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Leaving Us Behind: A Political Economic Interpretation of NCLB and the Miseducation of African American Males

By Jamel K. Donnor & Kmt G. Shockley

Introduction

The educational tribulations of African American males are well documented (Clark, 1989/1965; Davis & Jordan, 1994; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Polite & Davis, 1999; Majors & Billison, 1992). According to a report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2004), 70% of African American males entering the ninth grade will not graduate with their cohort (p. 2). The foregoing figures are troubling considering that the overall percentage of African American students enrolled in public schools has increased from 14.8% in 1972 to 15.6% in 2006¹ (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 85). Despite this modicum of progress, the education system's ability to adequately serve African American males is worsening.

The need to address the low academic achievement of Black males is important for two reasons. The first reason is the link between low educational attainment and incarceration (Mauer & King, 2004; Justice Policy

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Institute, 2007; Children's Defense Fund, 2007). The second reason is the shift in the skills needed for productive participation in the global economy (Green, 2001). With regards to the relationship between low education attainment and incarceration, the Justice Policy Institute (2007) reported that "52% of African American male high school dropouts had prison records by their early thirties" in 1999 (p. 11). Incidentally, the incarceration rate per 100,000 African American men between the ages of 18-64 was 7,923 compared to 1,072 for White men (Human Rights Watch, 2008). These statistics are problematic considering that African Americans only constitute 12% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Based on the foregoing statistics, one can easily surmise that there are more African American males incarcerated than in school.

Conversely, the economic vitality of the United States in the 21st century is contingent upon the productivity of well-trained people and the steady stream of scientific and technical innovations they produce. Levy and Murnane (2004) point out that the nation's challenge is to "recognize the inexorable changes in the job distribution and to prepare young people with the skills needed in the growing number of good jobs" (p. 6). Further, expansion of international markets through globalization has contributed to the transformation of America's economy from a mass-producer of durable goods such as automobiles, to a developer and provider of information and biotechnology products and services. This economic shift has not only altered the types of products required for international competitiveness, but more importantly the requisite skills needed to ensure high-tier workforce participation has been permanently altered (Waks, 2003). In addition to access to quality scientific, mathematical, and technological learning opportunities, a "good education" in the global age includes the development of "soft-skills"² (Levy & Murnane, 2004; Gordon Nembhard, 2005).

For traditionally under-served students, such as African Americans males, the education policies that govern curriculum and instruction are essential to shaping the capacity of learning opportunities vital to their collective social and economic advancement. Indeed, the relationship between education and social mobility is not a recent finding; what is new, however, is that public schools more than at any other time in American history are held accountable for preparing students to serve private interests and the public good (Kliebard, 1999; Hargreaves, 2003). The purpose of this article is to discuss the misalignment between public school assessment policies and teaching practices in accordance with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and the human capital, curricula, and soft-skill needs of the global economy. The authors suggest that changes regarding the nature of learning, how it is assessed, and the skills taught are critical to the educational and social success of African American males.

While the education literature abounds with studies highlighting the cultural and social psychological factors responsible for the under-representation of African American males throughout the P-16 education pipeline and the white-collar employment sector, few analyses attempt to explain or contextualize the impact

and broader implications of school reform policies that do not provide or develop skills for high-tier employment in the global economy (Gordon, Gordon, & Gordon Nembhard, 1994; Gordon Nembhard, 2005). For example, the fact that only small numbers of African American males complete Algebra II in high school is problematic given that Algebra II is a gatekeeper in determining one's access to a good college or job (Uhadle, Strohl, & Simkins, 2006). That said, understanding the alignment between educational policy and the global workforce is important to improving the opportunity structures of African American males (Elmore, 1987; Marable, 1983; Yeakey, 1983).

This article consists of four sections. The first section explains federal elementary and secondary education reform practices that have been mandated by NCLB. For the purposes of this article, we focus our discussion on NCLB on how Title I schools are affected, because the majority of school age Black males attend schools with this government designation. The second section articulates the divisions of labor and soft-skills needed in the global economy. Section three highlights the divergences between NCLB, the occupational competencies for high-tier employment, and the skills determined to be important in the knowledge economy (Waks, 2006). We conclude the article by discussing the effects current federal educational policies will have on African American males' opportunity to participate in the post-industrial workforce.

Title I Schools under No Child Left Behind

Historically, the U.S. government has played a central role in formulating educational policy by establishing and implementing provisions to advance cultural hegemony, promote economic development, and preserve national security (Bowers, 2000; King, 2005; Waks, 1991; Watkins, 2001; Woodson, 1993). For example, after Russia's launching of the Sputnik satellite, the federal government passed the National Defense Education Act to assuage the public's fear that the American educational system was inadequate in science, mathematics, and foreign language instruction (Waks 1991). An important component of federal elementary and secondary education policy since the 1950s has been curriculum reform (Kliebard, 1998; Waks, 1991). In addition to the transferring of "facts," curricular content has had a particular social utility in the post-industrial economy (Apple, 1988, p. 284; Beyer & Apple, 1998). According to Apple, curricular content is continuously redesigned to ensure alignment with macro-political models of achievement in order to "underwrite 'the promise of individual success in competitive markets and national success in competitive global markets'" (Apple, 1988, p. 284).

In response to U.S. student under-preparation and persistent unequal academic outcomes of Students of Color, the federal government under the George W. Bush administration enacted NCLB (Public Law 107-110). A focal point of NCLB is to ensure that public schools are held accountable for the academic progress of every student. Originally established by the U.S. government as the Elementary

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and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, Title I was intended to “provide financial assistance to local educational agencies for the education of children of low-income families” (Public Law 89-10, Section 201). Seeking to remediate the effects of historical disparities in education, the federal government through Title I intended to induce state and local educational agencies into improving the educational quality of “disadvantaged students” using compensatory programs, such as Head Start (McDonnell, 2005; Public Law 89-10). In contrast to the 1965 version, ESEA’s reauthorization under NCLB requires schools receiving Title I funds to use standardized tests to ensure that all students receive the same education. In addition, teacher effectiveness is measured by student’s performance on standardized tests in mathematics, reading or language arts, and science (Public Law 107-110, Title I, Part A, Subpart 1, Section 1111 [C] Subjects).

According to NCLB, students are tested on the aforementioned subjects once each between grades three through five; grades six through nine; and grades 10 through 12 (Public Law 107-110, Title I, Section 1111, State Plans, Accountability, v, D). Interestingly, test scores are assessed annually and examined in two ways. In the first, scores are aggregated in order to identify achievement trends throughout school districts and individual schools. Under the second approach students’ test scores are disaggregated according to race, ethnicity, SES, dis/ability status, and English language proficiency to determine whether teachers and school districts are improving educational quality and working toward closing the Black-White achievement gap (Public Law 89-10, Section 1111, State Plans, Accountability [B] Adequate Yearly Progress). In contrast to the first method of assessment, which measures academic achievement in absolute terms, the targeting of Students of Color in the second method is meant to assist in allocating resources in order to build instructional capacity (McDonnell, 2005).

Although achievement levels are defined by individual states, NCLB requires that a sufficient percentage of public school students, both aggregate and subgroups, pass state exams in each district. Referred to as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), states must demonstrate compliance with the following federally prescribed mandates: (1) the same high standard of academic achievement is applied to all public elementary school and secondary school students; (2) tests are “statistically valid and reliable”; (3) standardized assessments result in continuous and substantial academic improvement for all students; (4) progress for public elementary and secondary schools, and local educational agencies, is based on academic assessment; and (5) separate measurable annual objectives for continuous and substantial improvement are included for: (a) economically disadvantaged students, (b) students from major racial and ethnic groups, (c) students with dis/abilities, and (d) students with limited English proficiency (Public Law 107-110, Title I, Part A, Subpart 1, Section 1111, Accountability, [C] Definition).

In contrast to previous federal education policies, NCLB penalizes schools that do not meet AYP (Goertz, 2005; Mathis, 2005; McDonnell, 2005; Ryan, 2004). For example, NCLB’s predecessor, the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA)

of 1994 simply induced states to develop school improvement plans on good faith. Conversely, NCLB prescribes practices and corrective procedures schools and teachers must employ to raise student achievement (Ryan, 2004). Teacher pedagogy in accordance with NCLB emphasizes curriculum coverage and pacing over culturally responsive teaching methods (Diamond & Spillane, 2004).

In summary, Title I schools under NCLB are held more “accountable” for students’ academic performance (Epps & Morrison, 2003). Because students are assessed yearly, supporters of NCLB portend a correlative rise in students’ test scores. Further, by implementing a prescribed curriculum it is assumed that traditionally underserved students will have the same educational knowledge often associated with more academically successful groups (i.e., Whites and Asian Americans) (Apple, 1992).

The Workplace and Skills in the Global-Knowledge Economy

While the federal government has decided to emphasize a prescribed curriculum and standardizes tests, which are more aligned with the industrial age of last century, broader organizational changes to the workplace brought about by information and communications technologies in conjunction with the automation and outsourcing of manufacturing processes have intensified the bifurcation between blue-collar and white-collar occupational sectors. For example, since World War II the majority of manufacturing jobs have not only disappeared, but the shift of labor markets has accentuated the employment and income gap between the highly educated and unskilled (Rifkin, 1996; Wilson, 1997). Noting deindustrialization’s particular impact on unskilled African Americans, Rifkin (1996) states:

In the mid-1950s, automation began taking its toll in the nation’s manufacturing sector. Hardest hit were unskilled jobs in the very industries where Black workers concentrated. Between 1953 and 1962, 1.6 million blue-collar jobs were lost in the manufacturing sector. Whereas the unemployment rate for Black Americans had never exceeded 8.5% between 1947 and 1953...by 1964 Blacks were experiencing an unemployment rate of 12.4 % while White unemployment was only 5.9%. (p. 74)

More recently, economists Levy and Murnane (2004) highlight that:

more than one-half of employed U.S. adults worked in two broad occupational categories: blue-collar and clerical jobs. Few people got rich in these jobs, but they supported middle and lower-middle class living and many were open to high school graduates. Today, less than 40% of adults have blue-collar or clerical jobs and many of these jobs require at least some college education. The computerization of work has played a significant role in this change. (p. 3)

For unskilled and under-educated individuals who make up the bulk of the blue-collar labor force, the decline of the manufacturing sector has resulted in the concomitant expansion of service employment (Casey, 1999; Gordon-Nembhard

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, 2006; Waks, 2003). Unlike the industrial era workplace, which provided a living wage, service sector jobs do not. In addition, service sector employers do not provide workers with healthcare or retirement benefits (Gordon-Nembhard, 2005; Waks, 2006). Subsequently, the convergence of poor pay and the lack of benefits concomitantly lead to greater reliance on public assistance (Levin, Belfield, Muenig, & Rouse, 2007).

Similarly, the infusion of information technology into the white-collar sector has altered how tasks are performed. Because computers process information more efficiently than humans, high-tier employment no longer requires proficiency in technical or procedural knowledge. Rather, the “new nature of work” in traditionally middle-class jobs and fields that previously required a college education now requires higher-order cognitive skills in addition (Levy & Murnane, 2004, p. 47). Higher-order cognitive skills encompass a myriad of attributes such as abstract reasoning, problem-solving, communication skills, and collaboration (Casey, 1999; Gordon-Nembhard, 2006; Levy & Murnane, 2004; Waks, 1991). Moreover, foundational workplace competencies for high-tier knowledge professionals and high-skill production workers include: (1) social skills—particularly communication for working with people to achieve goals; (2) complex problem solving—for identifying complex problems, reviewing related information to develop or evaluate options, and implementing solutions; (3) creative thinking—for the designing, developing, and/or creating new ideas applications, relationships, systems, or products; (4) engineering and technology—includes the application of knowledge for the production of goods and services; and (5) leadership interests—involves creating and carrying out (new) projects, making decisions, and leading people (Uhalde, Strohl, & Simkins, 2006, p. 21; Waks, 2006).

Thus, as labor sectors continue to be fragmented, high-tier employers will seek applicants who are not only prepared for work according to their academic credentials (i.e., college major), but more importantly, workers in the global economy must be creative and flexible (Casey, 1999; Colardyn & Durand-Drouhin, 1999). Therefore, students with aspirations of high-tier knowledge employment must learn the qualities, skills, and capacities to ensure sustainable workforce participation (Stern, 1998). We argue that the proliferation of standardized testing does not align with the necessary skills and competencies needed for the sustained workforce participation of African American males.

NCLB and the Preparation a Diverse Workforce

The assessing of students’ learning with a standardized metric suggests neutrality. Such instruments are considered to be accurate indicators of human difference and capacity (Jones, 1998; Montagu, 1999). However, standardized tests employed in accordance with NCLB do not provide or develop the necessary skills for active participation in the global-knowledge economy. Instead, federally mandated use of high-stake tests as the primary means for assessing learning, determining grade

advancement, and guiding teacher pedagogy diminishes students' capacity for the global economy. Not only is learning and knowledge constructed and evaluated in absolute terms, but achievement is constructed and situated acontextually (Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Ryan, 2004).

A central problem of NCLB is that absolute achievement models are designed to yield results that “discriminate among individuals on the trait measured by the test and that are interpretable in terms of the relative performance of other individuals and groups on the same test” (Messick, 1975, p. 957). As such, performance outcomes, such as “proficient” and “basic,” tells us very little about how students learn and think, or the educational value of their school. In fact, there is no single model of achievement that best represents a complete mapping of the school achievement domain (Haladyna, Bobbit Nolen, & Haas, 1991). This limitation of standardized tests is attributed to “construct validation” (Messick, 1975, p. 955). Construct validity simply accounts for consistency in behaviors or item responses, rather than explain a student's response to a specific test question which entails various determinants and sometimes (Messick, 1975). Hence, test scores, aggregated and disaggregated, are summaries of “communalities” rather than a “conglomeration of specifics” of student knowledge (Messick, 1975).

Additionally, achievement score differences, annually and across demographic groups, are misleading because they do not account for or reflect the confluence of exogenous factors such as socioeconomic status, the quality of in-school resources, and the varying cognitive processes in which learning occurs (Haladyna, Bobbit Nolen, & Haas, 1991; Messick, 1984; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Ryan, 2004). Lee's (2005) exposition on the science of learning suggests that learning in the real world is dynamic and not a phenomenon in which single variables are a deciding factor or one in which students are “passive blank slates or wells filled with useless knowledge, beliefs, and feelings” (p. 73). Furthermore, cognitive skills such as reasoning, interpretation, and comprehension, all of which are vital for high-tier employment, are restricted because standardized tests are designed to measure student performance in relation to a specific set of information. Therefore, informal knowledge formation structures and processes, such as schemas and scaffolds, which treat achievement and learning as highly-varied, are ignored (Messick, 1984; Ryan, 2004). Further, cultural considerations “...are often overlooked as learners are often expected to perform in school as if understanding who they are as cultural beings is a moot point” (Shockley, 2008, p. 4)

While routinized learning and “basic” skills are encouraged by absolute systems of accountability, knowledge and capacity for high-tier labor participation in the global economy require different processes. In the knowledge society, professionals and high-skilled workers use background knowledge from their formal education and out-of-school experiences in “unpredictable ways” (Waks, 2006, p. 260). In other words, knowledge workers must know how to combine real-time data and knowledge modules such as online software tutorials in order to respond to ill-structured problems and make decisions under conditions of uncertainty (Waks,

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2006, p. 290). Herein lies the second reason standardized tests by themselves are insufficient tools for fostering meaningful educational achievement or socioeconomic advancement.

In the current political economy of science, education, technology, and work, context is paramount. As such what a student knows according to a test is neither indicative nor representative of whether s/he can transfer and apply that information in other settings. Indeed, a purpose of education is to invest in the “productive capacities” of its citizens, broadly defined (Strike, 1985, p. 411). However, because academic achievement as defined by standardized measurements emphasizes information retrieval rather than its nature and usefulness, students who attend public schools that use high stakes tests as the primary means for determining achievement are more likely to be exposed to an irrelevant curriculum (Conley, 2003; Diamond & Spillane, 2004).³ Conley’s (2003) study on the “degree of alignment” between high school exams from 20 states and “standards for success in entry-level university courses” revealed that “most state tests would need modification before they could provide high school students useful information on their college readiness or be considered as potential sources of information that could contribute to admissions and placement decisions” (p. 13). In fact, none of the state’s algebra exams in the study were identified as providing useful information for postsecondary readiness (Conley, 2003).

The foregoing policy disconnect does not portend to increase African American male participation in higher education when one considers their over-representation in remedial education, school expulsion rate(s), and compulsory attendance at “probation schools” (Diamond & Spillane, 2004). Probation schools, according to Diamond and Spillane’s (2004) study on the interrelationship between high stakes accountability policies and inequality, suggest that public schools that do not meet AYP for two consecutive years offer fewer demanding academic courses, such as algebra, calculus, and advanced placement, and have low institutional capacity to offset the shortcomings of accountability policies. Despite NCLB’s mandating that public schools receiving federal funds provide all students access to a standard curricula and evaluation structure, requisites for higher education and global labor-market participation are unmet. Hence, one can reasonably infer that NCLB in its current form will restrict African American males’ capacity to be successful in the knowledge economy.

Conclusion

The goal of this article has been to discuss the broader implications of NCLB, high-tier employment in the global knowledge economy, and African American males. Examining the disconnect between federal education policy and the skill requirements for the workplace allows for a more complete understanding on the quality of the education African American male students are likely to receive. As such, the misalignment between standards-based assessment and practice suggest

that students currently situated at the low-end of the academic achievement gap will be further marginalized

Education scholars familiar with successful schooling for African Americans continue to illuminate that student achievement requires a pedagogical approach that: (1) teaches students to pursue “academic excellence,” (2) utilizes students’ culture as a vehicle for learning, and (3) promotes a broad sociopolitical consciousness that allows students to critique “cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160; Lewis, 2001). By identifying the inability of standardized tests to promote contextual learning and skills for the post-industrial economy, it becomes apparent that NCLB offers very few material solutions. For African American males attending schools with learning opportunities structurally constrained by academic achievement mandates and norm-referenced tests, the likelihood of increased participation in high-tier employment sectors appears narrow. Indeed, elementary and secondary education reform policies by themselves do not fully explain the low occupational attainment of African American males. However, the divergence between standardized tests, soft-skills, and higher-order cognitive processes suggest that further research is needed to strengthen education policy at the elementary and secondary levels.

One approach for researchers and scholars is to consider the impact of K-12 funding practices, resource allocation, and academic achievement. For example, Levin et al’s (2007a, 2007b) cost-benefits approach for increasing student high school graduation rates through “effective educational interventions” which consider the role of class size, teacher-student interpersonal interaction, academic expectations, and “competent and appropriate” personnel is worthy of replication and expansion (Levin et al, 2007a, p. 20). In offering a way to make sense of the broader implications of low academic achievement for African American males, it is our hope that policymakers and education stakeholders can develop systemic strategies that better serve the interests of African American males.

Notes

¹ Interestingly, the percentage of African American students enrolled in kindergarten through the 12th grade peaked in 1998 at 17.2% (U.S. Department of Education, p. 85).

² Soft skills include competencies such as abstract reasoning, problem-solving, “complex communication” skills, team building and collaboration.

³ Conley (2003) offers a thorough explanation of the “standards for success” in undergraduate education by discipline in *Understanding university success: A report from standards for success: A project of the Association of American Universities and The Pew Charitable Trusts*. Eugene, OR: Center for Educational Policy Research.

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