



Illiteracy is a cultural “ting”

A careful reader of The Tribune cannot help but be alarmed about illiteracy in the Bahamas. This is especially true after reading Arthurlne Rahming’s article in the “Literacy Supplement” about “becoming literate about literacy”. She put the problem into a solid perspective.

Furthermore, the Tribune reader cannot help but be alarmed by the paper’s July 30th page-one article that had the headline “Crisis in Education – Nation in peril as third of students are found ‘illiterate’, 80% fail maths.” The paper quoted J Barrie Farrington of the Coalition for Education Reform as saying that as a result of its illiteracy the Bahamas was facing a social failure of immense consequences.

And the Coalition’s “Bahamian Youth: The Untapped Resource” of June 2005 is still the definitive published work on this subject; but it did not go so far as to say that “Illiteracy is a cultural ‘ting””.

However, there has been extensive analysis in the U.S. on the alarming differences in the academic performance between Asian and Anglo-American and between Anglo and Afro-American students. These two gaps are of roughly equal magnitude and significance.

With regard to the latter, three authors are worth noting:

Orlando Patterson, a Black sociologist at Harvard University, in “Taking Culture Seriously: A Framework and an Afro-American Illustration” pulled together the work of a number of others and observed –

1. “The test score gap between Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans is indeed important in explaining later occupational status and income, although what it is measuring is not so much intelligence as learnable cognitive and educational skills.
2. “This test-score gap is only partly explained by the class or social background of students. The still substantial income difference between Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans explains, at best, almost one point of the large ethnic gap in students’ test scores. And when all socioeconomic background factors are considered, such as wealth and occupation, no more than a third of the ethnic gap is explained.
3. “The answer in a nutshell is culture... Cultural beliefs and practices affect the child at least from the moment of birth and perhaps sooner. Even the parents’ expectations of the unborn child and their teachers, and other sources of influence in the culture signal what is important to the growing child, and these messages have both short-and long-term impact.”

John U. Ogbu, a black anthropologist from the University of California Berkeley, is best known for his study of Black American students in Shaker Heights, the upper-middle class suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. Shaker Heights had successfully prevented Black and Jewish residency until the 1960s when it became the “model of a voluntarily self-integrated community that discouraged ‘White flight,’ and promoted diversity...about one third of the community was African American.”

“The school system was (and still is) one of the best in the nation.” The community’s pride in its excellence in education was reflected in its motto: “A community is known by the schools it keeps.” However, the disparity in academic achievement was glaring; for instance, in one high school graduation class of 400 students evenly divided between Blacks and Whites, 156 of the Whites graduated with honors while 5 Blacks did so.

This was reported in a newspaper article in 1997 and that publicity caused the school board and community leaders to commission John Ogbu to do an eight-month ethnographical study.

Professor Ogbu observed and documented what he had seen elsewhere with Black students, namely, “disengagement from academic work, inability to focus on the task at hand, blaming teachers for their failure, and having low academic expectations of themselves.”

He concentrated on “the beliefs and behaviors within the minority community” that caused the disengagement and the resulting poor record of academic achievement. These beliefs and behaviors included the “Norm of Minimum Effort” and excuses like “It’s not cool to show you’re smart”, “I’m bored with uninteresting courses”, “Motivate me if you want me to learn,” etc.

John H. McWhorter, a young Black linguist at Berkeley, wrote *Losing the Race* while John Ogbu was doing the Shaker Heights study. McWhorter contends –

“Black America is currently caught in certain ideological holding patterns that are today much, much more serious barriers to black well-being than is white racism, and constitute nothing less than a continuous, self-sustaining act of self-sabotage.” He then identifies the three major manifestations that create an “ideological sea of troubles”.

1. The Cult of Victimology treats “victimhood not as a problem to be solved but as an identity to be nurtured... [It] encourages the black American from birth to fixate upon remnants of racism and resolutely downplay all signs of its demise. Black Americans too often teach one another to conceive of racism not as a scourge on the wane but as an eternal pathology changing only in form and visibility, and always on the verge of getting not better but worse.”
2. Separatism “encourages Black Americans to conceive of black people as an unofficial sovereign entity, within which the rules other Americans are expected to follow are suspended out of a belief that our victimhood renders us morally exempt from them.”
3. Anti-intellectualism is a tendency founded “in the roots of the culture of poverty and disenfranchisement” that “has now become a culture-internal infection nurtured by a distrust of the former oppressor.” He demonstrates that it is the root cause of the notorious lag in black students’ grades and test scores regardless of class or income level and not the unequal distribution of educational resources.

Many Bahamians may find these comments disturbing and they may question their relevance to the Bahamas. But...they can be a useful reference in an examination of Bahamian culture as it affects learning. This in turn will help determine what education reforms shall be implemented or whether they are likely to be effective.

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