Born To Be Great

Promoting the Educational Achievement of Black Boys: Caribbean and UK Perspectives

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PROMOTING THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OF BLACK BOYS: CARIBBEAN AND UK PERSPECTIVES
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SALUTATIONS:

I am delighted to be here with you in the city of Bristol. Speaking from a lectern in the ‘Science City’ of Bristol is particularly significant for this gathering, given its contribution to education, employment and culture, three of the critical components that contribute to the ‘achievement’ of boys and girls of every race, creed and colour.

I thank you for your kind invitation to contribute to the conversation about the promotion of educational achievements of black boys in the United Kingdom and the Caribbean, indeed, the achievement of boys of colour anywhere they live, go to school, and eventually pursue their livelihoods. The Anthony Walker Memorial Lecture has always sought to be a source of hope for young people. It focuses our attention on the circumstances of black boys in the African Diaspora.

The work of the Anthony Walker Foundation reminds me of the book “Azim’s Bardo” which was written by the Islamic father of a 20 year old youth who was senselessly shot and killed while delivering pizzas in California, by a 14-year-old gang member. Khamisa, the father of the murdered youth and author of this remarkable account, believed that there were “victims on both ends of the gun” and reached out in the spirit of forgiveness to the guardian of his son’s killer. Together, they
developed a foundation in the United States, which is similar to the Anthony Walker Foundation, called the Tarique Khamisa Foundation. That foundation, like the one I now address, seeks to confront issues to with youth development. This includes the epidemic of youth violence. They seek to prevent other such tragedies from striking other families.

As we seek to assert that our youth were and continue to be ‘Born to be Great’; if we truly wish to see this become a reality, it is full time that we all recognize that we need to realign our thinking in keeping with the rapidly changing circumstances of our world. Simply put, the ‘seasons’ of our lifetimes are rapidly changing and we need to keep in step.

So, even as I bring you greetings from the warm nation of Jamaica at the beginning of your autumn, I pause for a moment to make the point that this year, 2011, has been a significant one for ‘spring’ activities worldwide. The ‘Arab Spring’, the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests that have swept through the Arab world, from Cairo to Mauritania, tell just a part of the story of the disillusionment of the world’s youth, with the circumstances in which they live. The disturbances in Britain in August that were telegraphed across the world tell yet another element of that tale. In the more recent Wall Street Protests, American civil society has called for the occupation of the Nation’s geographic
symbol of economic wealth, success and material achievement. All of these are movements towards equity, democracy, justice and opportunity in what I see as ‘an age of futility’ for our young people.

The uprisings represent our young peoples’ demands for attention. They further highlight the need for more types of the very conversation we will have today. This ‘global spring’ provides me with a point of departure from which I present ‘Born to be Great’; Promoting the educational achievement of black boys: Caribbean and UK Perspectives.

First, I will examine some challenge to our boys’ natural legacy of greatness. I will then take a cursory comparative look, as this is what time allows, at the circumstances of education and socialization of black boys in the Caribbean and Britain – focussing predominantly on Jamaica as case study. Thirdly and finally, I will present some perspectives and suggestions as to how to address the way forward, to ensuring that those who were born to be great, actually get that opportunity.

Challenging the Challenges to the Legacy of Greatness

As we promote the educational achievement of black boys, we
must address the issues of our primary demographic, the demographic from which Anthony Walker came, our youth. It is critical that we examine the general contexts of their lives.

Global trends in youth activism have revealed that there exists, in general, a global culture of futility, of which I spoke earlier amongst young men – black and white. From Brixton to Bahrain, from Boston to Bangladesh, and from Brisbane in Australia to Barbados in the Caribbean, a sense of paralysis exists within the youth cohort of peoples, that have journeyed to adulthood in the last three decades.

In the wake of this year’s UK Riots, columnist Max Hastings, writing on the website Mail Online, the internet publication of the British Tabloid the Daily Mail, described, what he saw as the consequences of ‘years of liberal dogma’. According to Hastings, over three decades of neoliberalism has spawned a generation of “amoral, uneducated, welfare dependent, brutalized youngsters” who live a “normal life of absolute futility”.

Hastings further describes the characteristics of this youthful futility thusly:

“Most have no jobs to go to or exams they might pass. They know no family role models, for most live in homes in which the father is
unemployed, or from which he has decamped. They are illiterate and innumerate, beyond maybe some dexterity with computer games and smart phones. They respond only to instinctive animal impulses — to eat and drink, have sex, seize or destroy the accessible property of others. They are essentially ‘wild beasts’”. The author said he used the phrase advisedly, because it seemed to him appropriate for young people bereft of the discipline that might make them employable; of the conscience that distinguishes between right and wrong. What are worrying about this inflamed, generalized description of the state of affairs of our young people are the troubling elements of truth.

Paradoxically, the sudden activism of these youngsters also represents a new ‘spring’ for our young men. Through their actions they sprang into action, abandoning the apathy and paralysis that also characterized their generation. They exchanged that approach for social action and engagement.

As educators, we must appreciate, understand and take some responsibility for these circumstances of our young people. These are the trends that we must seek to reverse in generations to come. Part of the responsibility falls to us because this new ‘spring’ and the ways in which it has manifest globally, are representative of, and directly related
to global systems of education and socialization. Addressing it requires the adoption of a critical pedagogy.

Steinburg suggests that to successfully counter the issues faced in classrooms requires such an activist approach. “Only as insurgents within the system will we be able to transgress with our critical pedagogy”. She argues that as educators, as critical pedagogues, we are well placed to make a difference. “We are in the schools, we are in the classroom, we are in the teacher education programme, we are in the communities – we are naming ourselves, and we aren’t being quiet anymore” (x).

Adopting a Critical Pedagogy approach is important in addressing the pandemic of futility. As educators, we must examine what education has become. We must re-access market driven education, where, in many nations of the world, education serves the needs of businesses, rather than seeking to create holistic human beings. Such an approach will cause us to re-examine the factories our schools have become – geared more towards manufacturing passes rather than moulding personhood. It will cause us to challenge the social norms produced in mainstream classrooms in various geopolitical situations (McLaren xiii).
Black boys and the Legacy of Greatness

McLaren takes me closer to the demographic upon which we are focussing; black boys. The ‘global spring’ informs us that issues we confront in the global village in which we have come to live and operate, the issues that affect the achievement and lead to the demise, delinquency and despondency in our young people we confront today; transcend race. This not to say that each racial group does not have its specific social, economic and cultural idiosyncrasies and circumstances that causes it to differ from another. In fact, it is an assertion that each group has specific challenges. It is the compendium of challenges that have caused the new wave of global youth activism.

If there are commonalities across race, the challenges we face are, however, decidedly gender specific. When we examine individual acts of violence and delinquency, or collective acts of protest born out of frustration, as seen in the in the mass protests of the ‘global spring’; the faces contorted with anger and despair and those individuals who are carrying out and losing their lives in specific acts of violence, are the faces of predominantly young men. These young men are battling with the mixed, competing and changing values of education or
entrepreneurship as means to their end. In neoliberal contexts, education as a noble catalyst for development takes second place to notions of entrepreneurship as, predominantly our young men, get involved in the informality of what University of the West Indies academics, Witter and Gayle have called a ‘hustle culture’.

This caused me to think about notions of ‘achievement’ and of ‘academic achievement’ in black societies, specifically of black men and boys. I asked myself, and ask you to consider whether the notion of ‘academic achievement’ in the context of black masculinity and contemporary cultures, is a veritable oxymoron. So in order to answer this question I now narrow the scope by presenting representative data from Caribbean, specifically Jamaican, and UK Perspectives.

Several challenges present themselves in the education of black boys in Jamaica.

In his study Boys’ Gender Identity, School Work and Parents ender Beliefs, Clarke tells us that traditional gender beliefs are, simultaneously and dialectically, both catalysts and deterrents for boys education. By holding on to these beliefs, parents and teachers mete out harsher punishments to boys in schools and home. Paradoxically, parental discretion allows boys greater latitude to play than girls. Clarke’s study further found that the differences in socialization of boys and girls results
in the failure to really assist boys develop a sense of responsibility (1).

Teachers in Jamaica recognize that boys and girls have different learning styles, however the teachers themselves are inconsistent with classroom practices that address the differences. Culturally, boys arrive at schools later than girls, are far less prepared to work at school than girls and are more likely to be off task than girls while in the process of study and learning (Clarke 1). Consequently, teaching practices in the Caribbean generally favour the girl child over the boy, there are lower expectations of boys to see tasks through as girls socialized and expected to complete particular tasks from early. Traditionally and culturally, more excuses given for boys in Jamaica and the ways in which we in Jamaica discipline boys and girls differ. Hill points out in his 2009 study that boys’ perceptions hold that educated males, determined by the levels of standard English they speak, are ‘girly’ or ‘gay’. Given the fervent anti-homosexual culture in Jamaica, the perception of education as ‘feminine’ is a specific deterrent to Boys learning. This perception, Hill asserts is on the decline and points out in 2010, that more boys are expressing value for schooling and basic literacy through the learning of standard English.

In this context, the performance data clearly reveals that contemporary cultures reinforce the marginalization of males and
underperformance of boys. In the GSAT examinations, sat by over 50,000 year olds to determine promotion to high schools in Jamaica, in 2008 the national average by gender were males 48% and females 58% and in 2009 the gap widened slightly with males 51% and Females 62%. When the results are broken down by region, in each of the six regions, bar none, boys performed consistently worse, by approximately ten percentage points.

From all accounts, the gendered comparisons from early childhood to tertiary and adult education show the superior performance of women over men, girls over boys. There is even traditionally more theorizing about issues to do with women than men. But this is not the only challenge affecting the educational achievement of boys in Jamaica.

A two-hundred year historical trajectory of education began with black, slave children who populated the colonial plantations being denied opportunities to education or being given limited opportunities for learning. Campbell (262) tells us that slavery and the formal education of the slaves were considered incompatible by the slave owners in Jamaica (262). This was to prevent those in bondage from ‘thinking’ and developing radical ideas. Post emancipation, the children of free coloureds had little or no access to schools and education. Only exceptionally bright children from the poorer classes, were allowed
access to a basic primary education.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the advent of church schools provided limited access to black children. This began to change in the mid twentieth century with the considered activism which allowed for the opening of schools which served elite, often white or what we in Jamaica call ‘high brown’ (light skinned black) families in the colony. The wave of egalitarianism, anti-colonial sentiment, black power movements and progressive political thought that characterized the time, spanned the decades prior to and just after independence in 1962. As a result, black boys and girls access to education increased. A range of policy developments since then have caused the building of schools and expansion of the education system which now sees 90% of all Jamaican children in school.

Although access to education increased, issues of class and race still continue to pervade the education system. Education is provided through elite private schools at and traditional public schools at the primary level. The dichotomy continues to be perpetuated through the secondary system. Elite preparatory schools and some high performing primary schools feed elite secondary schools. The level of education a Jamaican child receives is dependent on his or her family’s ability to pay for it.
It is important to note that the racial and class composition of Jamaica is directly related to the economic demography of the nation. Poor, black girls and boys populate the least equipped and resourced schools across the country. This perpetuates both the stereotype and the realities of poverty’s linkages to behaviour and failure.

Indeed, a number of schools were deemed ‘failing schools’ this year by the Minister of Education and now Prime Minister Designate, the Hon. Andrew Holness. In examining the notion of achievement in black boys and girls in contemporary times, this psychology, sociology and history of failure is a critical, dialectical consideration. There is, indeed, a direct correlation between this phenomenon and our colonial past.

The Colonial Connection

Professor Helen Tiffin, a foremost authority on postcolonial studies reminds us that in the nineteenth and twentieth century’s, education systems throughout the British Empire were developed in accordance with the local circumstances of the colony. Another factor affecting the ways in which educational systems were developed in the colonies, was the political changes and educational developments within the British Isles itself. This is why discussions of success and failure the education of colonial descendants in their respective locales or in the diaspora,
must consider the colonial relationships that led to the development of their education systems. This is particularly important for those who returned to these British Isles, which many considered their motherland. Postcolonial Education Scholars Hickling –Hudson and Woods extensively cover this ground, and point out to us that this is a complex process, further complicated by the notion that Colonial assumptions and contestations continue to pervade educational systems until present day (7).

It is critical therefore to consider, when comparing the realities of educating black boys in Jamaica and Britain, to note the perspective that “black schoolboys have been betrayed by the education authorities for almost half a century”. This emerges from analysis of a 2004 study which was commissioned by the London Mayor, Ken Livingstone. The commission found that in 2002, black boys started to lag behind from primary school year two. The gap widened every year after that. At that time, 70% of African-Caribbean boys in London left school with fewer than five or more GCSEs at the top grades of A+-C or equivalent, while African-Caribbean men are the least likely of any group to have a degree.
Amongst the findings of the study were the fact that black boys complained of racism and stereotyping from teachers. It said their chances of success were also limited by an archaic curriculum. Pupils were acknowledged to suffer from negative peer pressure and many are said to be disadvantaged by inadequately funded schools with a high turnover of teachers.

The insufficient level of involvement by some black parents is also singled out in the study. Black parents reported to the schools that they did not feel their input was welcome in the schools. The issues do not begin and end with the students and their parents. Students complained of struggling to overcome racism from many of their own teachers. The report says that relationships between black pupils and white teachers were generally characterized by "conflict and fear". One participant complained: "When it is white boys, it is a 'group' but when it is black boys it is a 'gang'. I think that's wrong." The double standard reminds me of the British riots in the summer just past being described as thuggery in the UK, but as freedom fighting in North Africa.

Additionally, in the study, black teachers themselves spoke of discrimination where only 7.4% of London’s teachers were, at the time of the study, from ethnic minorities and 2.9% were black.
The issues transcend just race and race relations and extend to social class. Ironically the working class boys from other communities studied outperformed middle class African-Caribbean boys.

It is clear, therefore that our societies have a dire and chronic conundrum, that we as educators cannot choose to ignore if we are serious about promoting academic achievement in black boys. The education data from Jamaica, the data from the United Kingdom; when added to the realities of life for black boys in both countries and the global socio-political changes over time leave us with some serious, real challenges to overcome.

Place this now in the context of the ‘global spring’ and we see why Tiffin speaks to the concept of the benev(i)olence of the development of colonial educational systems. By this, she refers to the ambivalence of the project of imperial education. Although she concedes that such education had many good effects; Tiffin tells us that such systems did “violence to local life and culture in the colonies of occupation and resulted, in the settler colonies in an inferiority syndrome, sometimes described as ‘cultural cringe’”. Although, she was referring specifically to literary education, I am choosing to broaden the context to include a holistic pedagogy, a broader view of education.
We must address the manifestations of displacement in our black British and Caribbean boys that the Caribbean scholar in Britain, Stuart Hall writes extensively about. Black boys in Britain feel displaced. Their home is in fact not their homeland. They are made to feel so. Countless studies and observations of racism and marginalization tell that tale better than I ever could.

Black boys in the Caribbean feel displaced for a similar, yet different reason. They are in their homeland, but yet do not feel at home. This is particularly if they are from vulnerable socio-economic groups, a characteristic of which is ‘colourfication’. They are more at home in their homeland dependent on the shades of their predominantly black skins and their circumstances of birth.

Should we ignore these realities, the jobs we undertake to complete will be increasingly without meaning. We would simply be pouring information into brains, rather than positively changing lives, moulding fine minds and encouraging progressive thought.

Conclusion – The Dialectic of Performance

While we examine the promotion the Educational Achievement of Black Boys, the dialectic of performance is an important consideration in Jamaica. Even amongst the futility and even fatality of our boys there is
excellence and erudition.

This year alone, In addition, the Jamaican and Caribbean Rhodes Scholars are Jamaican young men. The prospect of these two brilliant young men leaving the Caribbean to further their education in Britain is one indicator of the relationships between our education systems. Many of our black boys have held on to the birthright of being born to be great. Many more have slipped through the cracks.

I assert, that if our boys, our ‘black boys’ are to embark on the journey from forgiveness to fulfilment and healing that I spoke of earlier, if they are to turn away from the legacies of violence that are both real and stereotypical; the world and its leaders, like us in this room, need to do, as our young people say, ‘a battery pull’ to reset our instruments of development. (A battery pull occurs when one removes the battery from a smart phone or other electronic device in order to reset its settings). Essentially, we need to carefully inform ourselves about the realities of our time and space. We then have to take some bold, new initiatives to address them.

The world is experiencing a new paradigm as it shifts from what we know as neoliberalism to what some scholars are calling postneoliberalism. This postneoliberal era is marked by the global economic downturn and involves a “counter-revolution of global
ideology” (Shiller 1). This crisis, Shiller says, “has set in motion fundamental societal changes...that affect our consumer habits, our values, our relatedness to each other”. From now on, Shiller advises us, “we will all be conducting our lives and doing business with each other a little bit differently to the neo-liberal period”.

In this context, our young people – be they Black, White, Asian, Arab, boy or girl, need to see and hear about opportunities and achievements. They need opportunities to identify with success and see it as accessible. They need to hear about and come to believe in possibilities. They seek comfort in their quest for hope. The intangibility of that feeling of ‘hope’ is, in many circumstances, the distinguishing factor between those who choose the option of participating in ‘spring-like’ protest activities and delinquency, and the larger number who are simply carrying on with their daily lives.

The process of upliftment and positive change-making requires an honest, frank articulation of what exists in the here and now. Engaging in ‘critical pedagogy’ (McLaren and Kincheloe)’ will cause us to look closely at the political economy of education – to see education as a practice that serves to “expand the capacities of human agency and hence the possibilities of democracy itself” (Giroux 2). From a
theoretical perspective, Critical Pedagogy emerged from Paulo Friere’s work. It amalgamated liberation theology ethics, with Frankfurt School ideologies and ‘progressive impulses in education’ (Kincheloe 12). It challenges us as educators, daring us to engage in social activism, outside the boundaries of schools. Indeed, if our role as educators is to cause those who are ‘born to be great’ to be able to actually attain greatness, we must, as Giroux prompts us, “conceive of education as a project for democracy and critical citizenship”.

I end as I began. Tarique Khamisa Foundation of which I poke earlier is based on the concept of ‘Bardo’. This is the Tibetan Buddhist concept that its founder based its principles on. It is the gap between one life state and the onset of another. Our education systems find themselves in this liminal, transitional state. The Anthony Walker Foundation, through this very process today and its other work is playing its part in taking us through this transition.

As we do so, I urge the Foundation you to find inspiration in philosophies of the third geographical space that completes us as multicultural, postcolonial peoples – the continent of Africa - which has its own set of specific educational challenges. Professor Penny Enslin, whose work includes the integration of African philosophy in the Education of peoples of Africa, speaks of the concept of Botho or
Ubuntu. Simply put, it is the integration of humanism in our delivery and sharing of the educational experience. Among the characteristics of Botho are communality, humility, tolerance and respect. We must incorporate these values into the ways that we teach and indeed, they these concepts will in turn be learned. What could be a better solution in the quest to promote excellence?

This is the challenge I leave with you with as we do our part in ensuring that each black boy and each black girl that we each interface with, has the opportunity to feel great, look great, perform great...be great. It is not impossible. It takes the commitment of each one in this room and beyond to make this a reality.

I thank you

Works Cited