

Research Issues Synthesis Paper

# The Education of African Americans in the Modern and Contemporary United States: Reflective History, Philosophical Foundations, and Narrative Pedagogy

EDUC 723 Multicultural Issues in Education

Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

Dachao Sun <sup>1</sup> (snd@upenn.edu)

Fall 2021 December 14, 2021

## Summary

*We introduce, in this reflective and synthesis paper, the featured history of African American education in the South from late nineteenth century as a grounding knowledge for further understandings. Then we propose some relatively objective philosophical principles followed by pedagogy for specifically the education of African American students. We emphasize the importance of expectation in the process of teaching.*

**Keywords:** African American education, late nineteenth century, Hampton model, expectation gap.

## 1 Introduction

In her recent book *Cultivating Genius* author Gholdy E. Muhammad of the Georgia State University devised and summarized a four-layered framework for equity in education, one that outgrew from the development of 19th-century African American literary societies and one she entitled “historically responsive literacy” (Muhammad, 2020); Dr. Muhammad’s book reminded modern educators in America once again of the achievement gap between African American community and the communities of other peoples. It was in the past

---

<sup>1</sup>current student in the master’s in Reading/Writing/Literacy program.

one and a half centuries when the education of African Americans in the United States had revealed its calculating progress and the unchaining from slavery.

It was indeed a period of unreliable time, ever since the early nineteenth century, that formal education for African Americans was “not practically” available (Wilson, 1976). Then the process started, with the efforts in both the South and the Northern states since 1860s; how these efforts and establishments brought African American people to where they are today is of great importance and informative for modern educators on the understanding of causes, intersectionality implied, and educational policies and movements in this branch of American education.

## 2 Featured History: African American Education in the South

Following the American Civil War, former slaves or ex-slaves were the very first people to depart from planters’ ideology about general education. With a strong desire to become literate, former slaves as a politically conscious and responsible social class struggled for their education. At the time, as is mentioned in James Anderson’s book *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*, providing literacy education or resources for African Americans were a dangerous act of “high price” which would have caused brutal punishment (Anderson, J.D., 1988, Ch.1).

Gradually and with more expression for freedom, the “universal public education” for African Americans were recognized and incorporated into southern state constitutional law, although the ideology then generally involved heavy use of child labor and significantly lacked innovation through better training and technology to reach a higher level of productivity, which laid the founding grounds for the furthering of African American education in the south.

Twenty years beyond 1860, by 1880 the

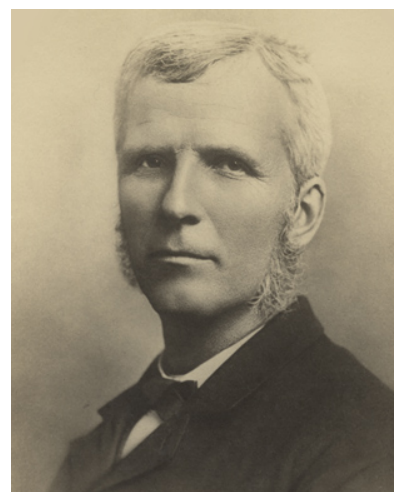


Figure 1: Samuel Chapman Armstrong, First President of Hampton Institute (Hampton University, 2021)

illiteracy rate dropped from 95 percent to to 70 percent for Afro-Americans, which would later be 30 percent by 1910. One of the major educational pedagogy and practical forces that contributed to this progression was the *Hampton* model of industrial education initiated in Virginia across the time span between 1868 and 1915, advocated by former soldier/general and educator Samuel Chapman Armstrong whose “Hampton Idea” aimed at teaching students steady work habits, practical skills as well as Christian morals as the “first step towards ‘proper’ reconstruction” (Anderson, J.D., 1988, Ch.2); students in the Hampton schools “studied” at nights after a day-long work starting from four o’clock in the morning, usually physical labor, six days a week and got a proof of their education without a bachelor’s degree.

Into the dawn of twentieth century one common problem was the great shortage of African American teachers. Dr. Anderson used the chapter title “the second crusade” when introducing the first 35 years of African American education, when racial discrimination and disparity remained severe in southern countryside, along with disrupting, oppressive factors such as double taxation. The industrial education throughout a period of half a century did push workers to become more skilled; the tobacco industries in Winston-Salem, North Carolina for example employed “33 percent of black male adult workers, and 48 percent of black female adult workers” (Anderson, J.D., 1988, Ch.6). The wealthy philanthropists also reconciled their racially distinct philosophies upon how public, secondary education should be like.

For higher education, it was about an interrelationship between philanthropy and black communities. The industrial northern philanthropists selected Fisk University (private university today in Nashville, Tennessee, [www.fisk.edu](http://www.fisk.edu)) to develop it into a model institution for African American higher education with an underlying philosophy of racial accommodation. Today, the Mary Frances Early College of Education at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia is named after Ms. Early (Skyler, H., 2018) who was the first African American graduate from the University of Georgia in 1962, honoring her accomplishment as a trailblazer for African American higher education, people like whom had paved their ways through the obstacles of racial segregation in the midst of which normality was an impossibility even when

they studied at colleges. It took courage and faith and a lasting desire for education and the betterment of themselves to make such progresses as African American higher education pursuers.

### 3 Philosophical Foundations for Teaching African American Learners

In a *triarchic theory of human intelligence* (Sternberg, R. J., 1985) proposed by psychologist Robert Sternberg, three aspects of generic intelligence were summarized, as

**analytical** (planning, organizing, remembering, etc.),  
**creative** (seeing new connections between things), and  
**practical** (“street-smart”, experienced and knowledgeable  
for survival in an urban environment)

in which the first two form an orthogonal space for intelligence while the third one emphasizes practices. In the case of Hampton model schools, for instance, analytical skills were undermined and creativity ignored, leaving the trainees as laborers who had limited time and resources to gain true knowledge. Meanwhile, being practical suggests us to consider the “survival game”, earning one’s place and living financially and socio-economically, which many African American students might need to get into after they finish their education. Hence, within the institutional setting, the question we want to ask is how to foster positive, inquiring interactive communications among students and faculty members such that they truly would become “smart” and well-versed with the skills required to enter urban workforce as well as being an empathetic, civil citizen.

For learning, with a particular concern of African American learners, it is an actively constructed process developed based on *experience*, normally situated (e.g. literacy, technical skills, etc.), and needs to step away from what used to be the complete practice of “banking education” by simply depositing information into students who are thought of as empty receptacles. To teach or to share knowledge with African American students means to share *life* with them, too, and as educators it is beneficial and important to proactively observe and to heed on the social environments where learners are situated: the neighborhood, family, cultural and ethnic group, and other multicultural backgrounds. Knowledge is, after all,

a canon that primarily involves the formation of *habit* referred to as “true pedagogy” by scholar Sonia Nieto (Nieto, S., 2010, Ch.1).

In parallel, the understanding of other ethnic and cultural groups would be essential for the growth of African American learners. A healthy conceptualization of the co-existence of different races, social hierarchies, and peoples of civilizations is critical to the long-term growth of African American youths. Take for example “white privilege”, which was not recognized or informed to whites themselves, could confer dominance and potential racial damages by systemic over-empowering certain other groups (McIntosh, P., 1989). Instead of being trapped to the hostile zone, one would better be encouraged to learn more about other peoples who are different than them in different ways, and give respect before expecting to receive it. Only if these moral underpinnings get clarified at the early stages of education, can African American students in the farther future form consistent collaborative relationships with peers as well as gaining success.

## **4 Pedagogy for African American Learners**

The multitude of complexities within the community and social class of African Americans in the United States by its nature defines the difficulty of its associated pedagogy. In this section, we devise a suggestive set of three principles customized to the particular ethnic group of African American learners.

### **4.1 Three-Way Framework for the Education of African American Youths**

Youths and kids like athletes because they “follow their dreams” (Reitman, J., 2009), and for African American youths they look up to their role models as well, many of which include athletic stars, movie actors, activists—and the range should go beyond these already well conceptualized professional disciplines.

#### **1. Broadened horizons of social and professional conceptions**

Students need to know role models from more aspects of social life and of disciplines.

Areas such as natural science, information technology, medical health, law, and education are good examples, as well as creative, performing, and traditional arts and beyond.

## 2. Complaint-free, engaging, and work-ethic mindset

The principle of the first African American Major League Baseball (MLB) player Jackie Robinson was very simple: Don't complain, and just work harder. It was in his contract not to complain even when racist fans spit on him (Reflections with Abba, 2012). The work-ethic and humility from professionals like Robinson can be breathtaking for contemporary students, but they are great examples for the importance of focus: a focus on one's goals and dreams, regardless of the environment. Students could constantly spot and complain about corners of their school, facility, and lack of resources etc.; however, there could probably always be some teacher if the student were willing to ask for advice would give them advice and elevate their studies and lives.

## 3. Development and maintaining a positive historic awareness

With all general challenges that the American society faces nowadays, if we had the choice to be borned in any period of time in human history, as former president Barack Obama pointed out, without anticipating any pre-conditioned socioeconomic status, as to what moments we would have the best chance of succeeding, then the answer would be *now* (PBS NewsHour, 2016, 3:40). In the Internet Age, we are at least "as good as" where we were in the past in terms of access of information. For African Americans as a group with heavy historical progressions, it is in particular crucial to be in the moment of our era—be positive, and leverage to the fullest one's potential and resources, to achieve, succeed, and ultimately win respects of others.

### 4.2 *Expectation Gap: Raising the Bar*

In R&B musician Babyface's 1996 work *How Come, How Long*, lines of lyrics were used to depict a female character as

"She had a college degree,  
Smart as anyone could be,  
Had so much to live for."

as an image of an educated person who was admired. The subsequent verse then turned to describe how she was wronged by other man. Here as someone with a college degree

it would be a recognition of a good education, and even well respected. When the author of this paper studied as a foreign science student in the state of South Carolina in late 2010s, he met a playmate on a basketball court who, after a few weeks of friendship and conversations, decided to go on to continue his schoolwork at possibly the high school level. It was not necessarily by the interaction with the author himself, but something did make that basketball playmate realize the goodness of education.

Along-side with the well-known achievement gap, there might be arguably also a hidden *expectation* gap by which it suggests that many teachers began teaching certain students—poor, segregated, or in particular races—with a “not high enough” expectation. If we raised the bar higher to the intellectual equivalence just as any other students who are conceived as “clever” or academically successful, we would give these students, including African American learners, an equal opportunity to see the horizon of the ocean of knowledge, intellectual vanity, and potential career outcomes; subsequently, they could deliver better performance.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, the student author initially derived thoughts from one of our two main textbooks, Dr. James Anderson’s account on African American education in the American South, part of the region of which is where he personally studied and lived for three years (2014 to 2017 in South Carolina). A synthesized discussion with reorganization of the content would be a basic idea for a critical literature review for option, while we tentatively prefer a leap beyond the evidence already given in Anderson’s text.

The featured history of African American in the South, in the particular period of time, was a window and a lens into what was the true realities lived by the people in late nineteenth century, and it would have provided us a solid ground of understanding many subsequent events and developments. It is our hope that through judicious consideration of philosophical methods and pedagogy, African Americans can cultivate their potentials with tools and resources available in our own time and fulfill their dreams and ultimately contribute to the betterment of other peoples and civilizations.

## Acknowledgment

The student author would like to thank the teaching team of course EDUC 723, the small group discussion classmates, other student members of the same class who continuously contributed to interactive discussions and added ingredients to the class. He also appreciate learning from the authors of the two main references, Sonia Nieto (Nieto, S., 2010) and James D. Anderson (Anderson, J.D., 1988).

## References

- Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Babyface. (1996). How Come, How Long [Song]. On *The Day*. 9. <https://genius.com/Babyface-how-come-how-long-lyrics>
- Hampton University. (2021). *Samuel Chapman Armstrong* [Photograph]. Hampton University. <http://www.hamptonu.edu/about/armstrong.cfm>
- McIntosh, P. (1989). *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. Peace and Freedom Magazine.
- Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*. Scholastic Teaching Resources (Teaching Strategies).
- Nieto, S. (2010). *The light in their eyes: creating multicultural learning communities*. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Teachers College Press.
- PBS NewsHour. (2016, June 1). *Town Hall with President Obama in Elkhart, Indiana* [Video]. YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvBh2FQRkSs>
- Reflections with Abba. (2012, February 1). *How bad do you want to achieve your dreams?*. Online resource available at <http://reflectionswithabba.wordpress.com/2012/02/01/how-bad-do-you-want-to-achieve-your-dreams>
- Reitman, J. (Director). (2009). *Up in the Air* [Film]. Paramount Pictures.
- Skyler, H. (2018). *Mary Frances Early: A life of courage and accomplishment*. Georgia Impact, UGA Today. <http://news.uga.edu/mary-frances-early-georgia-groundbreaker>
- Sternberg, R. J. (1985). *Beyond IQ: A triarchic theory of human intelligence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, A. (1976). *Education for African Americans*. Handbook of Texas Online, accessed December 14, 2021. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/education-for-african-americans>