

EDUCATION AND SELF-DETERMINATION

By Dr. Conrad W. Worrill (March 14, 2014)

Throughout most of our lives, African people in America have been told if you get a good education you can get a good job. African people in Africa were told something similar. If you get a good education your condition in life will improve.

In the early part of the twentieth-century until the late 1960s and early 1970s, the thrust was to encourage African people in America to at least get a high school diploma so that they could be eligible for a job in a significant segment of the work force.

The explosion of the 1960s Civil Rights and Black Power Movements forced colleges and universities to admit Africans in America to their predominately white colleges and universities in large numbers.

Today, African people in America are encouraged to get college education so they can get a good job. The education market has been saturated to the extent that a high school diploma of the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s, in most instances, has the same meaning as a college degree today.

That meaning is one of a college degree, qualifying people for entry-level jobs in the U. S. labor market, except for those instances where people have been trained in specialized fields at the undergraduate level.

What we hear repeatedly today is that we must concentrate on African people in America reading, writing, and math skills at the elementary and secondary levels so they can compete for the jobs that will be available in U. S. multinational corporations in the twenty-first-century, driven by the world of technology and computers.

Many of our ancestors in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth-centuries, who were concerned with the issue of education, asked the question— education for what? It is quite clear that the major direction of U. S. educational policy has been to train and educate African people to work for white people. That is, to teach them to read, write, and compute, so they will be prepared to work for us.

In a paper written by our great ancestor Dr. Jacob Carruthers several years ago, entitled, “Black Intellectuals and The Crisis In Black Education,” he observed, “When the chattel slave system was destroyed by the Civil War, one of the first acts of the victors was to provide for Black schooling on a wide scale. The northern industrialists through their philanthropic alter egos began finding and establishing Black colleges. These colleges were intended to sit atop a Negro education system.”

Further Dr. Carruthers wrote, “By the turn of the century, even southern whites were making use of this Negro education system to facilitate the transition from the old chattel to a new, but equally effective, system of Black exploitation.”

Carruthers explains, “The new system depended upon the cultivation of a Black elite to serve as examples for the masses of Blacks and to demonstrate the rewards of obedience.”

The educated Black elite, Carruthers points out, “demonstrated time and time again their ability to do what they had been trained to do. Eventually, a few of them were invited to manage the segregated colleges that were established to train Black teachers. In this manner, a small, educated Negro elite became overseers of the educational affairs of millions of Black people.”

This model of education, that continues today, was established by so-called leading white educators in this country who met at Lake Mohonk, New York (a resort area) on June 4-6, 1890, and June 3-5, 1891 to read and discuss papers on what they officially called the “Negro Question.”

Again, Dr. Carruthers writes that at the end of the second conference “they had decided that the primary things that Blacks had to be taught were morality and the dignity of labor (i.e., working for white folks).”

African people in the United States have a rich tradition of leaders who have taken issue with the white conceptualization of the mission of education of African people in America. David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet, Henry McNeal Turner, Martin R. Delany, and Edward Wilmot Blyden were nineteenth-century advocates that the education of African people should be designed *to assist us in doing for ourselves*.

In the twentieth-century, leaders such as Marcus Garvey, Carter G. Woodson, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X, all spoke and wrote consistently about the need for African people to develop an education program aimed at developing African people “to do for self.”

In other words, we are still challenged today to create an education climate that inspires African youth in America to understand that the purpose of education is to develop the skills and historical understanding of the past as it relates to the present and future in preparation for working for self and the liberation of African people. This is the challenge of the twenty-first-century— to defeat the one hundred year tradition established by white educational leaders who created curricula for Africans in America designed to prepare them to work for white folks.

Our esteemed ancestor, Dr. John Henrik Clarke reminded us repeatedly, that, “history is the clock that people use to tell their political and cultural time of day. It is also a clock that they use to find themselves on the map of human geography. The role of history in the final analysis is to tell a people where they have been and what they have been, where they are and what they are. Most importantly, the role of history is to tell a people where they still must go and what they still must be. To me the relationship of a people to their history is the same as the relationship of a child to its mother.” The purpose of education must always be “*for us to do for ourselves!*”