

# Culture Really Counts

by

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## Introduction

I am Ralph Massey, an economist, a retired banker and a long-time resident of the Bahamas. This is the third in a set of videos on the Learning Crisis in the Bahamas. The first dealt with **Academic Failure and the Skills Gap** and the second with **Knowledge, Facts and Cognitive Skills**.

This video **Culture Really Counts** is about one of the biggest potholes to be faced on the long rocky road of education reform. The reason is that it is a delicate subject since culture involves the collective memory of a people.

Nevertheless, one must deal with it; and a good place to begin is with a definition.

## Definitions

Orlando Patterson, an Afro-American sociologist from Harvard, states that Culture is a group of ideas that are passed down from generation to generation on how to live and make specific judgments. <sup>1</sup>

Malcolm Gladwell, an Afro-American author, recognizes that Cultural legacies do matter. He contends that - <sup>2</sup>

- "They are powerful and pervasive and they persist long after their usefulness has passed".

- However, he shows how they can change if a society is willing to confront them. AND....
- Cultural differences between peoples can cause significant racial and ethnic learning gaps. <sup>3</sup>
  - In the United States Asian-Americans on average score higher on academic tests than Euro-Americans. AND...
  - Numerical difference in test scores between Asian-Americans and Euro-Americans roughly equals the difference existing between Euro-Americans and Afro-Americans.

This presentation will examine those two differences.

## The Asian - Euro American Gap

One of the simple partial explanations for the **Asian/Euro American Gap** relates to mathematics. Malcolm Gladwell points out that Numbering in the Chinese language is simpler and more logical than in English. This makes Chinese math easier to learn.

## Chinese History

Gladwell also points out that wet-rice growing in South East Asia requires very intensive farming of small plots of irrigated land to produce three crops a year. The intensity of this farming is seen in sayings like -

- "In winter, the lazy man freezes to death"  
or
- "No one...who rises before dawn three hundred sixty days a year...fails to make his family rich."

The Chinese pioneered this type of agriculture hundreds of years ago.

Another explanation for the Chinese "Hard Work" ethic is the magnitude of its past achievements.

For instance, in 1384 the Chinese Government set the length of the solar year at 365 and one quarter days; that measurement has been proved accurate to within 10 seconds. They knew the difference between the Calendar Year and the Solar Year long before Galileo, the medieval Italian astronomer and mathematician. Actually, it was two and one-quarter centuries before and that's my point. <sup>4</sup>

## The Asian American History

The first large scale Chinese immigration to the U.S. came in the early 1850s during the California Gold Rush; and this attracted a tax on Chinese gold miners...a tax not levied on white gold miners.

In the following years tens of thousands of Chinese laborers came to construct the transcontinental railroad through the Rocky Mountains. This was difficult and dangerous work that connected America as one-nation, at that time an important national objective.

AND...it produced the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a law that removed the Chinese immigrant's "right to vote or testify in court, to marry whom you chose or to own property.

The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 and California's constitution was scrubbed of anti-Chinese discrimination in 1952."<sup>5</sup> In August 2009 the California legislation passed a resolution "apologizing for a long history of discrimination."

Today Chinese Americans are arguably California's most successful ethnic group. They are very prominent as mathematicians, engineers and scientists in Silicon Valley where Chinese Americans co-founded YouTube and Yahoo; and they are so visible on the campuses of Stanford and Berkeley, two elite West-Coast universities, that there is a latent fear that these schools will begin limiting their numbers.

## The Euro - Afro American Gap

Discussions of the Afro-Euro American achievement gap are often very heated. Perhaps one of the most noted incidents resulted in the late John Ogbu's book *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*. <sup>6</sup>

In 1960 there was not a single Black or Jew living within the boundaries of Shaker Heights, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. Also it possibly had the best public school system in the state.

By the 1990s 30 percent of the population was Afro-American. However, while Afro-American students did better academically in absolute terms relative to Afro-Americans in other school districts, they were underachievers relative to their Euro-American classmates at Shaker Heights High.

The furor created over this academic outcome caused the city to retain John Ogbu, the University of California, Berkeley, Professor of Anthropology.

He discovered what he had seen elsewhere among Afro-American students -

- A “disengagement from academic work,
- An inability to focus on the task at hand,
- Blaming teachers for their failure, and
- Having low academic expectations of themselves.”

Where does that come from?

## Slavery and the Civil War

The beliefs and behaviors that students bring to school reflect the country’s history. Slavery and the Civil War (1861-1864) were pivotal in the development of today’s culture. <sup>7</sup>

After Independence the South became a country within a country and a very prosperous agricultural country at that.

- “Cotton was truly King”; and the South had a virtual monopoly in the supply of cotton to the world market.
- It had a highly efficient “gang-system” of agriculture using slave labour. It used labour “without a contract or consent”, an assault on individual integrity and liberty.

In contrast, the North was a larger more urban country; and was an emerging industrial powerhouse without the use of slave labour.

The South seceded from the union and a war of unprecedented size, death and destruction followed, an estimated 620,000 men died.

If the U.S. population suffered the rate of human loss in Iraq equal to that suffered in the Civil War, there would have been 6 million deaths rather than four thousand.

The end of slavery cost the life of one soldier for every six slaves freed and one soldier for every ten white men who were not able to secede from the union. Simply locating, identifying and numbering the dead was a 40-year post Civil War obsession. Yet 40 percent of those who died, an estimated 248,000 men, remained unidentified and “unknown” to relatives and country. <sup>8</sup>

This national trauma has and continues to have a profound affect on education and politics in America.

So how is history, culture and learning connected?

That subject is so complicated that one must recognize that there is no formula...only informed reasoning.

## John McWorter’s Thesis

John McWhorter, an Afro-American linguist, a tenured professor at the University of California Berkeley, looks at Black America today and contends that Black America is caught in “an ideological holding pattern”: <sup>9</sup>

He states that -

- **Victimhood** has become an identity to be nurtured rather than a problem to be solved. Racism is not “a scourge on the wane but an eternal pathology changing only in form and visibility.”
- **Separatism** encourages a belief that Afro-Americans are a sovereign entity and this renders them morally exempt from “the rules of others”.
- **Anti-intellectualism** is founded in poverty and disenfranchisement and continues as a basic distrust of “the former oppressor.”

The cultural beliefs and behaviors of Afro-Americans as described by Doctors Ogbu and McWhorter differ from those of Asian-Americans and do not literally apply to the Bahamas.

It is up to Bahamians to determine how their culture affects academic achievement and public education.

It is reasonable to conclude, however, that the long history of academic failure and its debilitating impact on the country demands that any 10-year plan must start fundamental change, true education reform.

## **The Education Reform Problem**

What's the reform problem?

- Funding is limited so that simply spending more money is not an option.
- The laws and regulations relating to students, teachers, the teachers union and Government employment block needed change. They create legal hurdles.
- Outstanding teachers and principals are a scarce resource so that massive changes generally result in a reduction in the quality standards for new teachers and principals hired...AND...student learning does not improve. Massive change is not an option.
- Politics demands visible, positive change in the short run if reform is to remain a high priority program.

## **The Proposed Lab School**

The Coalition for Education Reform in July 2005 and the Learning Crisis Essay in April 2009 proposed the creation of a primary/secondary laboratory school patterned after the Knowledge Is Power Program.<sup>10</sup>

"They are terrific schools that serve highly disadvantaged minority kids...These schools aim to transform the culture of their students...Every student is expected to work hard to acquire the skills and knowledge that tests measure. These are schools with great

leaders and great teachers who have high academic and behavioral standards, and the schools provide nonstop learning through longer school days, weeks, and years."<sup>2</sup>

"What KIPP is most famous for is mathematics. In the South Bronx, only about 16 percent of all middle school students are performing at or above their grade level in math. But at KIPP, by the end of fifth grade, many of the students call math their favorite subject. In seventh grade, KIPP students start high school algebra. By the end of eighth grade, 84 percent of the students are performing at or above their grade level."<sup>3</sup>

## **Ingredients for Success**

To be successful the proposed Laboratory School must -

1. Be a Charter School owned by the Government and run as a private enterprise that operates outside the present laws and regulations relating to students, teachers, the teachers union and Government employment.
2. Operate within the labour laws applicable to any private enterprise.
3. Be held accountable for its output, that is what its students know and can do.
4. Start small with a single grade and expand year by year keeping its growth in line with its ability to attract superior teachers.
5. Offer the concerned Bahamian parent, who cannot afford "private school" tuition and whose children would otherwise be viewed as "disadvantaged" or "at-risk", the opportunity of a superior education.

## **The Bottom Line**

KIPP is a group of over 66 schools that started with one school and one grade level, the 5th grade in Houston, Texas.

“They are terrific schools that serve highly disadvantaged minority kids...These schools aim to transform the culture of their students...Every student is expected to work hard to acquire the skills and knowledge that tests measure. These are schools with great leaders and great teachers who have high academic and behavioral standards, and the schools provide nonstop learning through longer school days, weeks, and years.”<sup>11</sup>

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9. Start small with a single grade and expand year by year keeping its growth in line with its ability to attract superior teachers. (cont.)
10. Offer the concerned Bahamian parent, who cannot afford “private school” tuition and whose children would otherwise be viewed as “disadvantaged” or “at-risk”, the opportunity of a superior education.

### **The Bottom Line**

In the end the values and institutions of the Bahamas will determine its capacity to address “The High Failure and Illiteracy rates in the Public High Schools that are both a national handicap and a national embarrassment.”<sup>13</sup>

The nation must fashion an adequate response!  
<sup>14</sup>

Wednesday, September 23, 2009

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## The Author

Ralph J Massey graduated magna cum laude - Phi Beta Kappa from Case University, Cleveland, Ohio, and subsequently received a masters degree in Economics from the University of Chicago where he was a Harry A. Millis Fellow and a Research Associate.

During his 36 year business career he worked for the Ford Motor, Kimberly-Clark, Johns Manville and Chemical Bank...that is now a part of JPMorgan Chase...where he was seconded to The Bank of New Providence, Nassau, Bahamas.

He is a founding member of the Nassau Institute and worked as an Economist for the Coalition for Education Reform.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Orlando, Paterson, *Culture Matters: How Values shape Human Progress*, Basic Books, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Little Brown, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Abigail Thernstrom & Stephan Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, Simon & Schuster, 2003

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Menzies, 1434: *The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet Sailed to Italy and Ignite the Renaissance*, Harper-perennial, 2008

<sup>5</sup> The Economist, "From nightmare to dream, California's Chinese Americans", August 1, 2009

<sup>6</sup> John U Ogbu, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Robert William Fogel, *The Rise and Fall of American Slavery: Without Consent or Contract*, Norton, 1989

<sup>8</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Random House, 2008

<sup>9</sup> John H McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, Free Press, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> KIPP, Knowledge is Power Program, google (kipp.org/fivepillars)

Culture Counts book. Read 3 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Framed around the concept of culture, Nanda and Warms' brief book sho...  
Start by marking "Culture Counts: A Concise Introduction to Cultural Anthropology" as Want to Read:  
Want to Read savingâ€¦| Want to Read.