

AFTERWORD

SCIENTIFIC AND SOCIAL: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION

By **Alfred W. Tatum**

If one accepts the premise that there is a crisis in Black education, it is equally important to accept that a more powerful response is needed to move beyond a crisis state. Black education is defined here as education for the advancement of Black people. Central to any effort to craft and execute a response is figuring out what to become smarter about en masse, whom to include, which coalitions and institutions to build, and how to define and mobilize an agenda that catapults Black education to yield the desired outcomes for Black people in schools and the global society. The response has to be interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from the social sciences and natural sciences, with a tripartite focus on historical understandings, analysis of contemporary factors, and attention to future projections.

A response to the crisis in Black education should begin with the fundamental questions: What do we know about the crisis? How do we know it? Unfortunately, it was difficult for me to identify the most important single work published on the crisis in Black education that captures both historical perspectives and contemporary perspectives from a wide range of disciplines. However, a review of the *Handbook of African American Education* suggests there are several dimensions to Black education that include the ongoing struggle for an excellent education for Black people that begs for emulation. They include the landscape of teaching and learning for Black children and adults in US schooling, the dearth of Black leadership across Pk-12 schooling, the presence of Black people in institutions of higher education, the presence and marginalization of scholarship and research produced by Black scholars, and the impact of the Black voice shaping educational policy.¹ This limited educational frame does not include the presence

or absence of Black people or attention to factors impacting Black people across other fields of study and institutional and cultural structures that impact educational outcomes.

Scientists who study the universe have indicated that the universe goes through periods of expansion and contraction, and does not remain in an unchanging state. Similarly, I argue, Black education has undergone periods of expansion and contraction and does not remain static. In *The Education of Black People*, the American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois offered the following in 1973:

We must carefully understand the age in which we live; above all, we must realize that this is an age of tremendous activity; that today no race which is not prepared to put forth the full might of its carefully developed powers can hope to maintain itself as a world power. On one point, therefore, there can be no question—no hesitation: unless we develop our full capabilities, we cannot survive.²

Du Bois's words sit at the intersection of expansion or contraction of Black education. Any hesitation to develop full capabilities will lead to contraction and the ultimate destruction of the race. A race putting forth the full might of its carefully developed powers will expand through increased world power. In my analysis, any discussion of the crisis in Black education has to recognize the ongoing progress and resistance put forth by Blacks, within and outside of the US, to secure and protect their right to an education. There also has to be some recognition of surrender by Black youth and adults to the most egregious political, economic, and cultural assaults on their humanity, and the failure of some Black adults to protect Black children either due to a non-response, a lukewarm response, or an ill-timed late response to the crisis. Drawing from the novelist Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, this is certainly not the best of times in Black education, but it is far from the worst of times.

The historical archives are replete with the struggles that ordinary Black people in the American South faced to provide education for themselves under federal- and state-sanctioned denial and repression of educating African Americans. Still, Black people secured literacy to attain power that was withheld from them. Historical narratives similar to the one below capture the determination of Blacks:

I ain't never been to school but I jes' picked up readin'. With some of my first money I ever earn I buy me a old blue-back Webster. I carry dat book wherever I goes. When I plow down a row I stop at de end to rest and den I overlook de lesson.³

The expressed individual determination reflected in the quote is not intended to romanticize the struggle for Black education, but it does suggest that any people determined to abate a crisis can do whatever they deem necessary without seeking permission from others. This determination is manifest in the ongoing struggle of Black educators and those outside the field of education who work independently or collaborate with others to counter the neoliberal assaults that continue to position Black children, youth, and adults as guinea pigs for economic, legislative, and political reforms.

From a liberationist theological perspective, there has to be a deep belief in the non-permanence of any crisis, despite the deluge of scientific data and measurements and sociological indices that function as constant reminders of the dismal state of educational and societal outcomes, particularly among Blacks living in poverty. However, breaking down barriers should not be a focus of Black education. Instead, the focus should be placed on what is worth preserving and what is necessary to stoke social and scientific genius and consciousness in a world undergoing an intellectual explosion amid scientific, social, and racial assaults on Black people.

Those who are committed to fashioning new ground for Black education must accept that there will not be a single unified theory. In science, for example, Albert Einstein sought a unified theory capable of describing nature's forces within a single, all-encompassing, coherent framework. He wanted to illuminate the workings of the universe with clarity never before achieved. He was looking for the beauty and elegance of the universe, but never realized his dream, because a single, unified framework does not exist.⁴ As with the universe, there is no ultimate theory or single coherent framework to shape Black education now or in the future.

The orientations taken toward Black education will inevitably dictate and shape the outcomes. Examining Black education from multiple dimensions and grounding the focus of Black education in critical aims are prudent courses of action. For example, asking the questions “What

are the features of Black education necessary to engage all Blacks in the scientific protection of the race?” or “What are the features of Black education focused on shaping cosmological beings with a deep sense of the universe?” may yield different features from Black education focused on sociological and political aims. These foci, however, will always intersect with race, class, gender, and other identities in highly racialized environments. Therefore, I offer that a focus on Black education must begin with strong conceptualizations with aims to concretize those conceptualizations. My colleagues who penned the articles for this themed edition offered several dimensions and a range of perspectives of the crisis in Black education. However, there is so much work that must take place to build on the past and shape the future. This work must be interdisciplinary to capture the scientific and social underpinnings necessary for elevating Black education to benefit Black people in a world that has openly displayed hostility or paternalistic indifference to their presence.

Notes:

1. Linda C. Tillman, ed., *The Sage Handbook of African American Education* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009).
2. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Education of Black People* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973, 2001).
3. Phyliss Belt-Beyan, *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions* (Westport: Praeger, 2004).
4. Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and The Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).



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