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“Stakes Is High”: Educating New Century Students

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My apologies to iconic hip-hop artists, De La Soul for I have shamelessly appropriated the title, “Stakes is high” to underscore the importance of the work ahead for educators, students, parents, community members, and researchers as we attempt to develop a generation of what I call “new century” students for a world we can hardly imagine. Through this article, I would like to address the so-called achievement gap, the concept of new century students, and the magnitude of the challenges that lay ahead—particularly as they pertain to African American students.

Keywords: *culturally relevant pedagogy, hip-hop pedagogy*

ACHIEVEMENT GAP?

The term “achievement gap” has worked its way into most mainstream discussions about scholastic disparities between Black and Brown students and their White, middle class counterparts. To be sure, we are not talking about all Black and Brown students or all White students. Rather, the discourse is about the pattern of underachievement that is extant among these groups of students. The patterns are so regular and so predictable that we have come to expect them. But, I contend (and have contended since 2006) that what we actually have is not so much an achievement gap as what I term an “educational debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Some might argue that I am merely making a semantic difference since in the end both sides are identifying academic achievement disparities. However, what I believe have been central to my argument are the root causes of the disparities and the sense of social responsibility that accompanies those causes.

When we describe what has transpired in our communities as an achievement gap we slip into a discourse of individual or personal responsibility for a situation that has been centuries in the making. The notion of the achievement gap seems to cast blame on individual students, parents, schools and teachers without looking at the structural inequalities that have been at work since the establishment of the nation. Achievement gap language suggests that each individual is responsible for his or her own educational circumstance and Black and Brown students need to “catch up” to their White counterparts without acknowledging the ways that catching up is made near impossible by the many structural barriers the society has imposed on them.

When I argue that what we really have is an education debt I am speaking of the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral components of inequality that shape the contours of this nation. And just as we claim to have shared responsibility for the nation’s economic debt, we have shared responsibility for the education debt. Briefly, the historical debt came as a result of the failure and outright denial of education and educational opportunities to African American children from the founding of the nation. Indeed, the fact that it was once illegal for African Americans to learn to read says more about the society’s notion of literacy and learning as valuable commodities than any trite statements about education ever could. After the Civil War, the denial of real education persisted. In the South, there were separate and unequal school opportunities for more than 100 years. In the North, the system of *de facto* segregation often produced similar results as in the South. Today, almost 90% of Black and Brown students attend

what Orfield and Frankenberg (2008) call hyper-segregated schools. The historic debt alone speaks to the systematic denial of equal education to Black students.

Coupled with the historic debt is the economic debt. This debt speaks to the persistent underfunding of African American schools that not only began centuries ago but is also manifest in today's schools. Because U.S. schools are typically funded through property taxes and African American families are more likely to live in communities with lower property values, they are unable to generate enough tax revenues to fund their schools at the same levels as their suburban counterparts. Therefore, two promises offered by major court cases—*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Serrano v. Priest* (1971)—to desegregate and equally fund schools have *never* been realized. It is impossible to talk about an achievement gap without acknowledging the failure to live up to the letter of the law that would go a long way in alleviating these achievement disparities.

I call these failures debts because their backdrop is the incredible effort and sacrifice that African Americans made to build the nation. They fought valiantly in every one of the nation's wars from the American Revolution to Afghanistan. Abraham Lincoln would declare the entrance of 200,000 Black troops on the side of the Union Army the difference maker in the Civil War (Takaki, 2008). Black people literally built the city of Washington, DC. When Lafayette pulled out of the planning, it was Benjamin Banneker who completed the architectural plans. African American labor dragged the burdensome marble and quartz through the town to construct the U.S. Capital (Robinson, 2001). The cotton that made the South viable was picked by African American hands and that cotton was shipped to northern mills that grew rich and prosperous and eventually turned those profits into the insurance industry (Farrow, Lang, & Frank, 2006). Without African American free labor it is inconceivable that this nation could have risen to greatness. The lack of payment for this work forms the basis of the debt.

The third aspect of the debt is socio-political. Along with the inability to receive an education was the inability to participate in the self-determination a democratic political process offers. Without access to the franchise, African Americans could make no decisions about their lives. Starting in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act one sees a meteoric rise in Black voter participation and recognize that from 1789 (the ratification of the Constitution) to 1965—176 years—Black people did not have universal suffrage. This is not a gap; it is a debt!

Finally, I have spoken of a component of the debt that is less empirically grounded—the moral debt. Despite the inability to quantify moral behavior we can certainly recognize it. The juxtaposition between the magnificent founding documents—the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the U.S. Constitution (1789)—and the reality of Black life in America, raises serious moral and ethical questions about who we are as a nation and the nature of our commitment to equality and justice for all. This brief synopsis of the glaring disparities forces me to insist that we are encountering huge structural inequalities that cannot be swept away under the achievement gap language. What exacerbate the debt are the rapid technological and global changes that make today's students incredibly different from previous generations. I call today's young people, "New Century" students.

NEW CENTURY STUDENTS

For the past 27 years I have been working on university campuses and have seen students change and develop in remarkable ways. Those changes have occurred more rapidly because of technology and globalization. Their access and relationship to information and people are extraordinary and yet, most classrooms (from kindergarten to college) make little or no use of these resources. We fail to recognize how different the experiences of today's students are.

Each year Beloit College (2013) in Beloit, Wisconsin conducts the Mindset List for its incoming freshman class. The Class of 2016 Mindset List includes the following:

- They have always lived in cyberspace, addicted to a new generation of "electronic narcotics."
- Michael Jackson's family, not the Kennedys constitute "American Royalty."

- If they miss “The Daily Show” they can always get their news on YouTube.
- Bill Clinton is a senior statesman of whose presidency they have little knowledge.
- They have never seen an airplane “ticket.”
- Women have always piloted war planes and space shuttles.
- “Star Wars” has always been just a film, not a defense strategy.
- They have come to political consciousness during a time of increasing doubts about America’s future.
- The “Twilight Zone” involves vampires, not Rod Serling.
- They watch television everywhere but on a television.

These are just 10 of 75 items on the Mindset List to underscore how rapidly new technologies have widened the generation gap. Aging baby boomers who considered themselves “hip,” “cool,” and “with it” struggle to connect with Generation Y students who will teach “New Century” students. Now while I have not conducted a scientific study of these students I have made some “testable” observations about them as learners and these tendencies should be considered as we evaluate our teaching:

- They believe “multi-tasking” is an efficient way to work.
- They see themselves more as “consumers” than “students” and as such they are either “purchasing” an education or “shopping” for schools.
- They receive their news and information via push notices from their favorite Internet sites, blogs and programs like “The Daily Show.”
- Although heavily invested in “social justice” they are less sanguine about “social welfare” (particularly if they have to bear the costs).
- E-mail is an “old technology” and would prefer to communicate via instant messaging and tweets.
- “Library” research can best be done on their desktop, which means they rarely leaf through an entire journal.
- They believe it is important to “stay connected” thus their phones are always at hand (and classes that prohibit cell phone use interrupt their connections).
- They have very different conceptions of copyright, intellectual property, and plagiarism rules.

These observations are not to suggest that we have to adapt to these students’ standards but rather that it is important to know where they are so that we can do a better job of understanding them and assisting them in the classroom and beyond.

The New Digital Divide

A decade ago when people referenced the “digital divide” they were talking solely about the way social status (e.g. class, race, or ethnicity) kept some students from accessing electronic information. However, the advent of smart phones, tablet computing and other mobile devices has made electronic communication ubiquitous. Even in developing nations, mobile devices provide access to information and global communications in classrooms. In a recent trip to a rural community in South Africa where residents did not even have reliable electricity, I learned that most of the high school students owned mobile devices (i.e., cell phones) and were using them to participate in social networking such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. The new digital divide is that which exists between generations. The teacher on the flip phone is unable to keep up with his or her smart phone-using students to maintain live Twitter feeds or classroom blogs. When our students can access information and knowledge through iTunes U (<http://www.apple.com/education/itunes-u/>) and other open access online classrooms we must create more imaginative and engaging spaces in our courses and think differently about what it means to teach.

Hip-Hop as the Common Culture

This point will probably be the most controversial—hip-hop can be an important cultural vehicle for connecting with New Century students. I am *not* suggesting that the over 30 crowd should adopt the hip-hop aesthetic. Rather, the anthropologist in me believes it is important to know as much about a culture with which you work as possible. For instance, when teaching Puerto Rican students in North Philadelphia I began a deep and rigorous study of Puerto Rican culture and the specifics of the two Puerto Rican communities that made their way to Philadelphia. Knowing more about those cultures helped me plan relevant learning activities, increased my communication with the parents, and boosted student success. Similarly, when I moved to California I needed to do similar research as I worked with Chicano and Mexican national students. Again, knowing more about Mexican and Mexican American culture made me better able to serve the needs of the students who sat in my classes each day.

Today's students are in some ways a "new breed." I have called them New Century students and because of their deep connection to hip-hop they are "shape-shifters." They do not fit neatly into the rigid categories of race, class, gender, or national origin that we have relied on to make distinctions and create hierarchy. Their sports heroes and heroines include Kobe Bryant and Jeremy Linn, Gabby Douglas and Lolo Jones. They listen to Justin Bieber, Bruno Mars, and Nicki Minaj. They are more likely to endorse same-sex marriage and can separate out hip-hop traditions. Where baby boomers and their parents hear it all as "noise" (and remember, our parents called rock & roll and rhythm & blues "noise"), they point out that there are important differences between Lil' Wayne and Immortal Technique, Lil' Kim and Ana Tijoux. They know that this culture they have created is a mash-up with permeable boundaries. They are simultaneously sacred and profane with deep religious convictions and an embrace of all things secular. MC's like Lupe Fiasco and Omar Offendum do not hide their Muslim faith. They work in local, national, and global contexts—with music and films about Trayvon Martin and Arab Spring. Hip-hop filmmaker Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi (2005) makes global hip-hop films such as "Inventos: Hip hop Cubano" and "Home Grown: Hip life in Ghana" (<http://hiplifemovie.com/>).

These young people are not slackers who do not care about education. Quite the contrary, they desire to be deeply engaged in learning. But they do not want to receive a passive education where rote memorization and regurgitation passes for learning. They want to innovate, create, and implement. They are, as hip-hop science educator Christopher Emdin of Teachers College, Columbia University says, "science-minded," and as science-minded individuals they want to "do" science rather than read about it.

Scholars such as Jeff Duncan-Andrade at San Francisco State, Patrick Camangian of the University of San Francisco, Ernest Morrell of Teachers College, Dawn-Elissa Fisher of San Francisco State, Elaine Richardson, also known as "Docta E" of Ohio State University, and Maisha Winn of the University of Wisconsin-Madison understand why it is important for university scholars and researchers to stay engaged with communities and schools—as teachers and community activists. Teachers College professor Marc Lamont Hill has found ways to engage popular media and conduct research. H. Samy Alim of Stanford University is working with hip-hop in global contexts. Sam Siedel (www.HipHopGenius.org), working with TC Ellis (David "TC" Ellis, the founder and director of the High School for the Recording Arts), has helped to document the work of the High School for the Recording Arts (<http://www.hsra.org/>) where students previously headed for failure gain a second chance to put their knowledge and skill in popular culture and the arts to work for both fun and profit.

STAKES IS HIGH

So what is at stake with a seemingly insurmountable education debt and a generation of New Century students? The short answer is everything—the way we live our lives, the redefinition of prosperity and equal opportunity, and the meaning and relevance of our history as a people.

Gone are the days when one takes a job as a 22-year old and retires from it at 65. Today's young people will have on average 14 jobs in their career. They will display little loyalty to an employer because they realize that employers will display little loyalty toward them. New Century students play video games approximately 3 and one half hours a week. They watch almost 16 and one half hours of television a week. They spend 5 and one half hours on the computer each week. And, they spend about 2 hours per week reading a book.

While parents and teachers use e-mail, New Century students send text messages, instant messages, tweets, and blogs. They will have 14 jobs before they are 38 years old and most of those jobs are not yet created. Schools are ill-equipped to prepare students for jobs they cannot envision. Although the nation has thrived on a narrative of prosperity, for the first time the younger generation is looking at a future in which they will not do better than their parents.

Almost 48% of our African American males are failing to graduate from high school (Schott Foundation, 2012). When we parse the data by poor urban areas, almost 52% of our African American male students are failing to graduate from high school.

The United States has over 2.3 million people incarcerated in jails and prison—the largest number of any western nation. The number of African Americans who are incarcerated is about 1 million (Alexander, 2012). As a consequence of felony convictions, many of these Black people have lost the right of the franchise and cannot vote and are effectively left out of the political process.

The largest rise of HIV/AIDS cases is among African American heterosexual women—the same group of people who are less likely to have access to quality health care (visit CDC's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/risk/gender/women/index.html>).

While the population of the nation is becoming increasingly diverse, the spaces of privilege and access are becoming increasingly White and wealthy. Currently, the U.S. Supreme Court is set to decide a case, *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013) that is likely to change the face of affirmative action across the country. Given the recent school desegregation cases, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle* (2007) and *Louisville* decisions, it is unlikely that *Fisher* will be decided in favor of African Americans and Latinos.

Access to funds for college education is shrinking. Flagship campuses like the University of North Carolina, the University of California, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison are enrolling freshman classes whose average family income is about \$125,000 per year. We know those numbers rarely reflect the economic realities for African American families.

When I went into public school teaching in the late 1960s I was joining a Black teaching force that represented about 10% of the overall teaching force. When I began researching effective teachers of African American students in the late 1980s to early 1990s Black teachers comprised 8% of the teaching force. Today, Black teachers make up less than 5% of the nation's public school teachers (NCES, 2011). This means that it is possible for students, Black, White, and Latino to go through 13 years of public schooling—from kindergarten to 12th grade—and never have a Black teacher.

The so-called remedies for our schools are what A. Wade Boykin calls, “transactional” (Boykin, 2012). We are quick to jump at superficial solutions such as “longer school days,” “longer school years,” or “school uniforms” without asking any sound empirical questions about what it means to spend more time dressed like everyone else in the same bad school with the same bad teachers one had before donning a uniform.

Given the dire nature of this current situation you might imagine that I am not hopeful about our future. Paradoxically, nothing could be farther from the truth. The very nature of our history and culture is that of hope. How can a people who were stolen from their ancestral lands, survived the horrific middle passage, be subjected to the most brutal form of physical stress coupled with psychological stress and social exclusion rise to places of prominence in the country and the world? We are a resilient people who defy the odds at every turn.

My own story is instructive. My maternal great grandfather Jack Lyles was born at the end of the period of chattel slavery. My grandparents on both sides—Robert and Cora Woodward and William and Mary Ladson—were sharecroppers. My parents, James and Jessie Ladson endured legal apartheid—state-sponsored segregation. Nevertheless, I am an endowed professor at a major research university.

Every generation has its own task and our task is not more difficult than that of those who went before us. Our task is not harder than chattel slavery. It is not harder than sharecropping or legal segregation. In the grand scheme of things, the task to educate our children is nowhere near as difficult as the tasks our ancestors took on. Educating our children is the most important task we face because “stakes is high!”

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