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**Education and the Future of Black Children:
Are White Schools Hurting Black Students? (Part 2)
The Substance of Truth
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"It is simply calling a spade a spade. It is saying in plain English: that a separate Negro school, where children are treated like human beings, trained by teachers of their own race, who know what it means to be black in the year of salvation 1935, is infinitely better than making our boys and girls doormats to be spit and trampled upon and lied to by ignorant social climbers, whose sole claim to superiority is ability to kick "niggers" when they are down.."

- Du Bois, W. E. Burghardt. "Does the Negro need Separate Schools?" The Journal of Negro Education. Vol. 4, No. 3 (July 1935).

"Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher."

- Morrison, Tony. [Beloved](#). New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987.

Our great intellectual grandfather, Du Bois, had a point. For what does it profit a Black child to be instructed by a teacher who knows nothing about his/her cultural *configuration*? Worse than lack of knowledge, I believe, is the resistance to any opportunity whereby a learning process can take place. For many White teachers, who hold unprecedented leverage over the hearts and minds of their students, Black children must either adapt to the Eurocentric paradigm of education created without their interests in mind, or drop-out of it. As a result, Black students face countless obstacles on the road to educational empowerment. The cultural values they hold dear to heart are assaulted in these classrooms, with some White teachers helping make that possible.

The deadly ignorance of certain White instructors inevitably leads, as Du Bois noted, to

the spitting upon and trampling upon of Black children. Most distressing at this moment of criticality, is [the arrogance](#) of those White teachers, who would argue that they know Black history, they know Black heritage, they *feel* Black struggle, they've read all works contained in the Black literary canon; and to have their cultural intelligence called into question is an impenetrable affront on their integrity. Last December, a New York suburban middle school White teacher, Eileen Bernstein, showed just why such practices could be dangerous.

Attempting to teach the consequences of slavery to her students, she [bound the hands and feet](#) of two black girls, then made them crawl under desks representing slave ships. With outrage bubbling from within the local NAACP chapter, she explained that the students had "volunteered" to do it. Beyond the obvious insensitivity displayed by this *worthy* instructor, one of the students, according to a parent, had no idea what was coming: "My daughter didn't volunteer for this. My daughter was embarrassed. She's extremely uncomfortable." According to her, this student immediately "burst into tears," when she got home.

Ms. Bernstein's arrogance forced her to offer a second excuse: It was a repeat lesson. This wasn't the first time she had humiliated her students, by having them reincarnate the brutal African-American slavery experience. But let not your heart be troubled. The school district superintendent was having "conversations" with his staff, "on how to deliver effective lessons." *Ingenuity!* These "conversations," much like the farcical *Race* conversations taking place every February in commercial media, should, as he might have hoped, prevent a reoccurrence in the near future.

Not surprising.

To show and prove their knowledge of Black people, many White institutions employ similarly silly and cynical tactics to celebrate the triumphs of Black History. As such, February is a special month to them. Not because it helps facilitate these arrangements, but because it perfectly lays out a foundation, upon which they can flaunt their confident understanding of "what it means to be Black."

An example of this occurred earlier this year, when a St. Louis Elementary School, with a 75% African-American population, [came under fire](#) for a Black History month flier schoolchildren were sent home with. Its headline read: "Why I hate Black History Month." And, no, it wasn't a prank. Neither was it a misprint. School administrators actually authorized the publication of a flier bearing such vitriol. It was meant to promote an upcoming Parent Teacher Organization meeting on the subject of Black History Month. Following merited protest from a number of parents, however, the school's P.R. team went into combat mode, insisting that no harm was intended. Their intention, they explained, was to emphasize the importance of cultivating a year-round appreciation for Black History Month. *It wasn't meant offensively.* That excuse, the school hoped, should sufficiently close the chapter to their blunder. But just to ensure parents didn't misconstrue their genuine intentions, another batch of fliers was printed; this time, reflecting it explicitly: "Why I LOVE Black History Month."

Again: Not surprising.

Examples like those above-listed abound. Instances where White authorities take matters into their hands, and try to "reason with," or "relate to," or "communicate with" Black students appropriately, usually leads up to extremely painful episodes. In 2006, a Kentucky High School teacher, Paul Dawson, [confirmed](#) why such thinking is costly and deleterious.

Paul Dawson, trying to attain some decorum in his classroom, commanded a Black student: "Sit down, Nigger." As expected, his arrogance [restricted him](#) from admitting any wrongdoing. He explained that this student had used *the dreaded word* first. At this, he was "stunned." Stunned, he was forced to blurt out: "Get away from the door, Nigger!" Dawson "repeated the same insult, because that's sort of what I've been trained to do." In a [report filed](#) by a local news network, WHAS 11, Dawson's racial target, Keysean Chavers, an honor-roll student, denied his teacher's allegations. Unable to vindicate himself, Dawson then complained that students at his school use the "slang-version" of Nigger, all the time.

Holding up two papers, his next move was to show how less of an issue, he believed, those comments should have amounted to. The first paper had written on it the following: "2 completely different words!" And the second: "Nigger" and "Nigga." As much as he hated the use of either version, he used/uses it to feel more "comfortable" with his Black students. "Why is the word used so frequently?" he asked, almost sympathetically. "I just don't understand it, and I'm trying to understand it," he hypocritically answered. "I need help. Yes, I use 'Nigga'. I've used it. I admit it. I put the 'h' on it to emphasize: it's 'Niggahhh'. You know, 'Niggah', 'Niggah this', 'Niggah please'. 'Niggah!' You know, 'can you lend a Niggah a pencil'?"

The school board responded with a suspension for 10 days and the almighty punishment of "Diversity Training." Paul Dawson's victim expressed regret that he wasn't fired; but, of course, a Black child's concern is as important as their future, to most school board members. (And that's not saying much.)

One last time: Not surprising.

In spite of all this, Hollywood has been very charitable in painting a rosy picture about the good, they perceive, comes with having White teachers in Black classrooms. And not just any White teacher, but those with premeditated, tacit presuppositions about Black students - males especially. Films like "Dangerous Minds" (1995), "High School High" (1996), "Sunset Park" (1996), and "Freedom Writers" (2007), have made a strong case for the intervention of White minds into *dungeons* - classrooms - of Blackness.

The plot is so predictable, even at the incipient:

A "gang" of Black kids are making noise, preferably with boom boxes, in a classroom, and then, in comes a White teacher. The teacher is dazed by the animalistic traits of those otherwise classified as "students." He/she strives to quiet down the classroom, but is laughed off, by the students, for doing so. The teacher fronts an aggressive move toward the lead noise-making student, and naturally, he/she is now caught in the crosshairs of enraged Black students - who begin taunting mercilessly. The teacher, scared for his/her life, dashes for the door, and complains to the principal that those "things" in the classroom are nothing like the students he/she was expecting to teach. "Monster" would be a more appropriate descriptor. Encouraged by the principal that these "unfortunate," indigent students have no moral structure, discipline or guide, the White teacher happily and suddenly sees the task ahead as a messianic mission - one God has appointed and expects to be carried out faultlessly. The next day, a smiling face walks into the classroom - nothing like the scared, confrontational character that barged in a day before. He/she patronizingly explains that each of the luckless Black children has a "dream," and they should "explore" that dream to the utmost level of fulfillment. The students also take upon a new perception of the

teacher. All's well now. The hatred of yesterday has passed over. The tender mercy of the White teacher was competent in making possible this reality. At the end of the movie, there is little to account for, in the individual lives of the students. If at all, one student moves on, while the others lag behind. Very little substance has passed through, save for the fact that the White teacher is now "comfortable" enough to wear a baseball cap flipped backward, and he/she has just inspired a group - once gang - of students to be the best that they can be - the reality that this "best" never really manifests, is of little concern to the producers and writers (actors, too).

James Baldwin had it right: "Hollywood threw acid in both your eyes before you were seven years old. You're blind, that's the first thing you realize is that you're blind. Later on, you begin to see - something. And, then, you begin to see why you couldn't see." [[Just Above My Head](#). New York: Dell Publishing, 1978, p. 529.]

What Hollywood has failed to report are the brutal accounts that take place in these classrooms, across the country. The truth no one wants to confront. The kind of truth Malcolm X unveiled in his autobiography:

I know that he probably meant well in what he happened to advise me that day. I doubt that he meant any harm. It was just in his nature as an American white man... Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised, I remember, and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He kind of half-smiled and said, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic... [Y]ou've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer - that's no realistic goal for a nigger. [[Autobiography of Malcolm X](#). New York: Ballantine Books, 1965 (1992 ed.), p. 37.]

This truth, unfortunately, has yet to embrace the light of day it merits. Black children deserve much more, and with a good enough effort, all artificial barriers currently in obstruction of their future can be eliminated - once and for all.

One of those wholesomely dedicated to the struggle of making this dream actualized, is Asheru (Gabriel Benn); a Hip-Hop artist, Peabody Award-winning writer, and educator. Co-founder of the [Hip Hop Educational Literacy Program](#) (H.E.L.P.), Asheru is a rare individual - confident enough to put his time where his title is.

Asheru agrees, right off the bat, that Black children are not being "treated fairly" by the educational system. He arrived at this conclusion because a "disproportionate number [of them] are being shipped shifted into Special Ed programs, and labeled as 'emotionally disturbed'." He contends that the cause of this shifting actually "boils down to a cultural difference," rather than a deficiency "on the part" of Black children. As a result, Black students are "held to a standard that is not only unrealistic, but also not culturally conducive" to their learning process. To support his thesis, Asheru lays out a powerful scenario:

If a Black child that "comes from a poor, single-parent household" is not privileged to a breakfast meal before school, chances are he/she might appear "irritable and not willing to comply with the teacher." Overtime, the child is defined as "oppositionally defiant." Because teachers and administrators might be unfamiliar with the financial reality that child comes from, he/she is misdiagnosed, and what should have ended up with the provision of school-sponsored free-breakfast programs, leads to another child harshly disciplined for impulses he/she has no control over.

As he sees it, "these kids are not 'special'. They [just] need special teachers."

"Sometimes, it's something that simple," he says. "Empathy" and "compassionate communication" can help bridge that gap. These values, practiced by Asheru himself, "go beyond the textbooks and classroom structure." Teachers of other ethnicities should "identify" themselves "culturally," without trying to *fake the funk*, he adds. Doing so would ease whatever cultural tensions might arise, unintentionally, between them and Black students. They should also understand that "kids from impoverished homes are very sensitive." They must be able to "relate" to their students "without judgment, and be able to constructively give them what they need to develop themselves."

Asheru makes the distinction between teachers and educators. In his forthcoming book (work in progress), "The Urban Educator's Manual: What Your Master's Degree Program Didn't Teach You," he writes: "Educators are those who make the strange, familiar and the familiar, strange." Educators "think outside of the box, integrate technology, are not afraid of being vulnerable, are open to change, are life-long learners, are culturally-responsible. They find teachable moments in everything." Some of the "common trappings" of "regular, old teachers," he explains, is that "they look at [teaching] as 'just another job'." This leads to the "further marginalization of students." In his upcoming book, he hopes to convey to teachers how much of a responsibility they have in imparting upon inner-city students the gift of "liberation."

Asheru sees literacy as a non-negotiable factor in the educational development of Black children: "When we talk about literacy, we don't just mean 'reading'. We're talking about financial literacy, cultural literacy, environmental literacy, [and so on]. We want kids to be 'in the know'. That's just the bottom line." The educational system, Asheru argues, currently teaches Black students to "fall in line." Independent thinking isn't appreciated. The students are expected "not to question what they're being taught." True education, however, teaches Black children "to teach themselves, so they can be self-sufficient."

Students are "very perceptive. They know who's here for them, and who's not." Educators must also be willing to "adjust to" the emotional frequency of their students, he says. "Our kids are in dire straits right now," Asheru warns, "and I really don't think people realize how bad it is."

His literacy program, H.E.L.P., has helped improve the reading levels of Black students, and yet, many school districts are still nonchalant in incorporating it into their curriculum. If this example teaches anything, it is that the battle ahead is far more difficult than is easily acknowledged. If concerned minds don't engage this issue seriously, "the achievement gap will widen [and] the educational gap will increase." It's that simple. Asheru's parting words are even more sobering: "If you don't want a gun in your face tomorrow, put a book in a hand today."

Whether Black children remain statistics in White institutions, and fall mercy to the godless grace of arrogant White teachers, is hardly the focus of our fight. Our fight is a larger and luminous one. Additionally, it must be clearly registered that this article is not meant, in any way, to disparage the good works some White teachers are putting forth in the lives of Black students; but rather, to lay bare the truth, that we may forge a successful path toward victory.

[This is Part 2 of a three-part series titled, "Education and the Future of Black Children."] Click [here](#) to read any of the commentaries in this series.


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