The Power of Mis-Education

LaDarius Dennison

Dr. Na’im Akbar, a professor of psychology at Florida State, defines power as having the ability to influence the environment consistent with one’s self-interests. The word education is derived from the Latin word educare, which means “to bring out.” With that being said, the objective of education is to “bring out” the potential greatness within individuals. This implies that every human being has a natural-born potential and a prerequisite for their development in a success-oriented environment. Therefore, the objective of miseducation is to suppress any potential greatness within a human being provided by deplorable environments. The power of miseducation is having the ability to deprive a group of racialized people of the knowledge of their factual history, identity, and culture in an educational system that seeks to derive and maintain power over that group. Miseducation was coined in the early 1930s by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the second African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard. Woodson showed how African Americans lacked knowledge of themselves in education systems across the world in his book, The Mis-Education of the Negro. Regarding theory, White supremacists dehumanize African Americans while simultaneously safeguarding their White race from their past and present dehumanization practices in an educational system to sustain a racist society. It is a
society that is using education as a powerful tool for destruction rather than instruction.

The power of miseducation has implications for the domination of people. It was in the interest of slaveholders and the government to keep their enslaved laborers ignorant. They were fearful that, if their enslaved laborers could read and write, they could escape to freedom. This is evident in the aftermath of the largest slave rebellion in British North America, “The Stono Rebellion.”

On the morning of September 9, 1739 in South Carolina, Jemmy, an educated slave, assembled a group of twenty slaves near the Stono River. With freedom on his mind, Jemmy wrote the word, “Liberty,” on banners for his vanguard to hold up when they would begin their journey to the promised land of Spanish Florida. They knew of runaways from South Carolina who were rewarded with freedom and land upon arrival. They needed protection before they set out on their journey, so Jemmy led his men to a nearby gun shop taking guns and weapons and killing two White shopkeepers in the process. Jemmy and his men marched 10 miles south and killed approximately 25 White people before reaching the Edisto River where they encountered the South Carolina militia. They were shot dead and some of the men escaped only to be executed and sold to markets in the West Indies. They never reached the promised land. They never got to experience the word that was displayed on their banners, the word that they bellowed in unison on that cool summer day. It appeared only White men and women could relish liberty.

South Carolinians convened at their General Assembly the following year and passed legislation that enacted the Negro Act of 1740, prohibiting privileges to enslaved African Americans. These nefarious prohibitions stated that slaves could not earn money, assemble in groups, grow their own food, or learn to read English. This piece of legislation is the beginning of the development of the miseducation of African Americans which made it the first anti-literacy law. It is a law that protects the power of White men by limiting the consciousness of Blacks, suppressing any thought of providing for their families, and of pursuing liberty. Figure 1 shows a list of anti-literacy laws that followed the Negro Act of 1740 after America gained its independence from Britain.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Restriction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1740</td>
<td>South Carolina Literacy Law</td>
<td>Prohibited Blacks from learning to read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819</td>
<td>Missouri Literacy Law</td>
<td>Forbade assembling or teaching Black slaves to read or write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>Georgia Literacy Law</td>
<td>Provided fine and imprisonment for teaching a Black person to read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>Alabama and Virginia Literacy</td>
<td>Fined and flogged Whites for teaching Blacks to read or write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>Georgia Literacy Law</td>
<td>Provided fines and whippings for teaching Blacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>Missouri Literacy Law</td>
<td>Prohibited teaching Blacks to read or write</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1** Anti-Literacy Laws

In 1830, nearly 100 years after the first anti-literacy law was enacted, Frederick Douglass understood the power of miseducation on his journey of learning to read and write. Douglass had been relocating from slave owner to slave owner and finally arrived in the hands of Mr. and Mrs. Auld in Baltimore, Maryland. Mrs. Auld, his new mistress, had never assumed the role of a slave owner before. She was kind and treated Douglass like a human being. Douglass said, “I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. She was entirely unlike any other White woman I had ever seen” (Douglass 37). Out of curiosity about her kindness, Douglass asked her to teach him how to read and she was more than happy to. Soon after, Douglass mastered the alphabet and could spell words of three or four letters. Mrs. Auld was excited about his progress and expressed her intentions to keep teaching him to her husband. Mr. Auld had the opposite reaction and told Mrs. Auld to cease instructing Douglass. In Mr. Auld’s own words, “If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world...if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master” (Douglass 37-38). You can feel the fear in Mr. Auld’s words as he explains his philosophy of slavery to Mrs. Auld. The fear of losing valuable property. The fear of losing miseducation as a weapon. Douglass realized this in his agony: “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing
difficulty—to wit, the White man's power to enslave the Black man.... From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (38). Exposure leads to expansion and Douglass was exposed to a whole new world. A world of learning and education—power that the White man wants to keep for himself. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “A man's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.” Douglass saw the idea of freedom in his mind after he realized he was being miseducated, and he turned that idea into reality in 1838.

Miseducation as power has put African Americans in subservient roles to position White men and women into high social classes in all areas of human endeavors (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex, and war). Akbar says, “Power is intended to put people into the unique position that they can obtain and achieve within the context of their environment those things that maximize their survival and the continuation of themselves to the best of their ability. In a world of plentiful resources, as this one is, such power does not require arming oneself as a predator of other human beings” (Akbar 35). Akbar speaks of the physical environment, which provides human beings with the necessities to survive on earth: food, clothing, and shelter. However, slave owners were predatorial towards African Americans. They had the power to determine their socioeconomic environment, what food they ate, what clothes they wore, and how they should be sheltered. Frederick Douglass said:

The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of cornmeal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse Negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars...There were no beds given the slaves, unless one coarse blanket be considered such... (Douglass 21).

Then the slave owners dared to use their power further to enforce hard labor upon them from sunup to sundown. It is amazing how strong African Americans were to have survived such deplorable environments. Education is the instrument that should equip people to gain control over the physical resources of the environment (Akbar 36).
The skills that one obtains from an education gives them the ability to ensure their survival in any type of environment. As a community, having the skills of growing food, building houses, and making clothing gives African Americans the power to control their destiny. However, the manipulation of their minds to believe that self-determination was abstract and unattainable resulted in exploitation.

It is widely known that this purposeful miseducation has been perpetuated in future generations. According to CNBC, African Americans had $1.4 trillion in buying power in 2019. African Americans are the biggest consumers in the world. They do not know how to negotiate their skills to operate from a place of self-sufficiency. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad said, “As a people, we must become producers and not remain consumers and employees. We must be able to extract raw materials from the earth and manufacture them into something useful for ourselves. This would create jobs in production” (Akbar 36-37). But how can they become producers of industry when their labor and skills were exploited to the point of normalcy? How can they when they lack equal access to economic knowledge and land? According to New York Times Magazine, African Americans make up about 13% of the population and own less than three percent of this nation’s wealth. Why would White people give up this power, the power to control the environment, the power to control African Americans? Miseducation is lucrative.

White Americans used miseducation to gain control over a very valuable physical resource at that time, enslaved African American labor. It was the economic engine that developed American capitalism. Mehrsa Baradaran, a law professor at UC Irvine and advocate for financial inclusion, has researched that, “The effects of the institution of slavery on American commerce were monumental—3.2 million slaves were worth $1.3 billion in market value, almost equal to the entire gross national product” (Baradaran 10). Miseducation is lucrative. Slave owners used these products from enslaved labor to trade and exchange with other slave owners/businessmen; this was the basis of the Southern economy. It had a major effect on the minds of African Americans concerning knowledge and power. They lacked the power to influence the environment and to negotiate trade. The slave was removed from the effective negotiation of his/her skills because their skills belonged to someone else; the slave had been robbed of access to education, she/he could only develop the skills that gave their owner the privilege of trade (Akbar 37).
After the Civil War, there was great concern about how to educate African Americans after they received their citizenship via the 14th Amendment. Former President Rutherford B. Hayes convened a conference on June 4-6, 1890 called, “The Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question” in Lake Mohonk, New York. The attendees of the conference were educators and ministers from the U.S. and Britain, yet African Americans were not allowed at this conference concerning their educational fate. Anthony T. Browder, a historian, said:

The general consensus among Mohonk Conference attendees was that Blacks “were to be given, ‘industrial education’ to fix their caste position, ‘moral education, ‘for pacification,’ and ‘Western education’ in order to instill in them a sense of inferiority and a belief in White supremacy.” The Mohonk Conferences plotted the course for the miseducation of the negro which has endured for over 100 years. (Browder 140)

The liability of the miseducation of African Americans by circumstances beyond their control deserve moral, historical, and economic independence. It would be a great thing if African Americans were to receive an effective education based on their valid identity, but the destructive desires of White supremacy, their patterns, more often than not will not allow this to happen.

Much like how a child progresses from K-12, African Americans’ miseducation progressed from being forbidden to read and write, to being forbidden from having an academic education. Why? It was simple: the powerful had to adapt to new laws while simultaneously keeping the same objective—to control the minds of African Americans. One of the most interesting things said at the conference by Rutherford B. Hayes was his false knowledge of African history. Hayes said, “They had no skill in any kind of labor, no industrious habits, and knew nothing of any printed or written language” (Barrows 10). As for language, Mdw Netcher is Africa’s, and the world’s, oldest recorded writing system (Ptahhotep 8). This writing system was developed in the Nile Valley in North Africa, the earliest record of life and knowledge; it is known today as hieroglyphics. If it were not for enslaved African labor and principles, the United States would not exist. The purposeful miseducation of former President Hayes is not only injurious to African Americans but also to White Americans.

The injurious effects of miseducation on African Americans demonstrates how an entire group, White Americans, can benefit from them. Group-interest is the solid foundation that captures the minds for benefits gained through miseducation.
The causes that work best use false knowledge to cover up their drive for wealth and domination.

If White Americans today knew of the rich history of Africans and all their contributions to humanity, then maybe they would have a different perspective towards African Americans, one that does not view them as inferior. White scholars know the true history of Africans but purposely colonize the information. Akbar says, “...the environment of ideas is even more important than the physical environment...those who influence ideas literally control the minds of the people within the environment of those ideas” (Akbar 38). Hayes had the idea that African Americans could overcome their deplorable environments through education and religion. The first step was to get every African American to understand and learn to speak the English language. Dr. Amos Wilson, a psychologist, suggests that language is directly related to power. Wilson states, "The languages that people learn and speak are most frequently directly related to the power relations between them...Because the people who speak or spoke those languages were or are in ascendance or in power at that or this time...People tend to learn first their native language, whatever language is spoken by the people in power” (Wilson 23). African Americans have no idea that speaking English is a symbol of submission to their oppressors. They have no idea that it does not matter how much success or the number of degrees they may earn, they are still powerless. Powerless through the education of other people's language—miseducation.

The model of Negro education based on moral and character development through labor was pioneered by the American Missionary Association (AMA). They were an abolitionist group founded in 1846 that focused on the abolition of slavery and the education of African Americans after emancipation. AMA founded the Hampton Normal Institute in 1868 (present-day Hampton University) and instructed General Samuel C. Armstrong to go there and carry out their principles of education. General Armstrong was a prominent figure at the Mohonk Conference regarding his industrial training methods for African Americans. His emphasis on labor as a great moral and educational force was the basis of his speech. Armstrong stated, “The Negroes are a laboring people. They do not like work, however, because they had it forced on them...They work under pressure. The great thing is to give them an idea of the dignity of labor; that is, to change their standpoint” (Barrows 13). Even though
the AMA and General Armstrong had good intentions to educate African Americans, they did more harm than good.

Good intentions can be dangerous depending upon the motive of the giver(s). In this case, the good intentions of giving African Americans an education served as a decoy to cover up their actions to make them industrial slaves. People can only focus on one thing at a time and education was the focal point for African Americans which simultaneously set them up for exploitation.

Imagine slaves having to pick cotton for twelve hours a day and, after receiving freedom, they must find dignity in hard labor as a form of education. That is industrial education. That is the process, in a large measure, to mentally keep African Americans mentally as slaves. To train them in the industries of agriculture, mechanics, and the household to become assets for prominent White men. Armstrong expressed his real intentions to miseducate African Americans by stating, “The training that our pupils get is an endowment. An able-bodied student represents the capital of perhaps a thousand dollars. We propose to treble that. When they learn a trade, they are worth threefold more in the labor market” (Barrows 14). There is a distinct difference between training and education. Dr. Akbar explained it perfectly when differentiating between an educated dog vs. a trained dog: “The dog that learns how to bark to scare away its enemies, to defend itself by biting its attackers and to hunt and to feed itself is an educated dog. The dog that learns how to stand on its hind legs and wear a dress and dance to the music of its trainer is actually a trained dog” (Akbar 2). African Americans are the trained dogs, and their trainers are the oppressors. Notwithstanding the little wages that are obtained, African Americans are being trained away from an academic education and from participating in the American economy. This training does not afford them the ability to take care of themselves and their families. They are being miseducated because they can perform industrial duties at the command of their bosses and are not being taught the knowledge to command themselves to create/build their own special line of industries. This kind of miseducation exploits their labor, once again, for profit by their bosses who were once their masters.

General Samuel C. Armstrong, who oversaw this miseducation at Hampton Normal Institute, made the biggest impression on Mr. Booker T. Washington who took this model of education to the next level at the Tuskegee Institute. Washington
had nothing but high praise for General Armstrong, whom he loved like a father: “I have spoken of the impression that was made upon me by the buildings and general appearance of the Hampton Institute, but I have not spoken of that which made the greatest and most lasting impression upon me, and that was a great man—the noblest, rarest human being that it has ever been my privilege to meet. I refer to the late General Samuel C. Armstrong” (Washington 37). Dr. Carter G. Woodson warned us about this type of influence when he said, “If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do” (Woodson 84). In May of 1881, General Armstrong was asked to recommend a White man to fill a position in Tuskegee, Alabama to start a normal school for colored people. Although Washington was Black, General Armstrong asked him if he could fulfill the position and Washington obliged. Thus, on July 4, 1881, the Tuskegee Normal Institute was founded. The General did not have to worry about the education that African Americans were going to receive at Tuskegee under the tutelage of Washington because he had instilled industrial education in his mind. Washington said:

From the very beginning at Tuskegee, I was determined to have students do not only the agriculture and domestic work, but to have them erect their own buildings. My plan was to have them, while performing this service, taught the latest and best methods of labour, so that the school would not only get the benefit of their efforts, but the students themselves would be taught to see not only utility in labour, but beauty and dignity... (Washington 103).

The beauty and dignity of physical labor is very powerful only if you can control the resources in which you produce to negotiate trade. Having the power to operate from a position of self-reliance is freedom.

Although students in that capacity had the ability to extract from the physical environment whatever they needed for survival, which was power, they lacked the encouragement to develop beauty and dignity of themselves which is true power. It is the kind of power that can eradicate racism and miseducation. It is the power that can master their environments and perpetuate self and group respect so that they can practice counter-racist behaviors to achieve liberation. It is the power that allows African Americans to think and do for themselves.
Today, the education that African Americans receive in the American public education system is not predicated upon their needs, but it serves the needs of their White counterparts. Education should reflect what a person sees when they look in the mirror, and for African Americans that mirror does not exist. The first function of education is to provide identity (Akbar 2). How can African Americans thrive in a classroom when an alien identity is forced upon them? Dr. Na’im Akbar says, “The images that are associated with the development of basic skills are all reflective of themselves. The early storybooks and fairy tales represent images of them, from Snow White to Superman. As their children are exposed to these fundamental skills, they are simultaneously taught their identity” (Akbar 4). Many cultures take advantage of educating their children to develop an identity that is consistent with their history, culture, and survival while simultaneously developing skills to master their environment. In the American public education system, White Americans are taught to learn European participation in all fields of study which offers a connection with their White identity. This is not an effective education to develop the identity of African Americans necessary to empower them.

This issue of identity lays the foundation for what the person will be able to do and what they must learn (Akbar 3). Education is not created equal, what educates one group of people does not educate another group of people. African-Americans receiving a Eurocentric education suggests that they must act and think like Europeans. They assume a European identity/personality which is detrimental to the survival of African-Americans.

The state of Georgia’s Standard of Excellence social studies curriculum for K-12 includes a two-year World Area Studies course that includes the teachings of Africa and Asia for grades 6 and 7. Seventh-grade students learn about the historical, geographical, economic, and government/civic understandings of each country to get students acquainted with the world they live in. Thus, we will focus our attention on the historical understanding of Africa on page 46:
Africa

Historical Understandings

SS7H1 Analyze continuity and change in Africa.

a. Explain how the European partitioning across Africa contributed to conflict, civil war, and artificial political boundaries in Africa today.
b. Explain how the Pan-African movement and nationalism led to independence in Kenya and Nigeria.
c. Explain the creation and end of apartheid in South Africa and the roles of Nelson Mandela and F.W.de Klerk.

This is a classic example of miseducation that African Americans receive in the Georgia public educational system, a system designed for the educational needs of White Americans. African American children are being introduced to their homeland, Africa, for the first time in the seventh grade and the first thing they learn is how Europeans divided, killed, and imperialized their ancestors. That is oppressive. That is miseducation at its finest. This is how White Americans/Europeans keep power over the minds of African Americans by erasing the true African history from the textbooks and curriculum to instill a sense of inferiority.

An honest historical understanding of Africa that African Americans and White Americans need to understand is that all life and knowledge started in North Africa (Nile Valley). Akbar states, “The continuity of civilization from this place in Africa throughout the civilized world is an important part of this aspect of education...It is important for Africans and all people to realize that the earliest recorded civilizations were founded and developed by native African People” (Akbar 44). Now imagine if this information was a part of the curriculum. What would it do for young African Americans? It would inform them that they are not intellectually inferior to their White counterparts. That their ancestors contributed to the civilization of humanity which Westerners try so hard to hide or erase from the history books. Only through miseducation can White supremacy thrive. The result of miseducation causes self-hatred among African Americans and ignorance towards their legacy of competence. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad said:

One of the gravest handicaps among the so-called Negroes is that there is no love for self, nor love for his or her own kind. This not having love for self is the root cause of hate (dislike), disunity, disagreement,
quarreling, betraying, stool pigeons, and fighting and killing one another. How can you be loved, if you have no love for yourself?

For African Americans developing self-respect for themselves and others starts with love. They must love themselves. This is where education plays a big role. People who take on the responsibility to educate African Americans must love them to bring out their potential greatness. Can public educational systems in America love African Americans to educate them consistent with their identity, history, and culture?

Figure 2 Banning Critical Race Theory

Although African Americans are being miseducated, the emergence of the miseducation of White Americans is on the rise with the banning of Critical Race Theory in schools. Over the past year, Critical Race Theory has become a buzzword for teaching racism in schools. White parents are worried sick that their children are being taught that they are oppressors and that they must pay for their past privileges. These fearful concerns have taken school boards and state legislatures by storm. Why are people, specifically White people, so fearful of teaching about systemic racism in
schools? Molefi Asante, the creator of the first doctoral program in African American Studies, states, “There is no such thing as a Black against Whites; racism is based on fantasy; Black views of Whites are based on fact” (Asante 43). And the fact is, that White parents and conservatives are holding on to a fantasy world where racism does not exist, and they will try their hardest to never acknowledge America’s racist history in which Critical Race Theory is intended to initiate change through legal studies. In Figure 2, we see how proud White people were to preserve their racist heritage. They made statues, monuments, license plates, and stickers which are proudly displayed today. However, the moment an educator teaches their children about what the Confederacy stood for and how it affected African Americans it becomes a problem. White parents do not want to have uncomfortable conversations with their children about real-life social issues, but Black parents must have those conversations with their children because they could be subjected to violence at any moment.

James Baldwin wrote a letter to his nephew explaining what it is like being Black in America and he told him, “You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity” (Baldwin 7). The opposers of Critical Race Theory/racism being taught in schools spelled out with brutal clarity, in their opposing statements and legislatures, that they want to maintain and sustain a racist society. They will do whatever it takes to keep power, even if that means miseducating their own children about their history and culture. According to ABC News, “Texas has a new legislation, Senate Bill 3, that would remove several staples of U.S. history education from state requirements, according to Ovidia Molina, the president of the Texas State Teachers Association.” Those staples of U.S. history that are on the removal list are teaching "the history of White supremacy," "the institution of slavery, the eugenics movement, and the Ku Klux Klan, and how it is morally wrong; the Chicano movement; women’s suffrage and equal rights; the [C]ivil [R]ights [M]ovement" and more (ABC News). Imagine, that an African American child can grow up in Texas and not know who Martin Luther King Jr. is and that a White American child can grow up and have no knowledge of White supremacy. This is not the first time that history has been erased and a clear sense of the direction of where our society is headed is shown destruction.
Dr. Amos Wilson, a theoretical psychologist, once said, “If your education does not solve problems, then you have been miseducated.” The destruction of our society, to a large degree, is due to miseducation, but with the understanding that an environment can be mastered with proper knowledge acquisition would make all the difference.

Jennifer Lee, a teacher in Killeen, Texas, said, “Specifically editing out that you can’t teach that [W]hite supremacy is morally wrong -- that is deeply concerning. I think the angle here is just … preserving the ideals behind [W]hite supremacy.” Lee could not be further from the truth. The altering of history is sickening. Having the power to miseducate is a crime against humanity. According to Brookings.edu, eight states (Idaho, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Iowa, New Hampshire, Arizona, and South Carolina) have passed legislation banning Critical Race Theory. Eight states have committed crimes against humanity. To be fully recognized as human beings, humans must know their history and culture. Du Bois has written, “They must be recognized as facts, but unpleasant facts; things that stand in the way of civilization...and common decency” (Du Bois 71). Even though America’s history is based on racist principles, we must address those issues in academic environments to change our society.

Throughout American history, the power of miseducation is not a difficult or confusing situation, but an act of trickery to gain a financial, political, and legal edge. That power has been used and abused by prominent White men. It appears that miseducation is a formidable opponent. How can African Americans fight against this power? The only way to defeat an opponent that powerful is through love—knowledge of self. African Americans must overcome their fears of being defeated while trying to eradicate the injustice in the educational systems. They must educate themselves on their history and culture. Browder said, “Education has always been the key to unlock the power of the mind. Find your keys and duplicate them so that your children will never be locked out of their homes again” (Browder 148). With a helping hand from White Americans that want to see a just society, we can build neighborhoods brick by brick in the name of education.
Works Cited


Barrows, Isabel C. Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question. United States, G. H. Ellis, 1890.


