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Forty Years of Negro Education

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VII

FORTY YEARS OF NEGRO EDUCATION

Experience is the rational outcome of experiment. Where there are neither fixt principles nor established precedent, the practical worker must feel after the right way, if haply he might find it. But he must have an open mind ready to accept proved and tested results, and to discard discredited processes undertaken as an experimental necessity with equal acquiescence and cheerfulness of spirit.

Previous to the Civil War scattered schools for the instruction of persons of color existed in the North, and, to some extent, in a few Southern cities as well. Here and there a pious master or kindly mistress would teach a favorite slave the rudiments of knowledge, with connivance, evasion, or defiance of forbidding laws. Now and then an ambitious-minded slave would snatch furtive bits of knowledge, with the traditional relish of stolen waters.

But broadly speaking, it might be said that forty years ago the systematic education of the negro race began near the absolute zero point of ignorance. The real intellectual awakening of the race began with the overthrow of slavery.¹ When the smoke of war had blown away, when the cessation of strife proclaimed the end of the great American conflict, when "the war drum throbbed no longer, and the battle flags were furled," there emerged from the wreck and ruin of war 4,000,000 of human chattels, who were transformed, as if by magic, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, from slavery to freedom, from bondage to liberty, from death unto life. These people were absolutely ignorant and destitute. They had not tasted of the tree of knowledge which is the tree of

¹ This description of the early workers is taken from the writer's monograph on "Education of the negro," printed in the Report of the Bureau of Education, 1901.

good and evil. This tree was guarded by the flaming swords of wrath, kept keen and bright by the avarice and cupidity of the master class. No enlightened tongue had explained to them the deep moral purpose of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. They were blind alike as to the intellectual and moral principles of life. Ignorance, poverty, and vice, the trinity of human wretchedness, brooded over this degraded mass and made it pregnant. The world lookt and wondered. What is to be the destiny of this people? Happily, at this tragic juncture of affairs, they were touched with the magic wand of education. The formless mass assumed symmetry and shape. Nowhere in the whole sweep of history has the transforming effect of intelligence had a higher test of its power.

The circumstances amid which this work had its inception read like the swift-changing scenes of a mighty drama. The armies of the North are in sight of victory. Lincoln issues his immortal Emancipation Proclamation; Sherman, with consummate military skill destroys the Confederate base of supplies and marches thru Georgia, triumphant to the sea; Grant is on his road to Richmond; the Confederate capital has fallen; Lee has surrendered; the whole North joins in one concerted chorus: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." These thrilling episodes will stir our patriotic emotions to the latest generations. But in the track of the Northern army there followed a band of heroes to do battle in a worthier cause. Theirs was no carnal warfare. They did not battle against flesh and blood, but against the powers of darkness intrenched in the minds of an ignorant and degraded people. A worthier band has never furnished theme or song for sage or bard. These noble women—for these people were mostly of the female sex—left homes, their friends, their social ties, and all that they held dear, to go to the far South to labor among the recently emancipated slaves. Their courage, their self-sacrificing devotion, sincerity of purpose and purity of motive, and their unshaken faith in God were passkeys to the hearts of those for whom they came to labor. They were sustained by an unbounded enthusiasm and

zeal amounting almost to fanaticism. No mercenary or sordid motive attaches to their fair names. They gave the highest proof that the nineteenth century, at least, has afforded that Christianity has not yet degenerated into a dead formula and barren intellectualism, but that it is a living, vital power. Their works do follow them. What colored man is there in all this land who has not felt the uplifting effect of their labors? Their monument is builded in the hopes of a race struggling upward from ignorance to enlightenment, from corruption to purity of life. These are they who sowed the seed of intelligence in the soil of ignorance and planted the rose of virtue in the garden of dishonor and shame. They had no foregoers; they have no successors. It is said that gratitude is the fairest flower which sheds its perfume in the human heart. As long as the human heart beats in grateful response to benefits received, these women shall not want a monument of living ebony and bronze.

Those who enlisted in this cause had neither the lamp of experience to guide their feet, nor yet the assurance of hoped-for results to strengthen their faith. At that time not only the policy, but the possibility of educating the negro was in the bonds of dialectic doubt and denial. It was the generally accepted dogma of that day that the negro was not amenable to the same intellectual and moral régime applicable to the white child. The institution of slavery made requisition upon the negro physical faculties alone, and therefore the higher susceptibilities of his nature were ingeniously denied and prudently suppress. Ordained intellectual and moral inferiority is the only valid justification of political and social subordination. Hence, this became the ultimate dogma of the proslavery propaganda. Those who profess to doubt the possibilities of human nature are never quite sure of the foundation of their belief. Altho the loud boast is ever on their lip, their conduct reveals the secret suspicion of the heart for fear it might not be so. Thus we see that those who most confidently proclaim that the negro, by nature, is incapable of comprehending the intellectual basis of Aryan culture and civilization, are ever on the alert to prevent him

from attempting the impossible. If the negro's skull was too thick to learn, as the dogma ran, why pass laws forbidding him to try? But after all it must be said that the slave régime possess the wisdom of its policy and practised the cunning necessary to carrying it out. It was deemed dangerous to communicate to the despised negro the mystic symbols of knowledge which reveal all the hidden secrets of civilization. This policy was based upon the well-founded fear of primitive jealousy: "lest he should stretch forth his hand, and partake of the tree of knowledge, and become as one of us." But the flaming sword of jealousy and wrath can not for long guard the tree of knowledge against the quest of those who would partake of the fruit thereof. No one who sniffs the ozone of an atmosphere surcharged with the doctrine of equality, and to whom has been vouchsafed the talisman of knowledge, will ever be satisfied with a status that assigns him to a rank below the level of his faculties. Under the ancient régime of acknowledged and accepted political and social subordination, masters took pride in educating their apt and capable slaves. Indeed several names of this class attained the rank of respectable philosophers whose fame reaches down to our own day. But the doctrine of freedom and equality is a sure and swift contagion, without respect of race or color.

The missionaries who first came down from the North were not generally educators according to the requirements of modern education. They brought the technical terms of knowledge in their left hand. In their right hand they brought religion, culture, civilization. They quickened the spirit, aroused the energies, and awakened the consciousness of a supprest race that had been so long despised and rejected. As the traditional treatment had rested upon profest disbelief in the negro's capabilities, the method of the missionaries was based upon the belief in higher human possibilities. The colder calculating spirit of this later day may, with supercilious disdain, call it fanaticism, but none can deny its uplifting and sustaining power.

The missionary and religious organizations vied with one another in planting institutions of higher pretensions for the

recently emancipated class. The establishment of institutions on the higher level of European culture for a people who had hitherto been denied the alphabet was a most daring experiment. It was a severe test of the faith of the founders. But forty years of experience has abundantly justified the experiment. If we should subtract from the development of negro life the influence contributed by and attributable to these much-berated negro colleges and universities, the remainder would be niggardly indeed.

Of late we have heard much criticism to the effect that education of the race began on top instead of at the bottom. Naturally enough, these schools were patterned after the traditional academic type then prevailing in New England. Indeed the education of people should begin at the top, if we are to look to historical development of the human race for the proper method. In education, as in religion, the good things proceed from above, and trickle downward, carrying their beneficence to the masses below. Just as Yale and Harvard are the foster mothers of New England educational progress, so these negro universities and colleges produced the teachers, ministers, physicians, lawyers, editors, and enlightened leaders who are guiding and directing the race life today along better ways.

The Freedman's Bureau coöperated with the missionary and religious societies in promoting the education of the recently emancipated slaves. These coöperating agencies, governmental and private, were conducted by men of like mind and spirit as regards the needs of the field in which they were engaged. On the dissolution of the Bureau, many of its agents took leadership in the recently-founded colleges and universities. Its chief officer, General O. O. Howard, became president of the principal school which the Bureau had founded or fostered. When the reconstruction governments were organized in the Southern States they made provision for the public education of all children, black and white, as part of the organic law. These governments have been and are still held up to public obloquy and scorn by those whose ambition has been promoted by their overthrow. But they have

to their everlasting credit this one unchallenged measure of statesmanship, which is not equaled in the legislative annals of either the old South or the new.

At the time of the founding of these schools, industrial training was, nowhere in America, considered a stated part of the educational program. Indeed specific scholastic preparation for life's work was limited to the learned professions. A knowledge of the three R's was considered adequate preparation for the ordinary duties of life. Forty years ago, General C. S. Armstrong stood almost alone as the earnest advocate of industrial training as an agency for fitting the freedmen for their new function. Today, the necessity for manual training, not only for black boys, but for all the sons and daughters of toil who must shortly join the ranks of the world's workers, is universally acknowledged and extolled. Occupational training will demand a larger and larger place in the educational program of the future.

With the rise of industrial schools there sprang up a fierce and bitter controversy between the promotion of the two contrasted types of education. The one-eyed advocates aligned themselves in battle array, and would not so much as heed a flag of truce. Indeed the race problem seems to afflict the mind as a virulent intoxicant. Men of sane and sober judgment on ordinary issues seem to lose all logical balance and composure on this problem. Where passion enters, reason takes flight. The war between the hand and the head went merrily on. The situation was full of risible and grotesque possibilities. The Greek grammar and rosewood piano in a dingy cabin even now provoke mirth. The industrial advocates by adroit acquiescence in the political subjugation of the race gained the sympathy and assistance of those whose invariable policy is to reduce the negro to the lowest possible terms. Industrial education became a byword. In the mind of one man, it meant that the negro should be taught only to know the relative distance between two rows of cotton or hills of corn, and how to deport himself with becoming behavior behind the chair while his white lord and master sits at meat; while in the mind of another, it stood for the awak-

ening of the best powers and possibilities. To the white man of the South it may have meant that the negro was to be made more serviceable to him and more easily amenable to his imperious will. To the white man of the North, it may have meant that the black man was to be made a competent worker, equipped with intelligence and skill such as are demanded of Northern workmen. However variant may have been the interpretations of the meaning of industrial education, there was a general agreement to discredit the higher culture of the race. The industrial advocates made the more effective popular appeal. Philanthropic contributions were turned into the coffers. The college and university seemed doomed to starvation. But fortunately a more sober and rational spirit now prevails. The erstwhile partizan zealots are beginning to see what a dispassionate judgment has always made plain. A population of people ten million strong with all the varied capacities, aptitudes, opportunities, and inclinations of human nature stands in need of every form and variety of education that counts for progress. Industrial and higher education are complementary factors of the same product. They are both essential parts of the educational program, each in its proper place and proportion. Howard and Hampton, Fisk and Tuskegee are in no sense antithetic institutions, but supplementary coworkers in the same field. It is perfectly evident that no one school, nor any single type of schools, is adequate to the wide circle of racial needs.

There are some good people who are generally well disposed to the race, but who think that every negro, whatever his future calling is to be, should be taught a hand trade; that every negro school, whatever its grade or pretension, should have industrial work as part of its curriculum. They are always looking for the apron as the traditional racial badge. It is true that the great bulk of the race must for all time that we can foresee earn their living by some form of manual work. Therefore the industrial training should have a large place in the educational program. Its importance can not be over-emphasized. But there is a higher field of service, on the plane of directive intelligence and professional skill. The

negro teacher needs to know as much respecting the needs and necessities of the growing mind as does the white pedagogue. The negro physician meets with every form of sickness and disease that human flesh is heir to. The negro preacher certainly confronts as grave moral and spiritual problems as ever devolved upon the sacerdotal office. The best welfare of any people will not be long safeguarded unless they raise up from their own ranks men who have the power and preparation to state their case and defend their cause before the just judgment of mankind. The blind must be led; the leaders must have vision. Those who must stand in the high places of leadership and authority need all of the strengthening and sustaining power that the highest discipline and culture of the school can afford.

These warring factions are now beginning to open both eyes and to appreciate the value of binocular vision. Dr. Booker T. Washington, the chief apostle of industrial training, has accepted a place on the governing board of Howard University, the leading school for higher culture. Neither has surrendered, but both have struck hands on the high ground of mutuality and good will.

Among the most interesting features of negro education may be mentioned the rise of state colleges. The Federal Government appropriates, thru the land grant and Morrill Fund, a given amount for the encouragement of agricultural and mechanical training in each state. In those states whose constitutions provide for a scholastic separation of the race, these funds are divided pro rata to the racial population. As a result every Southern state has an agricultural and mechanical college for the negro race. These schools are placed under negro faculties, and the federal allowance is supplemented by state appropriations, as a partial offset to larger sums devoted to state colleges for the white youth.

Another class of schools which deserve special notice are those institutions which fall wholly under negro support and control. Each of the leading negro denominations has a chain of schools and colleges fostered along the lines of its denominational policy. These schools furnish a most hope-

ful and interesting indication; for in education as in physics, no body can for long maintain its stable equilibrium whose center of gravity falls outside of the basis of support. Many of the most forceful leaders of the race, especially in religious work, are the product of these schools. They are usually characterized by a marvelous optimism and virility of spirit.

The negro race is generally referred to as a unit, and its needs and circumstances as requiring a uniform mode of treatment. On the other hand, there is no other class of our population that is subject to so wide a diversity of conditions. Unlike the Indian, he lacks territorial solidarity and homogeneous environment. There are about three-quarters of a million negroes in the Northern and Western states, in which there is no scholastic separation of the races. The colored children attend school along with their white fellow pupils, and distribute themselves among the several grades and departments of instruction according to circumstances, aptitude, and opportunity. They have open to them all the educational facilities and privileges of the most favored portions of the nation. They do not, however, as a rule, take advantage of these opportunities, especially in the higher reaches of knowledge, because they do not feel the keen incentive of remunerative opportunity. It is only the boy of exceptional ambition who will take the pains to acquire an education which is not likely to be called into requisition in the vocation which he expects to follow. The occupational proscription of the North chills the ambition of the negro youth, despite the allurements of fine educational facilities. Several hundred negro students are pursuing higher academic and professional courses in Northern colleges and universities. But for the most part they are from the South with the fresh inspiration of the masses upon them. The best schools of the country, both as regards public systems and chartered institutions, are open to all applicants who are able to meet the intellectual, moral, and financial requirements. The scholastic separation of the races is only a local provision for states where the negroes are relatively numerous. Thru the broad policy of the North and

West, where our educational systems have the highest perfection, the negro is brought in touch with the best scholastic opportunities that the teaching world affords.

Again the educational needs of the city negro must be carefully differentiated from those of the rural masses. The general environment and practical conditions are so diverse that we must separate the two in any scheme of profitable discussion. There are about one and a half million negroes in Southern cities of 2,500 or more inhabitants. Adding these to the Northern fragment it leaves something like three-fourths of the race in the rural parts of the South.

In the cities, school funds are quite sufficient to maintain the graded schools for the average length of term with the requisite facilities and appliances of instruction. The duplication of schools for the two races works less economic disadvantage in cities where the numbers of both races are sufficient to supply adequate school constituencies than in the country where the population is sparsely scattered. The education of the city negro makes little or no claims on outside philanthropy. The cities are well able to educate their own children, and there is no more reason why they should seek outside aid for this purpose than for any other branch of municipal government. School-teaching furnishes about the only avenue of remunerative employment for colored women above the grade of domestic service, and hence the best equipped members of the race rush into this field of work. Negro school-teachers, male and female, are often the best paid wage-earners in the several communities, and are looked up to as leaders in social life and general activities. This gives the negro schools a relative advantage which the whites do not enjoy. The best equipped members of the white race are usually engaged in more remunerative and attractive pursuits. Such cities as Washington, Baltimore, St. Louis, Louisville, and Little Rock maintain high schools for colored youth which do respectable secondary work, even when measured by New England standards. Even where the municipality does not make provision for high schools philanthropic and denominational institutions have made some provision, so that there is scarcely a city in the

South of considerable negro population that has not a school of secondary pretensions, maintained either at public or private cost. Broadly speaking, educational facilities are open to urban negroes, which among white youth have been accounted sufficient to prepare for the ordinary duties of life. The pressing educational problem of the city negro is rather one of adaptation than of enlargement. Education on its practical side should be shaped to the obtainable pursuits of the pupil. The peculiar situation and circumstances of the negro race adds new emphasis to several educational principles. The negro race furnishes the richest possible field for educational experiment. There is the broadest scope for originality, or at least the interpretation of general principles in terms of new conditions. The perfection of the urban schools is of higher importance to the welfare of the race at large, for it is in the city centers that the torch must be kindled that is to give light to the remotest rural ramifications.

The education of the country negro is of itself a thing apart. The means are so meager and the provisions so inadequate that what little schooling he gets can be called education only by courtesy of speech. His life preparation is woefully inadequate to the requirements of intelligent citizenship. The demand is imperative that the Federal Government should bring the light of knowledge to the shade-places of the South. Statesmanship and philanthropy might well unite upon this patriotic task.

The Peabody, Slater, Hand, Rockefeller, and Jeanes Foundations have been devoted wholly or in part to the educating of the Southern negro. But only the last-named fund is aimed directly at the spot where the need is greatest.

Forty years of negro education has accomplished certain definite results, and suggests certain definite needs.

In the first place it has settled for all time the negro's capacity to comprehend the rudiments, as well as the higher reaches of knowledge and apply them to the tasks of life. The race which was once denied the possession of an educationable mind is thus proved to be responsive to the same intellectual stimulus as the great Aryan race. Those who

affect to doubt this proposition need themselves to be pitied for their evident incapacity to grasp demonstrated truth.

In the second place the colleges and universities have furnished the teachers, preachers, doctors, lawyers, editors, and general leaders who are now directing the activities of the negro people, and stimulating them to higher and nobler modes of life. This professional class, like the priest Melchizedek, sprang at once to place of authority and leadership, without antecedents or beginning of days. The instrumentality which in some measure helped to fit them to their high function, performed a service rarely, if ever, equaled in the history of human betterment.

In the third place the illiteracy of the race has been cut down to forty-five per cent., which marks the most marvelous advance in the technical elements of knowledge in the annals of human progress. It is true that the vast majority of those classed as literate have a technical rather than a practical grasp of the principles of knowledge. Of those who *can* read and write, comparatively few *do* read and write effectively, and bring this acquisition to bear upon the common tasks of life. They do not generally pass constitutional tests in Alabama, as the knowing registration officers assure us. While it is true that a mere mechanical knowledge of letters may have little immediate bearing upon practical tasks; yet its potential value is beyond calculation. It is a possession that is not destroyed but is carried forward. Literate parents transmit their acquisition to their children, so that the current of acquired knowledge flows onward with ever-widening and deepening channel. This mystic key with twenty-six notches unlocks all the hidden secrets of the universe. It opens up newness of life. Transition of a people from illiteracy to literacy is like changing the temperature of a region from several degrees below to a few degrees above the freezing point. The actual change may seem to be small, yet it effects a marvelous transformation in the surrounding flora and fauna. And so with a race, the transmission of the symbols of knowledge acquired by a few years' schooling thaws out the faculties frozen

by centuries of ignorance, which will shortly begin to yield a new flower and fruitage.

The cost of negro education for these forty years has been a vast sum in the aggregate, but is utterly inadequate when counted against the task to which it has been applied. Northern philanthropy has contributed a princely sum, unequalled in any other domain of vicarious service. The Southern states have appropriated to this use a part of the public tax which the negro's industrial activities and economic position make possible. The assertion that the Southern white man imposes a gratuitous tax upon himself for the benefit of the black man's education rests upon an economic fallacy and a total misapprehension of responsibility of the state to promote intelligent citizenship. The claim for equal educational facilities for the negro child is not based upon civic charity, but upon justice and equity and enlightened policy.

It is blatantly and bitterly asserted that the education of the negro has not solved the race problem. It was but a shallow philosophy that prophesied this outcome in the first place. Indeed much of the reversion of feeling against the higher education was due to the fact that after twenty-five years of effort the race problem had become rather intensified than abated in acuteness. The industrial advocates shrewdly enough promised the American people that their program would result in the desired solution. The prophet always puts the fulfilment as remote as possible from the prophecy and relies upon popular forgetfulness to escape his just condemnation. When the day of reckoning comes, as it shortly must, those who promised to solve the problem thru industrial training will be declared to have been false prophets. Education must not be condemned as a failure because it has not accomplished results that lie outside of the sphere of its function. All of our complex national problems are intensifying and growing apace with increase of education. Rapacity and greed, the tangle of labor and capital, the wrangle of rich and poor, municipal corruption, and crime against property and persons seem to proceed *pari passu* with increasing popular enlightenment. Shall we condemn the education of the American people

because it does not settle these grave problems? In the North where the negro has educational advantages equal to those offered the most favored class of children anywhere on earth, and in the cities where fairly satisfactory provisions prevail, the race problem persists in its manifold forms and phases. Education enables the individual to grapple with his environment; it makes the race a competent coöperating factor instead of a negative force in the general equations of progress. Without it, the negro must hang as a millstone upon the neck of the nation's advance. For in the nature of things, ignorance is a menace to knowledge, vice to virtue, and degradation to the decencies of life. But we misinterpret its function if we expect a few years' schooling to settle the problems growing out of the contact, attrition, and frictional relations of the races. These far-reaching questions depend upon a larger policy, and must be left to statesmanship, philanthropy, and religion, and most of all, to the propitiation of time.

Forty years of experience has also taught certain clear lessons as to method which should not go unheeded.

Early educational effort in this field was devoted largely to building up religious adherents within denominational lines. The negro race has become attached to two leading denominations, from which there is not likely to be much serious proselytism. As the Irishman is a Catholic, the Scotchman a Presbyterian, so the negro is a Baptist or Methodist. It seems to be a practical waste of while to attempt to wean him from this adherence by educational inducement. Up to a few years ago, Northern philanthropy was prompted largely by the religious motive. But the denominational institutions are becoming a diminishing factor in our general educational equation. They are not generally able to compete with those institutions which appeal to all the people without religious restriction. Since the organization of the general Board of Education, this philanthropy seems to be prompted more and more by a sense of civic and social service rather than to promote any particular religious polity. A wise coördination would obviate the waste of needless duplication. There should be called a conference of representatives of the various religious organiza-

tions and other agencies, to advise upon some comprehensive plan of articulation and coördination of work. There have been founded more colleges and universities than can be adequately maintained. The high-sounding pretensions of an institution above the level of its grade and facilities tends to discredit the whole scheme in the minds of serious and sensible men, and to give the negro youth a false notion of what education really means. This conference might well consider the advisability of reducing the number of colleges to five or six distributed with reference to the needs of the population, and of providing faculties and facilities that would enable them to live up to the name assumed. The others might well be limited to the secondary grade, as feeders for the higher institutions or as finishing schools of a lower order of pretension. The proper distribution of industrial schools might also claim the attention of this conference. Institutions maintained by private philanthropy were at first compelled to assume the lowest grades of instruction. But as the public schools have developed this is no longer a necessity. These institutions should relegate to the public schools all work which falls within their sphere, and confine their energies to those lines which fall beyond or at least outside of the scope of public instruction. It is needless to say that there should be the heartiest coöperation with Southern school authorities for the betterment of the public school system. Each Southern state should maintain a normal school, with facilities and equipment equal to the best requirements of the teaching world. The teacher is an agent of the state. It is as much a disgrace for a sovereign state to employ incompetent teachers to enlighten its future citizens, as it would be to engage incompetent persons to conduct any other feature of its affairs.

If the experience of the past forty years has done nothing but enable us to follow the right method in the future, the means and effort will not have been spent wholly in vain.

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