

A Theory of the American Public School Classroom
as a Site for Black Intellectual Emancipation

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Introduction

The legacy of Black slavery helped to create the stereotype of Black intellectual inferiority in the United States. Black slaves were viewed as inherently incapable of possessing the ability to reason and think rationally. Moreover, they were prohibited from learning to read and write. Even after the theory of inferior Black intellect was scientifically debunked, the myth continued to persist. While more subtle, the stereotype is still pervasive in modern American culture and damaging to Black people in the United States. It is evoked in many spheres of society, including the nation's main apparatus for education: the public school. On average, students in the United States spend about one thousand two hundred hours in public school every year (U.S. Department of Education). Nationally, students are required to be enrolled in school up until the age of sixteen, when they are legally allowed to stop attending. Therefore, (exempting pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten) most students are in school for *at least* twelve thousand hours during the years in which they are arguably the most impressionable. Additionally, eighty percent of public school teachers in the United States are White and middle class (Characteristics of Public School Teachers). However, they teach classes that are composed

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of majority students of color (Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools). Such teachers are arguably more prone to having a negative implicit (or explicit) bias about the intellectual capacity of their students of color (When Implicit Bias Shapes Teacher Expectations). These features of the public school make it a site that can be conducive for thoroughly indoctrinating Black students to believe that they are intellectually inferior to their peers. Living in an anti-Black society and attending institutions of education for at least twelve thousand hours, wherein the belief of Black intellectual inferiority is pervasive, can condition Black students to internalize their intellectual inferiority and consequently limit their ability to *fully* realize their academic potentials in school. I maintain that insofar as Black students internalize their inherent intellectual inferiority, their ability to fully realize their academic potentials is inhibited.

The main subjects of my focus are *low performing*, Black, public school students from elementary to high school who have (explicitly or implicitly) internalized natural Black inferiority. Intellectual emancipation is valuable for *all* Black students who believe in their natural inferiority, but it is *vital* for those who are low performing because internalized intellectual inferiority impacts them more detrimentally. Low performing students who do not believe that they are intellectually capable are more likely to not engage in class, not apply their full effort in academics, and drop out of school. This is concerning for reasons other than their ability to obtain ‘success’ in the future (e.g. obtain esteemed, lucrative jobs). It is worrying because low performing Black students’ belief in their natural, fixed, intellectual inferiority, limits their ability to *aspire*. It restrains their imagination. If the student cannot dream, then she cannot achieve. A student believing that she is not ‘an intellectual’, ‘a school-person’, or ‘smart’, automatically bars a wide range of future opportunities from her purview. This belief can prevent

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her from pursuing academic careers or professions requiring high levels of education. Her belief that her intelligence is fixed and that she is less intellectually capable of achieving academic success, can also preclude her from pursuing or engaging in a profession or activities that are *not* traditionally considered to be academic or ‘intellectual’. If the student believes that her intelligence and abilities are predetermined, she will likely only pursue those ends which she believes that she has the *natural talent* to succeed in. She may abstain from pursuing ‘non-intellectual’ jobs or embarking on endeavors that she doesn’t believe that she has the initial personality, skills, or character traits for. This is the true issue with the belief in natural Black intellectual inferiority-- by delimiting what low performing Black students are able to *imagine* themselves doing in the world, it restricts who and what they can become, what they can do in life. It both prescribes and circumscribes their life possibilities and therefore their existences. It limits their life freedom. It doesn’t allow them to make free decisions for themselves and live their lives on their own terms. Rather, the belief in natural Black inferiority subjects them to choosing from one of the limited amount of life choices that society says that low-academically performing Black students are able to live.

National leaders in the sphere of public education continuously discuss, plan, and create initiatives with the aim of improving the academic outcomes of historically disadvantaged students of color, such as Hispanic, Native American, and Black students. I maintain that in addition to other measures being discussed and implemented (desegregation, increased assistance for under-funded public schools, participatory budgeting, etc.), public schools should also take an empowering psychological approach to education, through which Black students can come to recognize their equal intellectual capacity, in order to improve the academic outcomes of low

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performing Black public school students. While the features of the public school can prime it to perpetuate the stereotype of Black intellectual inferiority, I believe that they can also enable the classroom to help reveal the equal capacity of academically low-performing Black students to themselves. I argue that if teachers provide classwork, foster a classroom culture, and interact with their low-performing Black students in a way that affirms their equal intellectual capacity, then their efforts will help low-performing Black public school students improve their academic achievement levels.

Psychological Approach for Educating Low-Performing Black Students

A prominent researcher and scholar of the individualized education psychology approach is Stanford education psychologist, Dr. Carol Dweck, the creator of the ‘growth mindset’. In *Mindset*, Dweck claims that having a growth mindset: the belief that one’s intelligence is not fixed, but rather can be developed over time, enables students to succeed in education and general life. In a study that she and her team conducted involving all of the tenth grade students in Chile, who were from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, she found that students who had a growth mindset were more successful than their peers of similar socio economic status, and as successful as some of their peers with higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Claro). She claims that the findings suggest that a growth mindset creates a buffer against “the deleterious effects of poverty on achievement” (Claro). Dweck proposes that if poor, disadvantaged students developed a growth mindset, they would be (better) able to succeed *in spite of* the negative effects of poverty (Claro).

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Some education scholars and activists criticize the individualized psychological approach to helping disadvantaged, academically-weak students to excel in education. One zealous opponent of this movement is educator and author, Steven Goodman, who criticizes the idea that students need to develop specific characteristics in order to be able to realize their academic potentials. He claims that the individualized psychological approach is not sufficient to help historically disadvantaged students overcome the obstacles that hinder them from performing at their full potential. Goodman asserts that it is not the characters of students that prevent them from reaching their potential, but rather the discouraging conditions affected by the structural issues of poverty and racism. He argues that in order to help students improve academically, the structural issues that cause their low performance need to be amended, and not their characters. In *It's Not About Grit*, Goodman writes:

Limiting the focus on students' character abilities to delay gratification, learn from failures, and become more "gritty" sidesteps the complex and often debilitating problems that structural poverty and racism create for students. They paper over the macro-level structural inequities that produce the trauma in the first place...Defining students and their relative grittiness as the problem that needs fixing fails to address the banking and real estate markets that segregate their families in unsafe and unhealthy housing, or the child welfare and justice systems that serve to break up the families of low income students of color, and incarcerate, detain, and deport their parents. It further overlooks the misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic systems that produce pervasive harassment and assault on female and LGBTQ students. Improving students' disposition to learning won't change these conditions. The preponderance of evidence shows that for millions of students from under-resourced communities across the country, whether they live in inner city, rural, or suburban areas, they must endure a broad range of social and

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economic disadvantages that correlate directly with and *create* the conditions for academic disadvantages. (Goodman, 2-3)

Goodman's critique seems appropriate. Without removing structural inequities, the ability of disadvantaged students to realize their potential will always be hampered. Thus, educators, activists, and advocates of equality, must persist in their efforts to eradicate the oppressive structures and effects of racism and poverty.

While a psychological approach to education may not be sufficient to improve the academic achievement of low performing Black students, I believe that it is *necessary*. Eliminating the structural barriers of racism and poverty alone is not adequate to enable low-performing Black public school students to fully realize their academic potential. Historically, Black people in the United States have been considered to be intellectually inferior. Although proponents of biological racism are relatively few today, racist stereotypes with similar sentiments are still expressed. Living in a racist, anti-Black society in which Black students are overtly or tacitly told that they are intellectually inferior to their peers of other races, can condition them to believe such fallacious notions about themselves. While racism may be able to be removed structurally, it can have lasting social effects that condition Black students to internalize their intellectual inferiority, thus still hinder their ability to succeed academically. Because of this, employing a psychological approach is *necessary* to assist Black students in fully realizing their academic potentials.

In an article about the Brazilian educator and critical philosopher Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*, Mark Hederman says "[Freire] tells us that to release the oppressed

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from their way of being is not as easy as removing the forces of oppression. The socio-political situation in the third world has created a psychology and an atmosphere which combine to form the culture of the oppressed...there is a mentality of oppressed peoples” (Hederman, 58). While Black people in the United States do not live in an identical socio-political condition to those in developing countries, Freire’s point is still applicable. Release from oppression requires more than just eliminating the oppressive force; it also requires a correction of the distorted, dominator-imposed mentality of the subjugated.

I believe that Black students who internalize their intellectual inferiority are mentally imprisoned, in a sense. Their belief in their intellectual inferiority hinders their physical ability to become academically high achieving. It prevents them from applying the effort required to achieve academic success, in turn affecting their low performance and consequently reinforcing the concept that they are naturally intellectually inferior.

In *Pedagogy of The Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, says that subjugation is partly maintained through persuading the subjugated to believe that they are naturally inferior to their oppressors.

In order to present for the consideration of the oppressed and subjugated a world of deceit designed to increase their alienation and passivity, the oppressors develop a series of methods precluding any presentation of the world as a problem and showing it as a fixed entity...For cultural conquest to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority. (Hederman, 59)

Slavery employs two kinds of bondage: physical and psychological. The physical bondage is what is visibly seen (chains, shackles, etc). Conversely, psychological bondage is not visible, however, it is just as, if not more, powerful to constrain an individual than its physical

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counterpart. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire maintains that when an oppressor conquers a group, the subjugated adopt the view of the oppressor and their actions advance his aims. Freire writes:

The conqueror imposes his objectives on the vanquished, and makes them his possession. He imposes his own contours on the vanquished, who internalize this shape and become ambiguous beings 'housing' another... [the oppressed] are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting him; between human solidarity or alienation (Hederman, 60)

Freire says that in order to escape bondage, subjugated people need to be aware that they are “the hosts of the oppressor” (Hederman, 58). When the subjugated internalize their inherent inferiority, they unwittingly perpetuate their own subjugation. Psychological slavery is a subjugated person’s commitment to and unconscious participation in his own subjugation. It is the belief that his enslavement is logical and thus just. It compels him to continue obeying the authority over him. It is so powerful that it can keep a slave in bondage even in the absence of physical barriers. Psychological emancipation is the rejection of the ideology that perpetuates one’s subjugation. While a slave can be constrained physically, physical constraints are able to be maneuvered out of. If he has psychological freedom --believes that his slavery is illegitimate-- and therefore has a will to overcome such physical obstacles, he is able to externally realize his freedom. Having psychological freedom motivates individuals who are subjugated to fight against and destroy more *concrete* barriers that restrain them.

Frederick Douglass, a former Black slave who lived in the United States in the 19th century, gained psychological emancipation and thus was consequently empowered to actualize it and run to freedom. Frederick Douglass' escape from slavery to freedom illustrates the necessity of a form of internal emancipation for Black students in public schools, in order for them to be able to concretely actualize their potentials.

Frederick Douglass is born into slavery in Talbot county, Maryland. When he is seven years old, he gets sent by his master, to leave the rural county in which he is born and serve the brother of his son-in-law named Hugh Auld and his wife Mrs. Auld, in the city of Baltimore. Mrs. Auld has never had a slave prior to Douglass, so is not cognizant that she is supposed to treat him callously. Mrs. Auld is so personally unfamiliar with the conventional interaction with slaves that she begins to teach Douglass how to read and spell words. Mr. Auld, who has more experience with slaves, finds this out and prevents her from continuing to do so. Douglass hears the explanation that Mr. Auld orates and claims that it gives him insight into “the white man’s power to enslave the black man” (Douglass, 370). In the arguments Mr. Auld gives to Mrs. Auld against teaching Douglass to read, Douglass believes that he “[understands] the pathway from slavery to freedom” (Douglass, 370). In Mr. Auld’s verbal reprimand, he warns that literacy would make Douglass “unfit... to be a slave” (Douglass, 370). It would make Douglass “at once become unmanageable...to his master” (Douglass, 370). White slave holding society convinced slaves that they were in slavery because they were *naturally* inferior to other people; they possessed inherent qualities and traits that established them as slaves and mandated their enslavement. In Mr. Auld’s comments to his wife against teaching Douglass to read, he subconsciously conveys that there is no essential quality or qualities that necessitate someone to

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be a slave, but rather that the forced disconnection from activities that are regarded as typical for humans, such as reading, writing... thinking (utilization of the intellect), is what conditions someone to be 'fit' to be a slave. By this, Douglass understood that slaves do not exist *naturally*, but are *constructed* by others. Hence, 'Douglass The Slave', was 'manufactured' in part, by intentionally being kept away from learning to read. His obtaining literacy would have counteracted the justification that was given for his enslavement (that he lacked the basic human potentials to possess an intellect and read).

After this incident, Mrs. Auld stops teaching Douglass to read. However, when Douglass gets sent on errands outside of the house he uses savvy strategies (including bribery with food) to persuade young, poor literate white boys who he encounters, to teach him. Douglass also reads books and newspapers when he is left in the house by himself to practice and eventually learns how to read. His achieving literacy confirms the ideas that Mr. Auld tacitly communicated to him: Black people are actually equally intellectually capable thus not *naturally* slaves, but rather inherently equal human beings.

Shortly after Douglass learns to read, he encounters *The Columbian Orator*, an anthology of political writings that advocates freedom and human rights. The rationale in the book effectively addresses and logically debunks arguments that espouse slavery, and provides convincing reasonings for emancipation. The defense for emancipation of a slave provided in the book, fully persuades Douglass that he is essentially human and therefore equally deserves to be valued and treated as such. Douglass becomes resentful and disgruntled with his position in slavery. He believes that it is unfair, and slaveholders are cruel frauds for enslaving Black people.

The defense for emancipation that Douglass reads, along with his understanding of himself as intellectually equal (which he verifies through obtaining literacy), help Douglass attain psychological emancipation. Douglass demonstrates that he is psychologically emancipated because he rejects the idea that slavery is valid and that he has a moral duty to obey his slave-masters. Douglass begins to deeply reflect on his position as a slave, and his psychological freedom or consciousness of his inherent equal humanity, thus *right* to be free, compels him to desire its actualization-- his physical freedom.

A few years later, Douglass gets sent to St Michael's in Maryland, in order to serve Master Thomas, whom he knew when he was a slave in his former home in Talbot County. Master Thomas dislikes Douglass because he continuously disobeys him, especially in the way Douglass takes care of his horse. Douglass repeatedly allows Master Thomas' horse to run away, and then takes a long time to locate and return it to the farm, against Master Thomas's desires. Master Thomas believes that the easier life that Douglass led in the city of Baltimore increased Douglass' recalcitrance. Because of his repeated disobedience, Master Thomas sends him to serve an infamous slave-breaker named Mr. Covey, who is notorious for his ability to break the obstinacy of young slaves and transform them into docile ones.

Douglass' first few months with Mr. Covey are difficult. Mr. Covey whips Douglass frequently and severely for small offences and makes him work from Monday to Saturday until he is almost fully exhausted. The discipline is so extreme that Douglass says "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me... My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!" (Douglass, 388) Mr.

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Covey's treatment discourages Douglass' determination and will to assert the equal humanity that he learned he intrinsically has and dampens the aspiration for freedom that he believes he deserves.

Some time later, Douglass is sick and faints while performing a task, so Mr. Covey beats him mercilessly. The beating is so severe that Douglass walks several miles to the farm of his official master, in order to request protection from Mr. Covey. Douglass' master dismisses his claims and forces him to return to Mr. Covey. The morning after Douglass arrives back on the farm, Mr. Covey attempts to tie his legs in order to whip him. Up until this point, Douglass tolerates being whipped by Mr. Covey. However, this time, when Mr. Covey tries to tie him in order to beat him, Douglass resists. He says "...from whence came the spirit I don't know--I resolved to fight...I seized Covey hard by the throat" (Douglass, 392). Douglass fights and prevents Mr. Covey from whipping him. He then declares that in refusing to let Mr. Covey whip him, by fighting back instead of tolerating the whipping, he regains a sense of equal personhood. Douglass's fight with Mr. Covey represents a turning point in his condition in slavery. He says

This battle with Mr. Covey... rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free... My long crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me. (Douglass, 393)

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Douglass necessarily had to have psychological freedom in order to fight with Mr. Covey. His resistance to Mr. Covey was not substantially precipitated by any other factor. It may seem that Douglass may have been motivated by a factor such as extreme anger, to resist the efforts of Mr. Covey in whipping him. However, such a belief would be incorrect and unfounded. One reason being that Douglass does not allude to being extraordinarily angry with Mr. Covey directly prior their altercation. Even if Douglass was exceptionally angry with Mr. Covey, it would not explain his bold actions. There were many instances in which Douglass was angry during his time in slavery (when Captain Anthony unfairly whipped his Aunt Hester (Douglass, 353-355); when his slavemasters sent his grandmother to spend her remaining years of life in isolation when she could no longer be useful to them (Douglass, 378-379), etc...), however he never resisted being whipped or fought with one of his masters in any of those instances.

The most significant influence that enabled Douglass to resist the efforts of Mr. Covey was his psychological freedom. Douglass signifies that he is psychologically free because he recognizes that he is not essentially inferior to Whites and that slavery is baseless. Douglass is free from the conviction of his natural inferiority that drove him to obey his master. The destruction of this psychological belief in the organicity of slavery provided Douglass with the necessary mindset to rebel against his master. Douglass' mental understanding of himself as an individual who possesses intrinsic, equal, human worth propelled him to actualize his internal understanding of himself in reality, by engaging in a fight with Mr. Covey when he attempted to whip, thereby, debase and treat Douglass as if he *truly* was inferior.

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The fight impacts Douglass so profoundly that after it ends, he professes that he no longer is (i.e he will no longer perceive himself as) a slave from this point on, in spite of his physical circumstance of slavery. He is physically enslaved for four more years after his fight with Mr. Covey, but he does not allow anyone to whip him. Instead, he *fight*s back (Douglass, 393). Once Douglass gains this affirmed sense of his inherently equal human value from his fight with Mr. Covey, he persistently insists that it is respected. Douglass' consciousness of his equal humanity and therefore natural right to live freely, eventually leads him to run from slavery to freedom.

The consciousness of many Black students, like that of Douglass was, may be influenced by erroneous stereotypes of Black intellectual inferiority. Douglass' story conveys that Black students who have internalized intellectual inferiority need to improve their psychological understanding of themselves before they can fully actualize their potentials. They, like Douglass, need a form of internal or mental freedom; freedom from the implicit or explicit belief in their intellectual inferiority; divestment from the oppressive beliefs that limit their recognition and utilization of their potentials. Such internalized, negative self-perception needs to be debunked, disposed of, and replaced with the cognizance of equal intellectual capacity, in order for Black students to be able to *fully* actualize their academic potentials.

This is exactly what Black psychologist Dr. Janie Victoria Ward concluded based on her four-year long psychological study about group identity and adolescent development, conducted on a group of young Black women attending the predominantly White Emma Willard School. Dr Ward found that the girls were able to be academically successful in a predominantly White institution wherein they faced discrimination and racism, in part because they rejected ideas of Black inferiority, and developed positive Black identities. Ward posits

This movement beyond an internalization of racial subservience to racial pride begins first with a conscious confrontation with one's racial identity. Resolution of the so-called identity crisis of youth requires that all adolescents proclaim that "I am not" as the first step to defining what I am. To the initial stages of the identity process, the Black adolescent, all too familiar with the demeaning stereotypes about her and her racial group, must add, "I am not what you believe black people to be *and I am Black.*" Herein lie the necessary statements of repudiation and affirmation. The Black adolescent must reject white society's negative evaluation and must construct an identity that includes one's Blackness as positively valued and desired. For Blacks, identity formation is a necessary rebirth in one's own terms. If this process of positive identification with the black reference group, despite its devalued status, is not completed and internalized, identity formation will be at risk. The process of repudiation, a casting off of the racially based negative perceptions of others, lays the groundwork for the formation of a positive self concept. (Ward, 219)

In the book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, political philosopher Jacques Ranciere also emphasizes and argues for the necessity of disadvantaged people recognizing their equal intellectual capacity. Ranciere adds to the findings of Joseph Jacotot, a French lecturer in the 1800's, and along with him, maintains that having the belief that all individuals possess equal intelligence, enables disadvantaged people to fully realize their potentials.

Ranciere focuses his theory on uneducated, poor people. He calls the belief in inherent unequal intelligence, 'stultification'. He propounds that stultification in uneducated or generally disadvantaged people is detrimental because it inhibits them from recognizing their own capabilities, consequently preventing them from *applying* their intelligence to tasks in order to

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accomplish them. An individual's belief in his inherent intellectual inferiority prevents him from attempting to engage in an activity and attain a positive outcome, because he believes that he is intellectually incapable of doing so. Ranciere feels that this belief impedes disadvantaged people from realizing their full potentials in the world. He asserts that *intellectual emancipation* is one's consciousness of one's intellectual equality (Ranciere, 35). It is one's belief that one is intellectually capable of accomplishing whatever other minds are capable of accomplishing, and one's use of this understanding of oneself to do whatever one desires to. Ranciere emphasizes that (everyone, but especially) disadvantaged people need to obtain emancipation because "...it is on them that the prejudice of the inequality of intelligence weighs most heavily. It is they who must be raised up from their humiliated position" (Ranciere, 106). A goal of intellectual emancipation is to "...raise up those who believe themselves inferior in intelligence, to make them leave the swamp where they are stagnating--... the swamp of self-contempt, of contempt in and of itself for the reasonable creature. It is to make emancipated and emancipating men" (Ranciere, 101-102)

Low performing, Black, public school students need this 'intellectual emancipation', to be able to fully realize their academic potentials.

Work

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the German philosopher Georg Hegel makes the claim that recognition of one's own capacity and equality, which is similar to Ranciere's concept of intellectual emancipation, can be initiated through the process of working. In Hegel's Parable of

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the Lord and Bondsman, the subjugated entity, known as the Other or the Bondsman, obtains freedom by becoming conscious of his equality to the Lord through the process of engaging in work. In Hegel's Parable, the Other's surrender in a fight for recognition of personhood, to his opponent (the Lord) and the Lord's declaration of his own superiority, conditions the Other to internalize his inferiority. When the Other believes the claim of the Lord's superiority and his inferiority to be the truth, he must renounce his former understanding of himself as inherently valuable, and accept the idea that he is simply a physical, unessential being. The Other is not *actually* inferior but is convinced (by the result of the death fight and the claims of the Lord) that he is unessential at his core, exists to serve another, and therefore is justly a Bondsman. Thus, the Other *becomes* a Bondsman. However, through the work that the Bondsman does for the Lord, which affirms the Bondsman's essentiality, he gains an irrefutable certainty of his equality and as a result achieves freedom.

When doing work, the Bondsman views the object that he is going to alter as a material thing that only exists physically. In this way, the Bondsman believes the object to be similar to himself, because he also is simply a physical existence. However, when the Bondsman exerts his force upon the object (engages in work), he observes that the initial shape of the object transforms. His work ends the life of the object by destroying its original, physical form, and makes it into a new shape. This activity physically demonstrates to the Bondsman that contrary to his initial belief, he is not a physical form in the same way that the object he works on is, but is actually different. Unlike the object that is inert and passive, the Bondsman is active; he has the capacity to create. He realizes that in addition to existing physically like the object, he must also exist in a way that is different from simply the physical-- but is rather immaterial or

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spiritual. His immaterial, spiritual existence is the part of him that differentiates him from objects that are simply material, and makes him able to affect things in nature. He deduces from this that his spiritual existence is thus necessary, because it is not predicated or contingent on anything, and therefore he exists *essentially*. This knowledge liberates the Bondsman in a sense. The Bondsman's consciousness of his essentiality enables him to comprehend that he is *equal* to the Lord. He is an essential being in the same way that he believes that the Lord is an essential being. Thus, the Bondsman stops fearing the Lord and his ability to kill him. If the physical body of the Bondsman is killed, he will still exist noumenally as a spirit. Moreover, as equals, the Lord does not hold any extraordinary power to kill the Bondsman over him. The Lord is just as prone to being killed by the Bondsman as the Bondsman is to being killed by the Lord. Thus, the Bondsman does not truly fear the Lord killing him, and consequently loses his personal motive to serve him.

Like Hegel, the French lecturer Joseph Jacotot believed that individuals could achieve emancipation through an activity or work that would reveal their intellectual capacity to themselves. He facilitated a particular exercise on several people to help them attain intellectual emancipation, which is called the Jacotot Method or universal teaching. The method consisted of Jacotot demanding a person or group of people to perform a task that they did not know how to, and challenging them until they accomplished the task, in order to ultimately demonstrate to them that they had the intellectual capacity to perform the activity that they initially believed was impossible for them because of their lack of education. Jacotot used this unique method to help illiterate people recognize their intellectual capacity to read. He asked illiterate people to read a

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book. They retorted that they did not know how to read, but Jacotot prodded them to connect their previous knowledge to what they needed to learn by asking them critical thinking questions.

Would you know how to recognize the letter O that one of my students-- a locksmith by profession-- calls 'the round,' the letter L that he calls 'the square'? Tell me the form of each letter as you would describe the form of an object or of an unknown place. Don't say that you can't. You know how to see, how to speak, you know how to show, you can remember. What more is needed? An absolute attention for seeing and seeing again, saying and repeating. Don't try to fool me or fool yourself (Ranciere, 23).

Demanding illiterate people to tell him what they saw and connect what they knew with what they saw to comprehend what they didn't know, forced them to pay attention or utilize their full effort to try to read, and tacitly communicated to them that they were *intellectually capable* of learning to read. When these illiterate people learn how to read, they will then recognize that they are intelligent (intellectually capable) and so are intellectually capable of doing other things, including those that they had not previously thought that they were able to do.

Jacotot maintained that "*everything is in everything*" (Ranciere, 26). In other words, one's ability to do one thing that one was previously unable to do, was sufficient to demonstrate to him that he had the ability to do several other things -- perhaps anything. Another person that Jacotot assisted in obtaining intellectual emancipation was the son of his printer, who was cognitively disabled. The printer "had despaired of making something of [his son]. Jacotot taught [the son] Hebrew. Later the child became an excellent lithographer. It goes without saying that he never used the Hebrew for anything--except to know what more gifted and learned minds never knew: *it wasn't Hebrew*" (Ranciere, 18). Ranciere and Jacotot make the argument that

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Hebrew was simply a *means* to help the son of the printer recognize his intellectual capacity, thus use his intelligence to attempt and succeed at learning lithography. Ranciere believes that what one learns or how well one does in the activity used to emancipate them is irrelevant to their actual intellectual emancipation.

[Jacotot's] own problem was that of *emancipation*: that every common person might conceive his human dignity, take the measure of his intellectual capacity, and decide how to use it...And whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants, nothing maybe. He will know he can learn because the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of the human mind (Ranciere, 18).

The purpose of universal teaching is not to adequately educate individuals in a particular field or help them become adroit at accomplishing a task per se, but rather to help them become conscious “of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself” (Ranciere, 39).

As Hegel, Jacotot, and Ranciere have demonstrated, work has the potential to help reveal a student's inherent intellectual equality to herself. Students who attend public school tend to come from lower income and less educated backgrounds than their peers in private schools. This makes low performing Black students who attend public school to be more susceptible to internalizing their inferiority. If (grades 1-12) public school teachers provide classwork, foster a classroom culture, and interact with their Black students in a way that affirms their equal intellectual capacity, then the public school classroom can be a site to galvanize intellectual emancipation in low-performing Black students.

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Some opponents of this theory and the psychological approach to improving academic achievement in general, may desire to raise the argument that attaining intellectual emancipation may not necessarily improve the academic achievement levels of Black students in school. Such a belief would be correct. Intellectual emancipation will give Black students the consciousness of their equal intellectual capacity, which will only enable them to achieve academic success *if they want to*. However, it is unlikely that if Black students gain a consciousness of their equal intellectual capacity, they will not use it to improve their academic achievement levels, because students typically do not *want* to underperform. In modern American society, high academic achievement is believed to be an important component in producing future success. Thus students *desire* to perform well academically, and if conscious of their ability to excel (and given the appropriate resources in the classroom), will likely use their knowledge of their equal intellectual capacity to help them do so. Even more important than affecting better academic outcomes, alterations to the classroom in the aforementioned ways will also enable Black students to have improved *life* outcomes. Intellectual emancipation would equip them with the necessary confidence to pursue and fully apply effort to accomplish whatever aims in life that they have, academic or otherwise.

Effort

While doing work can help Black students attain intellectual emancipation, some students do not apply their full effort or even engage in work in the classroom. Such students may not be able to be encouraged to attain intellectual emancipation through the public school classroom.

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Ranciere believes that contempt is the core reason for a disadvantaged stultified students' dis/non-engagement in work. He opines that "contempt is the principle behind the laziness that causes intelligence to plummet into material gravity...Self-contempt is always contempt for others. I can't, says the student who doesn't want to submit his improvisation to his peer's judgement" (Ranciere, 79). The (disadvantaged) stultified student holds others in contempt because they are able to judge him. Ranciere says that the contempt of the student

...tries to pass itself off as modesty: I can't, says the ignorant one who wants to withdraw from the task of learning... I am incompetent; I don't understand anything about it. You quickly understand what he means: 'This isn't common sense, since I don't understand it; a man like me!'...It is easier to *compare* oneself, to establish social exchange as that swapmeet of glory and contempt where each person receives a superiority in exchange for the inferiority he confesses to" (Ranciere, 80).

Ranciere claims that a student's contempt for himself and others, hence non-application of his full effort, is a way to gain power within a situation in which he has little because he internally believes that he is intellectually inferior.

However, disengagement can be viewed in an alternative way. In *Mindset*, Dr. Carol Dweck asserts that the refusal of a student to put in effort or engage in work can be a defense mechanism to protect his work from the judgement of others. The disadvantaged stultified student who (believes that he is intellectually inferior) says that he can't do the work or refuses to fully engage/ apply his intelligence to working on an assignment, may do so because he fears his intellectual inferiority being concretely confirmed by his poor work product, and this condition (of intellectual inferiority) being publicly exposed to others. According to Dweck, many students

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believe that their academic or school performance is an indication of their level of intelligence. She claims that students tend to believe that low academic performance is a reflection of who they are (personally and morally), a determination of their general capabilities in life, and a predictor of their future prospects after they complete school. This disposes students to be personally crippled by outcomes such as low test scores and bad class grades. Thus, a disadvantaged stultified student's disengagement from work or non application of full effort, can arguably be a strategy of self preservation. By disengaging from work, not applying (any/full) effort, students are protecting their work and by extension, themselves (their morality, intelligence, future), from being seemingly immutably judged by others. Dweck states that "low-effort syndrome is often seen as a way that...students with the fixed mindset protect themselves. They view the adults as saying 'Now we will measure you and see what you've got.' And they are answering, 'No you won't.'" (Mindset, 58). Dweck claims that student disengagement from work is often a denunciation and protestation against others' negative critical evaluation of them.

Using The Growth Mindset To Encourage Effort in School Work

Dr. Carol Dweck writes about the 'growth mindset': the belief that one can develop or 'grow' one's intelligence; the conviction that one's intellectual ability is able to improve. Her research in developmental and social psychology suggests that students with the opposite of a 'growth mindset', a 'fixed mindset': the belief that intelligence is mostly fixed, i.e cannot be changed based on one's actions, are more likely to not participate or fully engage in classwork.

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In a study that Dweck conducted on transitioning elementary school students of different mindsets, to see how they would react to the new academic rigors of middle school, she said:

Our students with the fixed mindset who were facing the hard transition saw it as a threat. It threatened to unmask their flaws and turn them from winners into losers... It's no wonder that many students mobilize their resources, not for learning, but to protect their egos. And one of the main ways they do this...is by not trying...students with the fixed mindset tell us that their main goal in school--aside from looking smart-- is to exert as little effort as possible. They heartily agree with statements like this: 'in school my main goal is to do things as easily as possible so I dont have to work very hard' (Mindset, 58)

Dweck says that conversely, students with a growth mindset more readily engage in work or participate.

One day, we were introducing the growth mindset to a new group of students. All at once Jimmy-- the most hard-core turned-off low-effort kid in the group--looked up with tears in his eyes and said 'You mean I dont have to be dumb?' From that day on, he worked. He started staying up late to do his homework, which he never used to bother with at all. He started handing in assignments early so he could get feedback and revise them. He now believed that working hard was not something that made you vulnerable, but something that made you smarter...For students with the growth mindset, it doesn't make sense to stop trying. For them, adolescence is a time of opportunity: a time to learn new subjects, a time to find out what they like and what they want to become in the future (Mindset, 59).

Teachers helping their academically low-performing Black students to develop a growth mindset is crucial to encouraging them to fully engage in work that can help them attain intellectual emancipation. A growth mindset gives such low-performing students the understanding that their skill or achievement level can improve. Their intelligence is not fixed, but malleable; it can be developed over time. Their work product or achievement level may simply reflect their *current* skill, but is not a judgement of their aptitude. A growth mindset encourages participation because it removes students' fear of being stamped as 'dumb' if they incorrectly answer a question in class or get a bad grade on an assignment. It communicates that their level of ability today does not determine what their level of ability will be tomorrow or what their general intellectual 'limit' is. Because of this, students with the growth mindset are generally more likely to participate or engage in classwork. The public school classroom can kindle intellectual emancipation in low-performing Black students by promoting a growth mindset, as that will incentivize students to engage in work that is intellectually emancipating and consequently will enable them to attain intellectual emancipation.

In addition to motivating students to engage in classwork, studies that Dr. Dweck and other researchers have conducted suggest that a growth mindset also mitigates the negative effects that stereotypes have on students' academic performance. She says that persons in stereotyped groups with a growth mindset are more easily able to reject negative stereotypes and maintain their self concept and confidence. Dweck states that "[w]hen stereotypes are evoked, they fill people's minds with distracting thoughts--with secret worries about confirming the stereotype" (Mindset, 75). However, "[t]his doesn't happen to everybody...It mainly happens to people who are in a fixed mindset. It's when people are thinking in terms of fixed traits that the

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stereotypes get to them. Negative stereotypes say: ‘You and your group are permanently inferior.’ Only people in the fixed mindset resonate to this message” (Mindset, 75). In contrast,

“when people are in a growth mindset, the stereotype doesn't disrupt their performance. The growth mindset takes the teeth out of the stereotype and makes people better able to fight back. They don't believe in permanent inferiority. And if they *are* behind--well, then they'll work harder and try to catch up” (Mindset, 76).

She says that for those with a fixed mindset,

The stereotype of low ability was able to invade them--to define them--and take away their comfort and confidence. I'm not saying it's their fault by any means. Prejudice is a deeply ingrained societal problem, and I don't want to blame the victims of it. I am simply saying that a growth mindset helps people to see prejudice for what it is--someone else's view of them--and to confront it with their confidence and abilities intact (Mindset, 78).

Suggestions For Creating A Growth Mindset Classroom Culture

While the growth mindset and intellectually emancipating work can be helpful for kindling intellectual emancipation through the public school classroom, it is incumbent that the teacher in the classroom be intellectually emancipated; that she believes (or presumes) that Black and all students have equal intellectual capacity. Stultified low-performing Black students enter

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the classroom with the belief that they are naturally intellectually inferior. This idea has likely already been communicated to them and reinforced in the past by teachers, school officials, or perhaps even family members, either explicitly or implicitly. The teacher in the classroom must interrupt and obliterate this notion. She can only truly do this by rejecting the fiction of Black intellectual inferiority for herself. Only after doing so will she be able to help her students come to comprehend that they are equally intellectually capable. Ranciere says that in order “[t]o emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and one need only be, emancipated oneself, that is to say, conscious of the true power of the human mind” (Ranciere, 15). Public school teachers must believe in intellectual equality and communicate this conviction to (all of the students in their classroom, but particularly to) their low performing Black students, in order to directly assist them in attaining intellectual emancipation and enable the classroom to be a site for intellectual emancipation.

There are strategies that public school teachers can use to create a growth mindset atmosphere in their classrooms. One such strategy is to create a nurturing classroom environment. Dweck posits that teachers need to be affectionate toward and create an atmosphere of trust for their students. In *Mindset*, Dr. Dweck recounts the story of Marva Collins, a renowned Chicago teacher who teaches disadvantaged elementary school students who are viewed as ‘troubled’ or ‘problem-children’. Collins gave her students academically rigorous work and set high standards for them to meet. Dweck says that in addition to this, from the very beginning of the school year, Collins created

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an atmosphere of genuine affection and concern as she promised students that they would produce: “I’m gonna love you...I love you already, and I’m going to love you even when you don’t love yourself” she said to the boy who wouldn’t try...Realizing that her students were coming from teachers who made a career of telling them what was wrong with them, she quickly made known her complete commitment to them as her students and as people. (Mindset, 197-198)

Dweck criticizes teachers that foster classrooms that create atmospheres of judgement because they engender a fixed mindset in students. Dweck asserts that “[t]eachers with the fixed-mindset create an atmosphere of judging. These teachers look at students’ beginning performance and decide who’s smart and who’s dumb. Then they give up on the dumb ones” (Mindset, 197).

While teachers do not have to ‘love’ every academically low-performing Black student in order to create a growth-mindset environment, Dweck maintains that “they have to care for every single student” (Mindset, 197). Teachers need to create an atmosphere of trust, and not one of judgement so that they can be a source of motivation for low-performing Black students to persist and develop a growth mindset, rather than be a reinforcement of negative stereotypes, thus drive them to adopt a fixed mindset.

Another way that teachers can cultivate a growth mindset culture in the classroom is by encouraging struggle. In *Limitless Mind*, Dr. Jo Boaler, a proponent of the growth mindset, relays her experience in a summer math camp for middle school students that she ran, where she and her team encouraged the students to struggle and told them that making mistakes would improve their learning. Boaler says

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One of the most common complaints I hear from teachers is that students don't want to struggle; they want to be told what to do. To the teachers it seems as though students just can't be bothered with struggling, which is probably what it looks like. The truth is, however, that when students don't want to struggle, it is because they have a fixed mindset; at some point in their lives they have been given the idea that they cannot be successful and that struggle is an indication that they are not doing well. But in our camp environment, where we actively valued mistakes and struggle, they became willing to persist, even when they found work difficult. In the moment when they turned to us looking forlorn and despondent and said... "this is too hard," we would say "these are the greatest moments of brain growth-- that feeling of it being too hard is the feeling of your brain growing. Keep going. It is really important and valuable". By the end of the camp we saw students who were willing to struggle and keep going when questions were hard. (Boaler, 61-62)

In the same book, Dr. Boaler also recounts her communication with a 6th grade math teacher named Jennifer Schaefer, who's teaching was transformed by the learning pit concept (which says that struggle is an important component in the process of learning) and Boaler's strategy to encourage struggle in the classroom. Boaler writes "[Jennifer] told me that students sometimes get frustrated and say to her: 'Ms. Schaefer, I am really in the pit!' And she answers, 'Excellent! What classroom tools do you need?'" (Boaler, 65-66). Dr. Boaler says that the answer Jennifer gives to her struggling students is an ideal one. Encouraging struggle normalizes the position of confusion and thus removes the stigma of confusion representing stupidity. This consequently motivates low-performing students to engage in work because it communicates that notwithstanding their current level of comprehension, they are capable of and will succeed in learning.

Moreover, by encouraging struggle in the classroom, low-performing Black students will be able to experience the improvement in their skill level for themselves and consequently develop a growth mindset: the belief that intellectual abilities can be developed over time. It conveys that lack of understanding is normal, temporary and something that can be overcome. And comprehension is something that can increase (with effort, specific support, persistence, etc). Boaler's strategy transforms the way that errors and failures are perceived. It changes them from being viewed as markers of stupidity to learning opportunities.



Another way that teachers can cultivate a growth mindset in the classroom is by taking a multidimensional approach to teaching and learning. Boaler says “It is challenging for students to develop a growth mindset when subjects are presented in a fixed way--as a series of questions with one answer and one method to get to it” (Boaler, 102). Approaching teaching and learning in a multidimensional way requires teachers to employ various methods to help their students learn a topic. Employing such a technique conveys to students that there are several different

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routes they can take in order to learn. In Boaler's line of work, she collaborates with neuroscientists in order to study ways that learning can be enhanced. She asserts that "[w]e can learn mathematical ideas through numbers, but we can also learn them through words, visuals, models, algorithms, tables, and graphs; from moving and touching; and from other representations" (Boaler, 103-104). She and the neuroscientists she works with found that in fact, "when we learn by using two or more of these means and the different areas of the brain responsible for each to communicate with each other, the learning experience is maximized" (Boaler, 104). She says that in order for students to develop a growth mindset, "teachers need to teach with a growth perspective, opening content to the multiple ways students can learn, so that students can see the potential for growth inside it" (Boaler, 102).

Classroom Assessments

Teaching in a multidimensional fashion and embracing struggle are useful methods to help low-performing Black students develop a growth mindset and thus attain intellectual emancipation. However, such strategies can be subverted by types of examination that act as measures of students' intelligence. Boaler asserts:

I have found that this message [that struggling enhances learning] is not strong enough to keep students from feeling bad when they make mistakes-- often because of the performance culture in which many good teachers work. Even when the message is phrased more powerfully--that mistakes are good not only for learning, but for brain growth and connectivity--it is hard for teachers to send it in a system in which they are made to give students tests that penalize them everytime they make a mistake. (Boaler, 56)

For this reason, it is important to give low-performing students formative assessments, which are constructive and not simply summative, on which teachers only give letter/ numerical grades without explanations to show students how they can improve. Carol Dweck says that creating a growth mindset environment requires “Giving feedback in a way that promotes learning and future success” (Mindset, 141).

In addition, students need to be provided with adequate support to help them obtain comprehension in the areas in which they struggle. When discussing Dweck’s research, Dr. Boaler says “One of the things that [Dweck] says keeps her up at night is when students are told to put in effort and that success is all about hard work, without their being given the tools by teachers to learn more effectively. As she says, ‘Effort is key for students’ achievement, but it is not the only thing. Students need to try new strategies and seek input from others when they are stuck” (Boaler,102). Academically low-performing Black students need to be given help when they fall short of meeting standards in the form of academic assistance, tutoring, etc.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Community Based Learning

Scholarship on multicultural education, education research and education reform, propound the idea that in addition to using psychological tactics, such as the growth mindset to help Black students improve in academic achievement level, teachers need to also adopt culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. Culturally responsive teaching is an approach to education, in which teachers affirm and include the unique cultural experiences, references,

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values, and forms of knowledge of ethnically diverse peoples in their curriculum. Black students who are taught by teachers who often do not look like them, come from a similar background, or share their experiences may have greater difficulty feeling comfortable or like they fit in at school (Muñiz). Adopting culturally responsive teaching in the public school classroom is crucial because it validates the experiences of Black students and affirms the value of their backgrounds, thereby helping to increase their feeling of belonging in school. Furthermore, utilizing the Community Based Learning approach in addition, can also encourage Black students to engage in work. Community Based Learning is a teaching method in which projects, assignments, and classwork are connected with the communities of students. This makes assignments more meaningful for low-performing Black students to engage in, which also motivates them to participate in doing school work.

Conclusion

Oppressive circumstances that many Black students live in and adverse experiences that they face, such as homelessness, poor health, violence, and hunger, which are caused in large part by institutionalized racism and poverty, are significant factors that genuinely impede their ability to excel academically. It would obviously be difficult for a student to succeed in her math class when she is homeless, malnourished, or in poor health. Institutionalized means of oppression need to be toppled and their effects terminated in order for Black, but also for all, students to have the full ability to actualize their academic desires and realize their ideas of the Good in the world. While these reforms are necessary to concretely improve the ability of

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low-performing Black students to become academically high achieving, they are not sufficient in and of themselves. A strong and positive self concept is crucial for Black students to have in order to excel in education and life. Insofar as low performing Black public school students internalize their natural intellectual inferiority, they are inhibited from fully realizing their academic (and life) potentials, and thus need intellectual emancipation to improve their academic achievement level. The public school, as an institution that requires students to attend it for at least twelve thousand hours during formative years of their lives, and has an alleged aim of educating and improving the lives of the students it serves, seems to be a good candidate to produce this change. If the previously mentioned forms of structural reform are implemented *and* teachers provide classwork, foster a classroom culture, and interact with their low-performing Black students in a way that affirms their equal intellectual capacity, then the public school will be able to help low-performing Black public school students realize their potentials and improve their academic achievement levels.

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