Sankofa in the Adrinka language literally means to return (san) and go or seize (ko), that which was left behind (fa). Represented as a bird with its head leaning backward in the direction of its tail while flying forward, Sankofa is simultaneously a guide to the future, and a necessary reminder of the past (Willis, 1998). Sankofa provides a coherent intellectual and metaphorical space in which to ground a discussion of African-Americans’ journey toward the attainment of a quality education, and at the same to rise above the systemic, structural and ideological shackles which have circumscribed African-American pursuits of a quality education. The obstruction of academic access continually threatens to nullify even the possibility for Americans of African descent to live the American dream of life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness and equality. Herein, we briefly explore the historical paths and patterns of educational struggles. We examine contemporary barriers including tracking, standardized testing and the school to prison-pipeline. We conclude with recommendations for family and community strategies to interrupt the pattern of mis-education of African-American children.

Sankofa: African-Americans Continuing Struggle for a Quality Education

By Linda A. Spears-Bunton, Carolyn Reid-Brown, Rachel Jean, and Keisha McIntyre McCullough

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Sankofa: Bloody Waters--A Textbook of Pain, Fear and Degradation

Academic pursuits have long been hotly contested and even considered dangerous for people of African descent due to social, cultural, political, and economical ideologies stretching from the beginning of the African transatlantic slave trade in 1619 through slavery, reconstruction, the civil rights movement and into today’s era of the New Jim Crow (Alexander, 2012). ‘Education’ in the early years of the African-American presence in the US involved the unique form of socialization designed to teach and to enforce the rules of decorum for subjugated persons. Fear, history reports, was the primary theme taught and re-taught in a myriad of ways, especially in the practical education of African children. ‘Education’ of the kidnapped African did not include: 1) imparting general knowledge, development of reasoning, judgment and discernment or 2) preparation for the self and others intellectually and emotionally for mature life. Indeed, one of the first things Africans had to do was to unlearn (or pretend to) everything they had previously known: language, religion, science, medi-
comes increasingly evident as we continue to trace its perpetuation in perpetuity. This be -
the future. Taken together history demonstrates the idiosyncrasies of flesh market agents, clients,
culture, and cultural history. Africans were taught values and ethics, logic, decency, family values,
class, and the South had difficulty envisioning people of African descent as capable of creating knowledge,
states, which have some of the lowest overall graduation rates in the country. (Dropouts in the South,
35% on average in Florida, creating a social and economic drain on society, which contributes to minority criminalization. “The ma -
American students, increasing for many, doubt about their ability to succeed academically. 
mal to succeed academically. Standardized testing is used as a basis for promotion beginning in the third grade. This practice raises concerns for teachers with students who have gaps in their knowledge. Students are bombarded with continual “practice” tests; many students repeatedly fail. Thus, far too many African-American children's desire to learn erodes into a lack of engagement. Moreover, the evolution of standardized testing as the single most important measure of student and teacher accomplishment, and a basis for promotion and teacher salaries in places like Florida, furthers the systemic pattern of racism in the educational system. For example, in 2014, a law was passed holding African American children to a lower standard than their Hispanic or White counterparts. “By the 2017/18 school year, the Florida Department of Education expects 92 percent of Asian students will pass their math tests at grade level. For Hispanic students, the goal is 80 percent. For African American students, it’s 74 percent.” (Mack, 2014). While this law may relieve some of the financial burden on teachers with failing students, repetitive testing drastically deters all students, especially those with less resources and in lower socio-economic situations.

The Florida Department of Education is stunningly callous in the way it causally reduced a poor, African-American child's self-worth and self-determination.

Sankofa: The Caged Bird Screams: From School to Prison

The practice of subjugation of the African American learner continues with the introduction and implementation of the Gun Free Schools Act (GFLSA) of 1994 and similar policies which ushered in an era of social control and the militarization of schools not been seen before. According to Chris -
topher Robbins in Saltman and Gabbard (2011), the zero tolerance policy relating to the possession of weapons, alcohol, tobacco and perceived disruptive behavior has “intensified a culture of fear in schools that merely reinforces ambient fears located in the wider society more generally” (p. 117).

How it was demonstrated was that Teacher authority pertaining to discipline was outsourced to local lawmakers; the court and prison system essentially make school matters legal criminal matters and effectively removing jurisdiction from schools and school personnel. The school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Petterson, 2000; Wald & Losen, 2003; Zeidler & Schiraldi, 2002) is a manifestation of low student expectations and engagement, poor school relationships, low academic achievement, and excessively harsh discipline for minor infractions including but not limited to suspension, expulsion, referral to law enforcement and arrest. This has disproportionately affect -ed students of color pushing these children from school into prison; the facts speak for themselves. Amaro (2013) highlighted the following statistics. Eight percent of students expelled from US schools annually are Black. Of the total number of students involved in “in-school” arrests or referred to law enforcement, 70% are African American or Latino. African American students are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended than Whites, and along with Latinos, are 2 times more likely to not graduate high school as Whites.

Teachers are bound by law to report negative behavior with the possibility of facing arrest
and obstruction of justice charges should they stand up for students in negative interactions with School Resource Officers. Thus, teachers forcibly become complicit in the violation of the students’ rights. The process of schooling, and the role of the teacher no longer seems to be about educating children; it is about controlling them. Robbins (2011) further suggests that teachers have become "a clerk-guard concerned with data "threats" [and students] as data “threats” – easy to manipulate and much easier to harm" (Saltman & Gabbard, p. 124). Too often, students, of color, are not seen as persons, but as statistics for testing or disciplinary action. What message is being conveyed to the students specifically and society at large? Blacker (2013) illustrates the situation quite interestingly by using the school-prison analogy and drawing parallels between the prison guards and the teachers. “With respect to structural issues pertaining to social justice, the educators are functionally similar to the prison guards in that they are the rather hapless marionettes of the larger forces that by and large write their occupational script. As prison guards and as teachers, their movements are similarly restricted” (p. 227). If we subscribe to the notion that the militarization of school and its criminalization of students of color has made it more of a carceral institution, then Blacker’s suggestion that the teachers’ ability, like that of the guards’ to effect change, is limited by their lack of “social reach of the main and chronic factors that populate, structure and perpetuate the carceral system within which they function” (p. 227). Teachers are then seen as drones seeking to maintain the status quo. That is to teach what is required, test accordingly and keep students in line as they pass from system to system (school to boardroom or prison).

African American children are clearly over represented in suspension and dropout rates (Fenning & Rose, 2007), grade retention, special education classes, failed classes, failed standardized test and underrepresentation in advanced courses. High rates of incarceration seem to follow a familiar pattern of repressed development and commodification when we look at the ways private prisons develop business plans. For example—fail grades on state tests—to plan for prison growth. One cannot fail to note that profits are accumulat ed by prisons and test makers when African American children fail.

Sankofa: Flying Forward: Things the African American Community Must Do

Clearly, African American children have an elite, powerful world against them, simply waiting for their failure, hoping that the historical tides continue to flow in the direction of the privileged. After the brutal subjugation of their ancestors, the African children of the African Diaspora still fight chilling racism with segments of society that seems blind to the stunning disparities of their education. However, have the odds ever created such a bold opponent? We are renewed with a strong community, remembering our own mis-education and injustices. Although resources might appear meager, they are still more than ever before. The following is a short list of ways we can help ourselves and our children:

- Black teachers can pour their love, hope and belief into Black students.
- Black community members can educate themselves about their elected leaders, contacting them with unwaveringly blunt needs of their people.
- Parents can vote and teach their young sons and daughters the history of their people, while guiding them into a brighter future.
- Parents have to become advocates for their children in a variety of ways. Some of these ways include:
  - Reading to your child every day for at least 20 minutes from birth through elementary school. This should be quiet time—no TV, music, cell phones etc. This is the very best prevention of reading problems.
  - Visit the public library bi-weekly.
  - Getting to know your child’s teacher(s)—ask for the topics, projects etc. your child will be engaged in and research them yourself.
  - Teach your child the history of those who have paved the way for them. Some examples follow.

There are those who started the path that must be followed: Gwen Cherry, the first African American woman “elected to the Florida Legislature,” who also helped pass Florida’s first Equal Rights Amendment bill in 1972; Christina Eve, a teacher and the founder of the Egglee club, which sponsors “Men of Tomorrow,” which helps Black males finish high school; Dr Gilbert Porter, the first black Assistant Superintendent for Dade Schools and Executive Secretary of the Florida State Teachers Association, increasing membership in 1965 by thousands; Ethel Gates Primus, an elementary school principal who founded Junior Americans Citizens and sat on committees in her Seminola community.

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