

Educating Black Students

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The problems surrounding the education of America's black youth are usually presumed to follow from either racism or poverty or both. America's terrible racial history adds a compelling logic to this presumption, and no doubt poverty remains a profound problem even if racism is far less a problem than it once was. But I believe that something very different from these two familiar difficulties is undermining the academic development of today's black youth. Allow me to begin with a speculation.

Suppose America decided that black people were poor in music because of deprivations due to historical racism. Clearly their improvement in this area would be contingent on the will of white America to intervene on their behalf. Surely well-designed interventions would enable blacks to close the musical gap with whites. Imagine that in one such program a young, reluctant, and disengaged Charlie Parker is being tutored in the saxophone by a college student.

The tutor learns that Parker's father drank too much and abandoned the family, and that his mother has had an affair with a married man. Young Charlie is often late to his tutorial sessions. Secretly the tutor comes to feel that probably

his real purpose is therapeutic, because the terrible circumstances of Charlie's life make it highly unlikely that he will ever be focused enough to master the complex keying system of the saxophone or learn to read music competently. The tutor says as much in a lonely, late-night call to his own father, who tells him in a supportive tone that in this kind of work the results one works for are not always the important ones. If Charlie doesn't learn the saxophone, it doesn't mean that he isn't benefiting from the attention. Also, the father says, "What pleases me is how much you are growing as a human being."

And Charlie smiles politely at his tutor but secretly feels that the tutor's pained attentions are evidence that he, Charlie, must be inadequate in some way. He finds it harder to pay attention during his lessons. He has also heard from many that the saxophone—a European instrument—really has little to do with who he is. He tells this to the tutor one day after a particularly poor practice session. The tutor is sympathetic because he, too, has recently learned that it is not exactly esteem building to impose a European instrument on an African-American child.

Finally Charlie stops coming to the program. The tutor accepts this failure as inevitable. Sadly, he realizes that he had been expecting it all along. But he misses Charlie, and for the first time he feels a genuine anger at his racist nation, a nation that has bred such discouragement into black children. The young tutor realizes that surely Charlie could have been saved had there been a program to intervene earlier in his life. And for the first time in his life the tutor understands the necessity for political involvement. He redoubles his commitment to an America that works "proactively" to transform and uplift its poor, and that carries out this work with genuine respect for cultural differences.

The following fall, back at college, he says in amazement to his favorite history professor, "Can you imagine? Teaching saxophone to a poor black kid from Kansas City?"

Of course the true story of Charlie Parker is quite different from this. Though he did grow up poor, black, and fatherless in the depression, he also became the greatest improvisational saxophone player in the history of music. When he died far too young at the age of thirty-five, he had already changed Western music forever.

Why was Charlie Parker, along with thousands and thousands of other blacks (few of whom were geniuses on a par with him), so successful at the high and complex art form of jazz despite suffering the same litany of deprivations that is today used to explain the weak academic performance of black students? Throughout the 1990s, the academic gap between blacks and whites widened, when every objective circumstance suggested that it should have narrowed. Worse, several studies including one by the American College Board tell us that this gap is wider between middle-class blacks and whites than it is between poor blacks and whites. This refutes the conventional wisdom that has always seen economic deprivation as the culprit in poor academic performance among blacks.

No other student group in America (and possibly the entire world) has been more studied and had its academic weaknesses more analyzed than black American students. No group has had more special programs created on its behalf or more educational theories generated in its name. And today there is no student group whose performance is more fretted over than black students. There is even an unspoken assumption that this group's performance is an indication of the moral health of the society.

Yet the general picture of black academic performance is nothing less than terrible. Black students at every age and grade level generally perform worse than all other groups on virtually every academic measure—test scores, grades, school attendance levels, drop-out rates, suspension rates, and so on. Black college students have the lowest collective grade point average and the highest collective drop-out rate of all student groups. And throughout the 1990s the

notorious academic gap between black and white students (SAT scores are one obvious measure) only widened, despite the fact that it had been narrowing a little during the 1970s and 1980s.

It is the relentlessness, the seeming insistence on academic weakness in black students that mystifies. I think at least part of the explanation for this can be seen in the story of the real Charlie Parker—a man who came from an area of life where black performance has always been superb rather than terrible.

I believe the real Charlie Parker had two profound advantages over his fictional counterpart. The first was that the America he lived in did not care at all about his musical development. During the depression there were no programs or tutors devoted to black musical development. In this void of indifference there was nothing between Charlie and his saxophone. Maybe he heard the music of a great musician such as Lester Young or Ben Webster and was deeply moved. However he came to the alto saxophone, the disinterest of the society in his playing allowed him to relate directly to the business of making music. There was no subtext for him to decipher as he worked at the instrument, no intimations of guilt in the larger society toward him, and no sense that his achievement might have a social and political significance. He was simply a young boy with an instrument who wanted to make music. As his commitment to the instrument deepened, he had no trouble setting himself to the hard work and long hours of practice that mastery required.

The second great advantage was evident after Charlie became very good on his instrument. Wanting to show off his new talent, he sat in on a jam session with a visiting band—a common practice among black musicians then and now. After he played long enough for the professionals to get a measure of his skills, the drummer dislodged a cymbal from his drum set and threw it at Charlie. Like the infamous hook in the theater, it was the sign to get off stage and go

back to the “woodshed,” the metaphorical crucible in which musicians develop their craft. So Charlie’s second great advantage was that he belonged to a community in which only excellence was acceptable—a community that enforced excellence as an impersonal standard. The drummer was not humiliating Charlie so much as pointing to the bar of excellence. These two advantages—the disinterest of the larger society and an impersonal devotion to excellence in his own community—made Charlie’s economic deprivations virtually irrelevant to his achievement. In this “clean” environment his deprivation was only a prod; it excused him from nothing.

But does this mean that the social program and the tutor were actual disadvantages for the fictional Charlie? I think so. The tutor let his idea of Charlie’s deprivations move him to an unexamined faith that concern was the true ingredient missing from Charlie’s life. If the tutor could show concern, if America could overcome its intractable indifference toward blacks and become concerned about their uplift, if people could consider mentoring, if educational funding could be more equitably distributed, if. . . . The mistake in this faith is that it makes the concern of others the agent of black social transformation. In this faith blacks are conceived as essentially inert people so overcome by deprivation that only the concerned intervention of others can transform them into self-sufficient people. Others act; blacks are acted upon. This is a profound mistake with a litany of terrible consequences for blacks. It encourages this people coming up from three centuries of oppression to trade away agency over their own advancement in order to gain the help of others. Worse, it encourages them to argue their own weakness in order to qualify for such help. It puts them in the same position as the fictional Charlie—looking to a “tutor” who is inept and self-absorbed rather than to their own talents and energies.

What is agency? It is ultimate responsibility combined with possession. You have agency over something—a life, a

problem, an education—when you have the freedom that allows you to be responsible for it and when you accept that this responsibility belongs to you whether or not others support you.

Many families in America want their children to become well educated, and they are willing to do what is necessary to agent that goal. They read to them in early childhood. They ask for their thoughts in frequent and pleasant conversations. They take them places and teach them to respond to the larger world. And then, having consciously nurtured their child's mind, having understood this to be an important part of parenting, they try to arrange schooling that will continue this process, schooling that is safe and challenging. If the local public school does not offer this, they will go elsewhere to find it. They will move to a better school district or pay for a private school or even try home schooling because they understand that a poor local school does not excuse them from the responsibility of providing a good education for their children. Circumstances can surely limit what even the most responsible family can achieve, but no family is ever really excused from the responsibility of imaginatively fighting difficult circumstances. President Clinton, of course, showed this kind of agency when he sent his daughter to a private school. As the responsible agent of his daughter's education, he simply chose an elite private education over a poor public one in the schools of Washington, D.C. I would have done the same thing. Agency involves determination and commitment. The real Charlie Parker withstood the ire of his neighbors who complained of his constant practicing. President Clinton withstood the political fallout that came to him as a Democratic President seemingly scorning the public schools when it came to his own daughter.

A recent study from the Manhattan Institute (Education Freedom Index) found that academic achievement was higher in states where more “educational freedom” pre-

vailed. In states such as Arizona and Minnesota, where there are many charter schools to choose from and where home schooling is allowed, SAT and NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) scores were significantly higher than in states such as Hawaii and West Virginia, where charter schools and home schooling are discouraged or heavily regulated. Could it be that the more “educationally free” states encourage their parents to be the responsible agents of their children’s educations? Or maybe the demand for more agency by parents in some states leads to freer educational policies.

The point is that there is an indisputable relationship between agency and excellence and that black America—as with all other communities—performs well wherever it sees itself as the responsible agent and performs poorly wherever it doesn’t. Agency is a call to the will, a demand that we find the will even if our circumstances are bleak, even if great sacrifices are required. Because agency is so demanding, it has to be supported by an entire constellation of values that today would be called “traditional,” a commitment to excellence, hard work, delayed gratification, initiative, risk-taking, etc. Among other things these values organize and focus the will. Agency is not really possible without them. Or conversely, agency always makes these values necessary.

It is certainly true that poverty and racism can affect how well a group performs in a given area. But it is also true that poverty and even racism do not prevent a group from achieving excellence when it takes agency over an area and begins to live by the values that allow the will to be applied. Charlie Parker was one of thousands of black Americans who made a living in music even while segregation was pervasive. Obviously this does not mean that segregation was a benign or tolerable institution. It merely points to the relationship between group agency and group performance. American minority groups that have taken agency over their educational performance—Jews and

many Asian-American groups are obvious examples—have done in education what blacks have done in music. They have excelled.

The first sign that a group (race, ethnic group, tribe, nationality, gender, region, etc.) has taken agency over an area is that it impersonally enforces a rigorous standard of excellence. Somehow the group decides that its future or even its survival depend on its performance in a given area. Soon it begins to esteem individuals who perform well in those areas. This does not mean that others are devalued, only that those who perform well are seen as special carriers of group pride and honor. Achievement is reinforced by the group bestowing special esteem on its high-performing members. And in group lore this high performance is presumed to result from a special genius that is unique to the group. Thus, Charlie Parker's musical greatness was seen to come from a special black genius, and he was rewarded with much esteem from his group.

When a group takes agency in an area, it evolves an "identity" legend or mythology that in effect says, "we do such-and-such very well"—"we sing well," "we are smart," "we know business," etc. The group presumes itself excellent in the area it takes agency over and then rewards individuals for manifesting this excellence that is now said to be inherent to the group. People grow up in the knowledge that their group excels in certain areas and that their membership (identity) in the group may give them special potential in these areas.

Of course, once this self-fulfilling prophecy is set in motion, the group will likely become excellent in the area it has taken agency over. And from this achievement it also begins to build very real expertise in this area that can be continually refined and passed on within the group. So there is a movement from agency to a priori faith to achievement to evolving expertise.

In some cases excellence no doubt shows itself before the group takes agency. Maybe there were many superb black

singers before the group claimed an inherent excellence in this area. But this is only a chicken-or-egg argument. Agency—a level of responsibility in which the group proudly and fearlessly enforces impersonal standards of excellence in an area as a statement of group identity—must happen for a group to perform competitively in an area over time.

Group identities are constructed out of agency by what a group takes responsibility for and by the degree of that responsibility. Despite poverty and intractable segregation, the real Charlie Parker succeeded because he developed his talent in an area that was at the center of his group's identity. The extraordinary power of this identity-agency paradigm is evident today in the multi-billion-dollar rap music industry, an industry created and sustained by the very same deprived inner-city blacks who perform so terribly in school.

Of course, group identities are not shaped in a vacuum. In Parker's day music was open to blacks but neurosurgery was not. Music could be learned and practiced without a higher education; medicine could not be. Oppressed minorities, in effect, have always negotiated with a hostile larger society over where they could invest the group identity by taking agency. In today's world this negotiation is no longer necessary. In America groups can take agency anywhere they wish. They can remold their identity at will. Individuals can select wider circles of identity than the traditional groups they are born into and take agency wherever they see possibility. Today's America is a fluid society with little restriction on the assumption of agency beyond the individual imagination.

This said, I believe this identity-agency paradigm still affects the performance profile of black Americans. Group identity is very strong in this group, which means that the group's taking or rejecting of agency is more determining of performance than it might be in other groups. Black America now practices identity politics more intensely than any

other group in American life. Conforming to the group's selection of agency wins one an esteemed identity; nonconformity puts one's group identity in great jeopardy. So it is no accident that the academic performance of black students is so weak today. The group has not taken agency over the academic development of its children in the way that it has taken agency over their development in other areas. One remarkable indication of this is the fact that excellent black students from middle school to college are often taunted as "white wannabes." This constitutes nothing less than a tragic irony: the esteemed identity goes to the weak black student and is denied to the high-achieving black student. The excellent student is denied a feeling of belonging and esteem from his group. He is made to suffer isolation and alienation for his academic excellence.

I must add here that wider America has also not taken agency over the academic development of black children. No one has. For the last thirty-five years, neither black America nor wider America enforced rigorous standards of academic excellence for black youth. Less and less has been asked of black students and weaker-and-weaker performance has been allowed to count for them—social promotion in K-12 and lower standards for college admission than for other groups. The struggle by universities across the country to keep affirmative action is also, inadvertently, a struggle to keep admission standards lower for blacks, to continue the practice of asking less of them than of others. No group in American society has been more betrayed by American education over the past thirty-five years than black American young people. It is now clear that the primary device for treating their academic weakness has been to grant them a license to academic mediocrity. I have written elsewhere about the peculiar symbiosis of black anger and white guilt that this blindness to simple human need was born of. Suffice it to say here (in a bit of an oversimplification) that whites have had to prove themselves innocent of racism by supporting programs of low-

ered expectations and double standards for blacks. Blacks understandably developed a sense of entitlement that became a part of their group identity. What happened quite unintentionally is that both groups took agency for black weakness rather than for black strength. Both groups needed the weakness more than the strength in their symbiotic trading. Without black weakness how could America redeem its moral authority from its shameful history of racism? And, if blacks were strong academically, how could they get the programs and money that are a proxy for historical justice? Untold billions of government and private dollars have been spent since the 1960s in the name of black disadvantage. Millions of careers have developed and flourished. Black academic success would end the flow of these dollars and destroy the rationale for these careers.

So when educators sit down to consider how to improve the achievement of black students, they are dealing with a group that is, at the very least, ambivalent about taking agency over the education of its young people—this despite all its vociferous claims to the contrary. In fact, this group inadvertently protects the academic weakness and mediocrity of its youth as a way of sustaining its entitlement. It uses group identity more to punish academic excellence than to punish academic weakness. The weak achiever is the true black; the high achiever is a white wannabe.

Educators today must understand that the group identity of their black students—as currently constructed—is very likely a barrier to the educational disciplines that high academic achievement requires. It may be impossible for educators to entirely overcome a barrier this profound. Group identity is strong in all people and stronger still in blacks. And as long as wider America continues to use black weakness as the occasion to pay off an historical debt, the incentive lies with weakness rather than with strength.

Still, the challenge for today's educators is to do what the black identity is currently failing to do: to enforce for black

students at all levels a strict and impersonal accountability to the highest standards of excellence. The challenge is to stand before that poor black student from a single-parent home and a drug-infested neighborhood and ask more than is asked of his wealthy white counterpart in a suburban private school. This is agency. This is the difference between the fictional and the real Charlie Parker.