *College and Beyond* survey, Bowen and Bok found huge black "underperformance" of their SAT scores and other academic indicators. Slightly less than half of the 30-point difference between blacks and whites in their average rank in class (twenty-third percentile for blacks, fifty-third percentile for whites), could be accounted for, according to Bowen and Bok's analysis, by lower black SAT scores, lower high school grades, and other variables associated with academic outcomes. The rest of the difference resulted from the underperformance factor. Blacks were, in other words, clearly not living up to their demonstrated potentials to the same degree as whites, and the degree of underperformance, once again, was huge.
7. "This Was Not Supposed to Happen: The Black-White Test Gap is Growing," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 25 (1999): 96, 98, 99.
8. Cosby as cited in Dauben, "Bill Cosby was 100% Right."
9. My degrees are from the following colleges and universities: Virginia Western Community College (A.A.S., 1978), Roanoke College (B.A., 1983), Virginia Polytechnic and State University (M.A., 1984), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Ph.D., 1989), and Yale University Law School (M.S.L., 2000).

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