

The Achievement Gap: A Permanent Staple in American Culture

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*At the bottom of education, at the bottom of politics, even at the bottom of religion, there must be for our race economic independence. – Booker T. Washington*

It was the most anticipated day of June. Summer was in full swing, and the fourth of July was steadily approaching. Social media was buzzing. Everyone was counting down. There were parties scheduled throughout the next two weeks. Yet, the sweet jubilee in the “City of Lights” would not be a celebration of American independence, but a response to the “Nissan Shutdown” which was a well-deserved paid vacation for the employees of the Nissan Motor Company in Canton, Mississippi.

Fourteen years ago, the company opened a factory in Canton, a predominantly African-American community. With the factory came the promise of relatively high-paying jobs, so most looked forward to the new economic opportunity. Today, however, tension is in the air as the company is at war with a large number of its employees over union representation. In March, presidential hopeful, Bernie Sanders, lead a rally for worker’s rights. The United Auto Workers’ campaign “has often focused on respect and workplace quality-of-life issues such as safety and scheduling more than wages, benefits and pensions” (Jackson Free Press, 2017). However, the company and its supporters argue that the union’s campaign is a ploy to gain members for its fading organization, and there are still many workers who support the company.

Canton has a rich history and convenient geographic location in capital metropolitan area which points toward economic prosperity, but many live in poverty. According to the Chamber of Commerce (2017), “Canton grew as a booming railroad, lumber and saloon center prior to the Civil War.” Today, however, 31% of the population makes less than \$15,000 per year.

How did a city with such promise become a city with significant poverty? How does a town that has produced some of the state’s engineers, lawyers, and doctors find itself in such a vulnerable state? How can the problem be fixed? Booker T. Washington had the solution for closing the achievement gap

before it ever existed. We must build communities that are able to sustain themselves. The strength of a government comes from the strength of its people. How can unresourceful people retain power? Nissan came to impoverished state because there would be people with limited options who would work for low wages. The only way we can safeguard ourselves from economic dependency is through education that include a focus on financial literacy. A failure to properly rise from slavery has lowered us into the depths of poverty.

### **Up from Slavery**

Humans have a desire for power. A traditional representation of power is government. For generations, African Americans were held in bondage having no voice in their personal lives or communities. After African Americans are freed from slavery, positions of political power would seem to be a natural transition. Everyone, regardless of race or age, should have a valued opinions that are taken into account when decisions are made about their lives. However, focusing solely on rising to power without immediate regard to human and community development is a grave mistake. While government representation is a vital element of that development, the rise and fall of any settlement depends on its ability sustain itself with little outside intervention. After all, strength of a democracy lies in the ability of its people to make informed decisions in all areas of their lives.

A man of integrity, Booker T. Washington, believed in laying the foundation that would result in a gradual rise to power for the black community. Starting from the bottom instills the value of hard work in the race. If much attention would have been devoted to building personal skills and their communities, it would have formed an unbreakable bond among African American. As scripture instructs, "I have the right to do anything," you say – but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything" – but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of

others" (Corinthians 10:23-24, New International Version). The race for political power lead a few to the top and left the rest behind to serve under a new class of elite.

Today, there is a divide within the African American community fueled by a need to compete which was embedded in the race through slavery. In the Atlanta Exposition Address, Washington insists, "We shall constitute one-third and more of ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, every effort to advance the body politic" (155). Competition has driven the race to focus on outward appearance instead of on the inner growth that compels humans to make positive contributions to the greater good of humanity whether it's through professional or philanthropic endeavors.

### **A Need for Financial Literacy**

There is a line of progress on which all children fall. Each child starts on the line at a different point which is determined by geography, race, class, and parental support. Education is a potential force that can move students along that line to the slope of success.

In America, classism is a threat to financial literacy. Financially literate has been considered an attribute of the upper class. The lower class would not dare to think about investing or saving because it implies that a person has extra money. The middle class spends to build material wealth because they are constantly trying to distinguish themselves from the poor. Neither class considers financial freedom, so debt is perceived as inevitable. In this sense, financial literacy is determined by mindset.

Financial literacy can be defined as the skill of discerning how decisions could negatively or positively impact wealth. When most people hear the term, they think of money. It is the misconceptions about money that causes financial illiteracy. The most detrimental idea is that money should be displayed. What's the point of having money if no one knows you have it? For those who

embrace this idea, a lavish lifestyle signifies wealth. Another misconception is that the accumulation of money is determined by luck, fame, or family name. As a result, many people become complacent with having just enough and often less.

With this in mind, it is important not to overlook that while financial literacy includes have a body of knowledge and skill set, practicing financial literacy is most important. With practice comes discomfort which is a major challenge for most. That is why financial literacy for students is critical. They have to practice financial literacy and develop the proper mindset early on so that destructive habits will not be developed.

We failed to come up from slavery in the manner that we should have, so now our attention must be drawn to coming up from poverty, and the only way we can do that is by breaking the cycle that leaves us with financial burden. Each burdened individual helps form the wedge that keeps the achievement gap open. So, what changes must be made to education? We must first shift our focus away from what occurs in schools and individual classrooms. The world is the greatest classroom. The actions of individuals, families, communities, cities, and so on are the greatest teachers of youth. We ask students to pledge allegiance a flag of a united states while the narratives of the nation prove otherwise. Being well versed in Shakespeare and Socrates is a great achievement, and, undoubtedly, cultural literacy primes us for reading and instills a myriad of values, but if there is no vehicle to financial freedom, an individual will always be bound by the chains of poverty. And those figurative chains manifest in stress that clouds our judgement, consumes our time, and devours our souls. For this is the plight of the impoverished parent who is uninvolved in their child's education. Collectively, we should focus on breaking that cycle. It will require us to make sacrifices and abandon certain comforts, but because society brings out the worst in humans, I do not foresee that ever happening, so the achievement gap will be a permanent staple in American culture.

## References

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