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**Education and the Future of Black Children:  
Forging a Successful Path toward Victory - Part 3  
The Substance of Truth  
By Tolu Olorunda  
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*"What does education often do! - It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free, meandering brook."*

-Thoreau, Henry David. [Uncommon Learning: Thoreau on Education](#). New York: Mariner Books, 1999, p. 39.

"We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous."

-Angelou, Maya. [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#). New York: Random House, 1969 (2002 ed.), pp. 175-76.

All that education can do is to determine the direction which this activity shall take; and that is the reason why a man's nature is so much more important than his education... In virtue of his education a man says, not what he thinks himself, but what others have thought and he has learned as a matter of training; and what he does is not what he wants, but what he has been accustomed to do.

-Schopenhauer, Arthur. [The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer: The Art of Controversy](#). State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, p. 80.

No one should know more why the education system is in need of severe reform - if not an all-out-no-holds-barred-overhaul - than this author. Having been through it all,

in a relatively short period of time, I'm convinced that if Black children - and really all children - are to function with the mind and spirit requisite to prosper as future leaders, the current mode of drilling into them facts and man-made opinions must cease - at once! To forge a successful path toward victory, all involved in this fight must understand that a system structured on the foundation of capitalism, cannot - and does not intend to - address each child with the patience and love required for a genuine learning process to take place.

I write this as one who was held back - forced to repeat a school year - at age 13. In retrospect, sure, I could have listened more attentively in class, done more homework assignments, taken tidier notes (when I did, that is), studied harder for tests (memorized more facts), and participated more actively in class (sought better my teachers' favor [See "Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling," 2005 ed., p. 63]); but those are all generic factors and limiting in potential.

Without the painful trauma I underwent that year, I might have never fully understood how dilapidated a system most schools were. I might have never overcome the feeling of guilt that overwhelmed me, knowing that I was being left behind as a consequence of my own actions. I might have never escaped the dungeon of pity I was trapped in, as I watched my whole world come crumbling down, right before me. I might have never mustered the courage to look beyond the superficial qualities of a school grade, and come to recognize the value of self-awareness as higher than any score the school system could place on my intelligence.

My fate that year was inevitable. It wasn't abrupt or unexpected. In fact, secretly, I had wondered just when it would come. It was due a couple years earlier, but, luckily, it missed me. By age 9, I had become weary of the school process. I had my views on what education should conceptualize, but I understood the game that had to be played to pacify the worries of everyone, but myself - parents, siblings, relatives, teachers, administrators, friends, etc. By age 11, I was known as a serial class-skipper. For days, sometimes extending to weeks, I was missing from class. I had first skipped a class when I was 9 and, by 11, I was a master at it. At 12, little could be said about me, for I showed up when I wanted, and how I wanted, to. Assignments were the least of my worries - as were tests and exams. So, when 13 hit, and reality tightened its grip on me, I was fully submitted to the embrace of destiny.

I knew the extent to which I was culpable. I couldn't curse God or man. I couldn't even curse myself. There comes a time when one refuses to resist life's unsurprising twists and turns. This refusal does not indict said person as a culprit in self-destruction, but rather suggests that, at that point, his/her life is being meticulously controlled by a higher force - over which one has no control (fate, future, deity, etc.). Biblical scholars can attribute this theory to Jesus' (as recorded in the Bible) countless acquiescence to pain and humiliation, reportedly to ensure "that the scripture might be fulfilled."

My scripture was being fulfilled - as I found out later.

Navigating the terrain of demotion would be a hard task, to be sure, but through that experience came an enlightenment most students would never attain. To fail as badly as I did was to succeed in going places few are privileged. Every encounter - however painful - I intercepted in that journey, would prove useful, later on, in my rehabilitation and reconstruction process.

Though averaging C's and D's for the rest of my academic career, I was already set forth on a path toward victory. When the time came to restore my dignity, and rise from the ashes, I stumbled upon the truth I had been searching for. This truth came in

the flesh of my painful past. I realized, soon after, that most of my teachers - well meaning as they were - had been taught to instruct with pedagogical models that could only guarantee the success of a few, and the failure of the many. I realized that the texts and teaching aides which were employed, ostensibly to help make "bright" students, could only succeed in creating a culture of opportunism, among them.

My experiences bore a strong resemblance to that described by 19th century philosopher, Henry David Thoreau:

"We saw one school-house in our walk, and listened to the sounds which issued from it; but it appeared like a place where the process, not of enlightening, but of obfuscating the mind was going on, and the pupils received only so much light as could penetrate the shadow of the Catholic church." [Thoreau, Henry David. [\*Uncommon Learning: Thoreau on Education\*](#) . New York: Mariner Books, 1999, p. 52.]

I had to re-learn the learning process. And when I did, I learned what learning really is. I learned that to be educated is to bask in the sea of knowledge, and emerge soaked from head to bottom. I learned that education aimed at tests and examinations is an assault on the integrity of teacher and student alike. I learned that teaching with a "professional" mind is no teaching at all. I learned that a pedagogy of excellence must involve the teacher as much as it should the student. I learned that most of what I had been taught had to be flushed down the latrine of futility, if I was to make a full recovery.

So, while my academic *stock* declined, I grew immensely as an intellectual. I, for the first time, understood what it means to "think for yourself." Hitherto, others had done the thinking for me. From that moment onward, however, such bastardization stopped. I took the pen of courage, and wrote out my future in the book of self-determination.

But I refuse to romanticize the reality. Most Black children have not the privilege of information I received, in repairing the intellectual cells my years in the school system had broken. I am rare, and I know it. Not for gift, but grace.

To forge a successful path toward victory, the journey ahead must be placed in proper perspective. Very few are more qualified than Dr. Janice Hale, in this aspect. As the author of three books, [\*Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles\*](#), [\*Learning While Black: Creating Educational Excellence for African American Children\*](#), and [\*Unbank the Fire: Visions for the Education of African American Children\*](#), two of which were nominated for Pulitzer prizes, and a life-long educator, Dr. Hale knows best what criteria must be addressed to guarantee success in the long haul. The founding director of [\*Institute for the Study of the African American Child\*](#) (ISAAC), she has dedicated her life to assuring educational prosperity for Black children.

"There is a game of hide-and-seek [being played], there is a rat race [being run]," says Dr. Hale. "And parents who are connected to the 'culture of power' [can ensure] their children are stimulated at an early age." This is a "political issue," she says. Because of a lack of "universal preschool education," Black children are more likely to "start off behind." Medication then becomes the remedy for their shortcomings, because "nobody wants to be bothered." This practice, in the eyes of unenlightened observers, "looks fair because the child [supposedly] doesn't have the skills. So, the educational enterprise dismisses the child."

As Dr. Hale sees it, the education system "is a rat race, and the people who are equipped to run it are creating escalating standards, and Black children are [being]

victimized by those standards." Black children, she says, are being "washed out at earlier and earlier ages." Capitalism, a philosophy that "takes from the needy and gives to the greedy," is the problem, she asserts. And the notion of "raising standards" is built upon that foundation.

"We as intellectuals in our community must change the cultural ethos," says Dr. Hale. Black children need "culturally-appropriate pedagogy." The "survival-of-the-fittest" structure, within which the school system currently functions, promotes the psychology of defeat to which Black students are cast. Until educators move from a "talent-assessment" orientation to that of "talent-development," Dr. Hale sees a gloomy future for Black children. She lays out a sobering example:

"When you give a well-constructed test, a small percentage would get an A, the same number would get an F, a little larger percentage would get a B, the same amount would get a D, and the majority of your students would fluster with C's. That's the Bell Curve! And teachers are made to feel that their job is to determine quickly who those children are, who can benefit from instruction. That is talent-assessment vs. talent-development."

Most Black students who drop-out of school are "frustrated" with their inability to read, she says. "If you're staying there and you can't read, that's the mark of intelligence, to go ahead and drop-out." According to her, reading achievements are "the biggest index" for measuring educational parity. And "the biggest predictor of a child's reading [ability] is vocabulary."

A dilapidated education system makes "students miserable," says Dr. Hale, to the point where they "hate school." This can only stop when administrators stop "putting the same medicine in a different bottle." Giving students more homework assignments, forcing them to wear uniforms, enforcing more tests, lengthening the school hours, extending the school week, and militarizing school policies, are comfortable schemes that avoid dealing with the real issues. The surge of charter school and private schools, "which are really public schools with money," are just as insolvent, contends Dr. Hale.

The struggle ahead is neither hopeless nor hazardous, she believes. Through ISAAC, Dr. Hale intends to further her public ministry of advocacy on behalf of Black children. By forming "[educational aide societies](#)," the "principalities and powers" in coalition against the future of Black children can, and will, be defeated.

If concerned educators and students, parents and activists, clergymen / women and community members, everyday folk and ordinary people, are to regain control of the steering wheel directing the future of Black children, COURAGE must be the impelling force provoking our actions. We must come to see that faith without courage would inevitably dissipate into hopelessness.

A successful path can only be forged with the determination that the future of Black children is as important, to our survival, as the air we breathe.

**To find out more about The *Institute for the Study of the African-American Child* (ISAAC), VISIT:**

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
*[This is Part 3 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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