Article

African American Homeschooling and the Quest for a Quality Education

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Abstract

Academic interest in homeschooling has increased over the last decade, as what was once perceived as a marginal development, has, in fact, turned into a significant and growing phenomenon. There has been, in recent years, a noticeable surge in African American involvement in the homeschooling movement as well. However, there continues to be a general paucity of research on the motivations of homeschooling Black parents. It is the purpose of this essay (a) to present empirical evidence regarding African American motivations for homeschooling; and (b) to explore in depth one of the main reasons why African Americans increasingly choose to educate their children at home, namely, African American discontent with the poor quality of the education available in American schools, both public and private. While discontent with the quality of education is also commonly cited by other ethnic groups, the African American definition of a satisfactory education stands out, as it is articulated within the context of a racially exclusive and discriminatory society, and often includes demands for cultural and historical relevance.

Keywords

change, multicultural education, choice

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Academic interest in homeschooling has increased over the last decade, as what was once perceived as a marginal development, has, in fact, turned into a significant and growing phenomenon. Indeed, it is estimated that more than 2 million children are being homeschooled today in the United States, as opposed to 300,000 in 1990, thus indicating a dramatic increase over a relatively short period of time (Gathier, 2007; Ray, 2010). As a matter of fact, homeschooling, which grew by 74% between 1999 and 2007 (Grady & al., 2010), appears to be the fastest growing form of education in the United States today. While White homeschooled students still represent about 75% of all homeschooled children, there has been a noticeable surge in African American involvement in the homeschool movement as well. In 1999, it was estimated that nearly 10% of all homeschooled children were Black, and those numbers appear to be consistently growing (Coleman, 2003; Fulbright, 2006; Ray, 2010). However, there continues to be a general paucity of research on the motivations of homeschooling Black parents, as the common and implicit assumption seems to be that African Americans' disengagement from the school system is dictated by reasons quite similar to those cited by European Americans (Gathier, 2007; Taylor, 2005). Yet the very unique experiences of African Americans in this society should be cause for caution.

It is the purpose of this essay (a) to present empirical evidence regarding African American motivations for homeschooling. While previous studies (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Llewellyn, 1996) have been limited by narrow geographical scopes, and small subject pools, our study sought to overcome these limitations by drawing from a much larger number of households distributed over a wide geographical area; and (b) to explore in depth one of the main reasons why African Americans increasingly choose to educate their children at home, namely, African American discontent with the poor quality of the education available in American schools, both public and private. While discontent with the quality of education is also commonly cited by other ethnic groups, the African American definition of a satisfactory education stands out, as it is articulated within the context of a racially exclusive and discriminatory society, and often includes demands for cultural and historical relevance.

African American Motivations for Homeschooling

The latest NHES report on the topic (2010) reveals that the three most important reasons cited by parents for homeschooling their children are (a) the desire to impart religious and moral instruction (36%); (b) a concern about the school environment (21%); and (c) dissatisfaction with academic instruction (17%). These reasons were fundamentally similar to those cited

in the 1996, 1999, and 2003 NHES reports. Other cited and less significant factors included child's physical and mental health, other special needs, interest in nontraditional approach to education, family time, finances, travel, and distance. While yielding important information about motivations for homeschooling, the categories used in the surveys cited above remain quite broad, and therefore allow for a multitude of interpretations (Isenberg, 2007, p. 399). Scholars have offered several labels to refine our understanding of the motivations for homeschooling (e.g., Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001; Collom, 2005; Green et al., 2007; Ice et al., 2011; Isenberg, 2007; Knowles, 1991; Lange et al., 1999; Mayberry, 1989; McDowell, Sanchez, & Jones, 2000; Pittman, 1987; Van Galen, 1991). What clearly transpires from a review of this literature is that the motivations of homeschooling parents do not lend themselves to easy and neat classifications. At the heart of this difficulty lies the fact that the homeschooling population's heterogeneity has considerably increased over the past decades. As a result, previous categories such as the widely cited "pedagogical" and "ideological" ones, which were once proposed by Van Galen (1991), and which managed to capture the two main groups of homeschoolers in the 1980s, namely, the libertarian political left and the religious right, must be considerably enlarged to include parents who homeschool because of their dissatisfaction with public and private schools, of family needs, cultural needs, racial factors, and academic concerns, for example. To illustrate further, according to Van Galen (1991), pedagogues, who have developed a broader interest in learning, espouse the view that schools' methods of instruction are inane. Ideologues, on the other hand, are not so much concerned with methods as they are with content that is aligned with their Christian beliefs. However, the Black parents in our study who reported homeschooling because of the poor quality of education available to their children are equally concerned with content and methods. Not only do they take issue with schooling and the concept of learning that undergirds it and the practices that characterize it, they are also most concerned about self-knowledge as an intricate and indispensable part of education. Their preoccupation about the inclusion of cultural content is central to their definition of a good education. This concern for cultural inclusion and relevance should not be surprising since, as cogently argued by McDowell et al. (2000, p. 130), "Clearly, the decision to homeschool for African American parents contains a great many critical and diverse elements that are simply not a factor for Euro-Americans." The uniqueness of African American motivations is further highlighted by the three studies that sought to explore them in greater detail (Fields-Smith et al., 2009; Llewellyn, 1996; Romm, 1993). Our own study on the motivations of Black homeschooling parents is offered

as an attempt to provide a richer and more complete picture of the African American understanding and experience in discussions about motivations for homeschooling.

American Education: A Persistent Malaise

There has been a general and persistent dissatisfaction with the state of the public education system, at least since 1983, when the *Nation at Risk Report* rang the alarm about what it considered a grave deterioration of American education. Citing international student comparisons, significant adult and teenage functional illiteracy, lower student achievement on standardized tests, as well as an increase in the need for remedial courses for college freshmen, the authors of the report lamented that "Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them" (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 1).

As a result of this alarming assessment, many plans of action were proposed, such as the *Improving America's Schools Act* (1994) or the *Goals 2000 Act* (1994). However, the movement toward standards-based assessment culminated with the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB). This new plan sought to hold schools and teachers accountable to improve students' academic performance, especially that of poor students, and students of color. Its main focus was reading, writing, and math proficiency, with all schools required to take yearly tests to determine students' progress, actions needed to ensure progress in case of failure, and all states receiving federal funds required to demonstrate that all children had reached minimum levels of proficiency in reading and math by 2014.

However, despite the drastic steps taken under the NCLB, many of the issues raised by the 1983 *A Nation at Risk report* persist. For instance, the United States continues to lag considerably behind many other industrialized countries in international comparisons, especially at higher grades, and a still relatively small number of students display basic and advanced proficiency in math, reading, and science (NCES, 2011). Furthermore, the high school dropout rate is disturbingly elevated, since 30% of high school students leave school without a diploma (Soares et al., 2008, p. 18). To make matters worse, a growing number of high school graduates who enroll in college must continue to take remedial courses, while reports about college graduates falling short of basic expectations have repeatedly surfaced, with some observing an actual decline in literacy among college graduates (Soares, 2008). This failure of American students to do better has been partly attributed by some scholars to the persistent deficiencies of American elementary and secondary

education, despite several years of NCLB (Shellings Report, 2007; Soares et al., 2008). Moreover, many have blamed the NCLB itself for bringing down the quality of education by overemphasizing standardized testing at the expense of genuine teaching and learning (Vernez, Karam, Mariano, & DeMartini, 2006).

African American Education: A Disturbing Picture

Faced with the compounded impact of past and present-day racism and the inordinate material, psychological, and social challenges that it has created, African American students have experienced the deleterious effects of a declining educational system to an even greater degree than many other groups. Indeed, numerous studies attest to the fact that, although some modest gains have been made in recent years, African American academic performance tends to be significantly lower than an already lacking national average (Rothstein, 2004). Furthermore, the African American high school dropout rate may also be as high as 50% nationally and, in some urban areas, like Chicago, reaches 61% (Barton, 2006). It is worth noting that African American educational tribulations are nothing new since, from the very beginning, Blacks have had to reckon with the adversarial use of schooling as a potent mechanism of social and racial domination and control (Anderson, 1988; Hilliard, 1997; Lomotey, 2010). Today, African American students, especially impoverished ones, attend schools that are rapidly resegregating (Frankenberg, Chungmei, & Orfield, 2003), and are routinely subjected to less adequate teachers, often incapable or reluctant to provide them with social and emotional support as well as setting high expectations for them; high teacher turnover; fewer advanced courses; fewer specialists; and larger number of out-of-field teachers for core academic classes (Donovan & al, 2002; Persell, 2012). Furthermore, Black students are greatly overrepresented in special education classes as well as in the juvenile criminal system as a result of the School to Prison Pipeline (New York Civil Liberties Union [NYCLU], 2010). Finally, Carter G. Woodson's 1933 famous complaint that African American students were being "miseducated," that is, "taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African," remains valid today. Indeed, American schools tend to focus on Europe, held as the natural norm for all. European culture and thought are implicitly presented as universal, and Europe as the only place from which great ideas and discoveries originated (Asante, 2003; Mazama, 2003). Such an experience is far from ideal for Black students, whose culture and history are rendered largely invisible and insignificant. As a result, Black children often remain totally ignorant about their own history and culture and thus,

Table 1. Place of Interviews.

Philadelphia metropolitan area	25.7%
Washington, D.C. metropolitan area	17.6
Atlanta	8.1
New York City metropolitan area	10.8
Chicago metropolitan area [Chicago land]	29.7
Columbia and Florence, South Carolina	6.7
Bridgeport, Delaware	1.3

Note. $N = 74$.

several scholars claim, cannot be considered truly educated (Asante, 2007; Hilliard, 1997). Moreover, not only are most school curricula void of any meaningful and sustained engagement of the African American cultural and historical experience but also strikingly missing is a "culturally relevant pedagogy." Some scholars have indeed argued that good teaching was based on actual performance in the classroom, in particular on the teachers' ability to adjust their teaching style to their students' cultural background (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, teacher preparation programs are deemed sorely inadequate in that respect and largely held responsible for "the failure of teachers to teach African American students effectively" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 208).

Given this state of affairs, it is hardly surprising that increasingly large numbers of African American parents, frustrated with schools whose quality has been seriously and consistently questioned, and with a system bent on treating their children still as second-class citizens, choose to educate them at home to provide them with a more positive alternative.

Research Designs and Data

To capture the voice and agency of African American homeschoolers, we conducted 74 interviews across a wide geographical area, stretching along the Mid- and South Atlantic, and the Midwest during the spring and summer of 2010. In addition to the interviews, we also relied on surveys, focus groups, and participant observations of Black homeschooling parents to provide a comprehensive view of the Black homeschooling experience (see Table 1). Indeed, the largest pool of participants came from Chicago and its surrounding suburbs (29.7%), followed by the metropolitan areas of Philadelphia (25.7%), Washington, D.C. (17.6%), New York (10.8%), and Atlanta (8.1%).

A snowball sampling procedure and active recruitment from local and national homeschooling associations accounted for a majority of

respondents. The interviews consisted of two parts: a survey that sought demographic and background data for each homeschooling family. This was followed by a semistructured, open-ended interview with the participating parent, where issues touched on in the survey were further explored and elaborated on by parents. More than 80% of the interviews were conducted with one parent—usually the mother ($N = 60$)—representing the homeschooling family. The interviews ranged from roughly 1.5 hr to 2 hr in length, and were analyzed using an open coding method, whereby the interviews' content (i.e., data) was divided into meaningful segments and then scrutinized to allow common categories or themes to emerge (Strauss, 1987). Connections were then made among the categories and subcategories in a process referred to as axial coding. In other words, we sought connections among the various emergent categories. This, in turn, led us to the final stage of analysis known as selective coding whereby a "storyline" or main theme emerged (Charmaz, 2006). As a follow-up, three focus group sessions were conducted in the fall of 2011 to further investigate the homeschooling experience of Black families. The focus groups consisted of 5 to 6 mothers in a large metropolitan area in the North East of the United States. Finally, on many occasions observations were made at forums specifically geared for homeschoolers (e.g., science museums or sporting events). The data gathered in the focus groups and participant observations were used to complement and triangulate the data gathered in the individual interviews and surveys. The information presented in this study, however, is largely culled from the surveys and interviews. Table 2 considers the demographic characteristics of the participants interviewed. As can be seen, there is little variation in the ethnicity of Black respondents interviewed. The majority of our respondents self-identified as native-born African Americans, with only a few self-identifying as foreign-born or racially mixed. In terms of family description, the average family consists of 3.2 children and most were brought up in a two-parent household (91%).

In terms of education, more than 80% of the mothers and more than 60% of the fathers have an undergraduate college degree or more. These figures are significantly higher than the national trend of only 19.4% of Blacks with a bachelor's college degree or more in 2010 (Aud et al., 2011). These figures aside, a substantial number of homeschooling households have parents with no college degree. For example, almost 20% of mothers and close to 40% of fathers do not possess a college degree.

Table 3 provides a general socioeconomic profile of our homeschooling parents. Overall, they are quite educated, with more than 80% of the mothers and more than 60% of the fathers having an undergraduate college degree or more. These figures are significantly higher than the national trend of only

Table 2. Indicators of Respondents' Demographic Background.

Ethnic/racial	
Black/African American	92.7%
Caribbean	2.9
African	1.4
Mixed race	1.4
Hispanic/Latino	1.4
Immigrant origin	
U.S.-born	95.6
Born abroad	4.3
Children characteristics	
Average number in household	3.2
Younger than 18	59.8
Aged 18 or older	21.9
H.S. graduate	12.9
Aged 25 or older	2.2
College graduate	3.1

Note. $N = 71$.

Table 3. Indicators of Respondents' Socioeconomic Background.

Mother's highest level of schooling	
Some high school	0%
High school graduate	1.4
Some college	17.4
College graduate	37.7
Some postgraduate	14.5
Graduate or professional degree	29.0
Father's highest level of schooling	
Some high school	1.5
High school graduate	7.5
Some college	27.5
College graduate	37.3
Some postgraduate	2.9
Graduate or professional degree	22.4
Household income	
US$4,000-US$24,999	15.6
US$25,000-US$34,999	12.5
US$35,000-US$49,999	10.9
US$50,000-US$74,999	18.7
US$75,000-US$99,999	17.2
US$100,000-or more	25.0

19.4% of Blacks with a bachelor's college degree or more in 2010 (Aud et al., 2011). This suggests substantial human capital on the part of our homeschooling parents. If human capital is understood as the skills, abilities, and knowledge possessed by specific individuals (Becker, 1964), educational attainment then becomes the most common and direct indicator of that construct. It is believed that parents who possess substantial human capital are in a better position to supervise and instruct their children in further acquisition of human capital (Lareau, 2000). These well-educated parents aside, our figures do suggest a bimodal trend that ought not to be ignored. In effect, a substantial number of homeschooling households have parents with no college degree. Although this trend is higher among fathers—who for various reasons are not as involved in homeschooling instruction as mothers—our data suggest that almost 20% of mothers and close to 40% of fathers do not possess a college degree.

Regarding household income, our data reveal broad representation across the income spectrum with a slight increase at the high end. A quarter of our participants are in households with an income of US$100,000 or more, and more than 60% report an income of US$50,000 or more. These figures leave, however, a substantial portion of our participants with an income less than US$50,000 a year. According to national labor statistics, the poverty line for a family of five with three children is US$26,023. With this number as a baseline, we can ascertain that 15.6% of our participants are living under the poverty line and an additional 12.5% hover near the poverty line.

Findings

The open-ended interviews dealt more specifically with African American parental motivations for homeschooling. Each respondent was read the following statement:

> Now I would like to begin a discussion of some of the reasons you chose to homeschool your child. If for any reason you feel there is something else you want to add that would contribute to my understanding of your reasons for homeschooling, please feel free to share it with me.

Parents were then asked directly, "What made you decide to homeschool?" Most respondents were quick to provide a response to this question—a question which in most cases had already been answered in the course of the interview. To insure completeness and some level of uniformity, a list of possible reasons was then read to each respondent, in which case respondents

Table 4. Reasons for Homeschooling.

Quality of education	25.0%
Racism	23.9
Family bonds	14.8
Religious	9.5
Safety concerns	7.6
Financial constraints	4.2
Moral—nonreligious	4.2
Special needs	3.4
Other	7.6

were free to select one or more reasons aligned with their motivation or provide an option that was not on our list.

In response to our query most parents offered a series of motives, and were rarely motivated by single factor. As seen in Table 4, among the many reasons given, a concern with the quality of education provided in brick and mortar schools was most often mentioned, with 25% of respondents citing it as their first reason for homeschooling. This finding is consistent with previous research, and indeed consistent with the history of homeschooling in America (Gathier, 2007). But unlike other research on homeschooling, and unique to the African American experience, the second most mentioned motivating factor for homeschooling was a concern with racism, with about 24% of our respondents citing it as a motivation. Although neither quality of education nor racism was cited by a majority of our respondents (i.e., more than 50% of those surveyed), it is fair to say that a preoccupation with racism and discrimination undergirds most of the responses regarding motivation for homeschooling. African American parents' inspiration to homeschool their children was often couched as a desire to protect one's child from possible racist actions or, as is often the case, as a reaction to an egregious racist incident when their children attended school. In many interviews, cultural compatibility of the learning experience and the fight against institutional and individual racism undergird other reasons provided by our participants. That is to say, for example, parents who mention religion or family bonds as their motivation for homeschooling do so within a context that acknowledges institutional racism and the imperative of a curriculum that espouses a positive self-image of African American people. We have chosen to address more specifically here the question of quality of education since, as the most cited motivation, it is without a doubt able to provide great insight into the unique but unfortunately often absent from discussions the African American homeschooling experience.

Educational Protectionists: Coming to Terms With the Deficiencies of the Educational System

We have chosen to label "Educational Protectionists" those Black parents who have opted to educate their children at home, at least in part, in an attempt to shield them from the deleterious effects of an educational system they deem sorely lacking. Those parents typically displayed an acute awareness of the often reported deterioration of the educational system, and of the particularly devastating impact of such a state of affairs on Black children in particular. The questions raised by our participants were far reaching: indeed, they problematized not only academic and cultural content and teaching methods, but also teachers' attitudes and competence as well as the structural arrangements and political purpose of schooling itself.

Curriculum. Many of the parents with whom we spoke challenged the curriculum on philosophical grounds and cultural grounds. On the philosophical level, the curriculum fell short in three different and major ways. First, it fails to stimulate children by making learning boring: being primarily adult-driven, children have little to no input in what they are made to study. Yet, espousing a theory of learning that purports the view that children learn better what they are interested in, while becoming bored with adult-imposed school subjects, many parents objected to adult-driven curricula in favor of an emergent curriculum (Jones, 1994), or, for unschoolers, no prescribed curriculum at all. Second, the curriculum is not intellectually challenging enough, and thus does not allow children to reach their fullest intellectual potential. Parents who pulled their children out of school commonly reported being able to teach in a few weeks what schools could not teach in several months. Thus, for many, going to school amounted or would amount in fact to a pure waste of time. Melissa, the mother of three, in Chicago, recalls her thoughts regarding sending her first-born, then 5-year-old daughter to school:

> When I thought about it, I told myself, okay, we'll get her up for kindergarten, but for what? Is it worth my time and energy every day to make sure she gets to school so she can learn to color? This is ridiculous. She already knows everything you're going to teach her. From an academic standpoint, she could've been performing in second grade. We were her best option academically.

Third, many parents reported being greatly dissatisfied with the very narrow and rigid conception of education that undergirds most school curricula. Parents, for instance, lamented the exclusion of foreign languages, or the sole focus on academics at the expense of the acquisition of life skills. As a result of this narrowness, it is felt that schooling cannot produce well-rounded

individuals. Instead, it produces purposeless people with no understanding of the world around them, and of them in that world.

On the cultural level, the curriculum was indicted for its monoculturalism and ethnocentrism. Indeed, while focusing primarily on the White cultural and historical experience, which is the de facto norm, the full contributions of people of color are left out, thus impoverishing the curriculum. This exclusion takes on a more poignant and pressing dimension for Black children who are not included in classroom conversations and are made to feel less than adequate, as this statement by Kofi, father of two, in Washington, D.C. attests:

> All they teach is their stuff, and then we don't know nothing about our stuff, and then we believe that we are nothing and we act like we are nothing . . .

This issue of cultural and historical inclusion and relevance was stressed by several parents as a critical one. Knowledge of one's historical and cultural contributions was identified as a major parameter in the definition of a quality education. Many parents indeed adamantly objected to the idea that one could be considered educated while remaining ignorant about oneself and insisted that education had to start with who their children were, that is, African Americans or Africans in America. As stated by Yenenga, mother of one, in Atlanta, Georgia,

> Our children are not being well-educated, you know. They're doing horribly. They're not being taught. There is a difference between schooling and education, education prepares you for life. If you don't know who you are, can you consider yourself to be educated? Are you prepared for life?

Many indeed held as a given that true education must enable the development of a strong sense of self as African American. Imparting knowledge about the experiences and achievements of African Americans should instill in their children a sense of pride and direction that will serve them well. It will give them the courage and faith in themselves to face the obstacles that they are bound to face as Black people. Failure to impart self-knowledge, on the other hand, will deprive them of knowing who they are and what they are capable of (by association). Kwaku, father of three children in Atlanta, Georgia, went to an expensive all-White private school in Philadelphia. Yet he feels that this critical element was missing:

> I know what my parents were trying to give me. My parents were trying to give me the best education. But I had no sense of myself as a person of African descent. And so now I feel like that's the most important thing. You got to give a child a

> sense of themselves so that, once they get the academics and all the other stuff, then they will be able to make better decisions and choices in their lives.

Moreover, the attempts made by most public and private schools to include some reference to African American history, especially during Black History Month, were dismissed as largely insufficient, if not totally inadequate and disrespectful. A large number of parents indeed expressed great displeasure over the reduced and distorted presentation of Black history and achievements in most schools. Melanie, the mother of one boy in Washington, D.C., cogently summed up the views of many homeschooling Black parents when she stated,

> Slavery did not begin black history. And, if you're educated in an American school, that's what you're led to believe. You learn that, you know, there was this place in Africa called Timbuktu. Now there were slaves, and the slaves were treated poorly, and then, and then came Abraham Lincoln, and then came Martin Luther King. And then there was the other guy called Malcom X, and then, you know, now there's Barack Obama. And that's black history, you know. And, you might get in there once in a while, o yeah, there was this woman called Harriet Tubman and, you know, a black man invented the traffic light, if you're really lucky.

Teachers. Many parents expressed sympathy for the teachers' poor working conditions in urban public schools. They recognized that the material reality many teachers face makes effective teaching impossible, in spite of professed good intentions. Of particular concern is class size, and as a result, the reduced attention that students can expect to receive from their teacher. Dwayne, father of six, in Philadelphia, PA, recalls conversations with teachers:

> I wasn't sold on homeschooling at first, but teachers convinced me. They were complaining, and justifiably so. Thirty-five, forty, or even more students in a classroom is overwhelming. They were really telling me that they're not able to provide the quality education they'd like for the children.

Lynn, mother of three, in Frederick, Maryland decided to homeschool her daughter because of this overcrowdedness, which she had no doubt, was totally antithetical to effective learning:

> When my daughter was in kindergarten, I thought: thirty kids, one teacher? I can't do any worse than that. Even if I don't do anything *all year*, I'm sure I can do better than that.

However, teachers themselves, outside of their difficult working conditions, are believed to contribute to the poor quality of education experienced by

African American students in several ways. Generally speaking, teachers were criticized for not being educated and knowledgeable enough, not passionate enough, and sometimes simply unqualified to teach. However, parents were particularly critical of what they perceived to be a lack of commitment to Black students' academic development on the part of White teachers, and of the tendency of the latter to belittle and have low expectations for Black students. This is consistent with the literature that suggests that White teachers often display problematic attitudes and behaviors toward Black students (Hilliard, 1997; Kunjunfu, 2002). Commenting on White teachers' attitudes toward Black students' academic progress, for example, Diamond, mother of two in Baltimore, Maryland, cogently summed up the views of many:

> I don't believe that white teachers and white-led schools see the importance of education for our kids like we need them to.

The lack of commitment to Black students' progress was apparent to Black parents in the lack of professional attention paid to their children and in the hasty requests for cognitive and behavioral testing.

Instruction. Many have criticized the heavy emphasis of public education on teaching to the test, and focus on minimum rather than optimum achievement, as a result of the NCLB Act. Noddings (2007, p. 7), among others, argues that the NCLB "misconstrues the aims of education and indeed misunderstands the very nature of education." Such invaluable traits as imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity, which cannot be measured by a test, are dismissed, or at least not nurtured in the school environment. We found that the parents with whom we spoke largely agreed with this view. In fact, many contended that no real learning was actually taking place in school, as the pace was too fast and the study of the material too superficial. Indeed, the need to follow a calendar-driven curriculum and to be ready for standardized tests prevented teachers and students to spend too much time on any single topic. Lynn explains this clearly:

> They're teaching to the test, they're not teaching the kids how to think or how to learn. They're just giving them the material so they can pass their test so they can keep their funding. I was not willing to put my daughter through that. My son went to public school for his high school years and he basically didn't learn anything.

However, it is clear that the emphasis on testing, and the reduction of learning to passing a test predates the NCLB, and was simply exacerbated by it (Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986). Indeed, some parents questioned the expected learning outcome that undergirds school, and talked about school dynamics in general as a "game," whose main rule is the regurgitation of information by the students. Students who are able to do this well

receive good grades and are said to be good students. Yet, the parents argued, this is not real learning. Athea, mother of three in New Jersey, recalls her own experience as the deciding factor:

> The fact that I could make straight A's and not learn the material was disturbing to me. I knew that I was memorizing things and knowing things for a test. But if you asked me about it, I didn't learn it. And, I felt like this is not right. How can you get As and not learn? I just felt there's something fundamentally wrong with it. Until I said, well you know what, when I have children, I will homeschool.

In addition, many felt that too much time was wasted in school routines, like standing in line, going to the bathroom, being quiet, and that the classroom schedule was too rigid to foster an optimal learning environment, even in grades where standardized testing does not occur yet, such as Kindergarten. Oya, mother of one in New York, recalls how upsetting it was for her daughter to have to jump from one topic to another after 20 min:

> It was like, "Okay, now we're going to do math for twenty minutes. Boom. Everybody gets a math sheet, sit down, color three red apples for the number three. Okay boom, math time is over, now we're going to do reading. Boom, reading time is over. Now, we are going to do gym." I could see her getting really frazzled and upset. I don't think that works for most children, this sense of moving.

Questioning the purpose of schooling and its impact on children. Obviously, the parents we interviewed were quite concerned about the impact of schooling on children—this concern prompted them to opt for home education. They stated that schooling destroyed the desire to learn in children and prevented them from developing a sense of self and purpose. Furthermore, schooling was blamed for prohibiting critical thinking, and actually impairing children's intellectual development. For many parents, this was not the incidental effect of a deficient economic system, but much to the contrary, the outcome of deliberate and careful planning. In that respect, the true purpose of public schooling was redefined as a mechanism involved in turning slaves out of children and preparing workers for the system. Michelle, mother of three in Chicago, expressed this succinctly:

> And you know, basically all these schools are geared towards creating a labor force for the corporations. That's what it's about. It's training people to take orders, breaking your allegiance to your family, breaking your allegiance to your country, to your fate, and remaking you in their image. And that's not what I want for my children. I want independent thinkers.

It is worth noting that the critique addressed by African American homeschooling parents is not specific or limited to the African American

experience. In fact, it speaks to the political and structural reality that public schools in the United States were largely designed, to begin with, for the purpose of schooling those to be subjugated, not of educating them. In his groundbreaking study of compulsory schooling in the United States, Gatto (2006) convincingly argues that schools are best understood as "prisons" and schooling as "mass incarceration," whose object is "the engineering of stupefaction" and "dumbness." Schools, Gatto argues, steadily and scientifically deprive children of their ability to think to preempt any possible threat to the status quo. Let us note here that the view that schools engage in a process of "dumbing down" children, far from unique to Gatto, is shared by many (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Wacquant, 2001).

Homeschooling as a Corrective

To the Educational Protectionists we interviewed, homeschooling appeared as the only real alternative to avoid altogether the profound shortcomings of schooling. Homeschooling indeed was claimed to be the ideal corrective to a philosophically and culturally deficient curriculum, inadequate teachers and instruction, unsatisfactory teaching conditions, and the problematic purpose of education. Most specifically, parents reported that homeschooling allowed them to follow a curriculum that made learning interesting and intellectually challenging for their children. Those who were so inclined were also able to include in their core curriculum not only academic subjects but also other endeavors such as farming, carpentry, music, and so forth, which they felt were a necessary component to a complete education. Furthermore, homeschooling granted African American parents the opportunity to teach their children about African and African American history and culture. As mentioned above, this matter was a particularly sensitive one as many parents considered the exclusion of the African American experience from school curricula a major defect. Dee, mother of three, in Silver Spring, Maryland, explained her approach thus:

> I'm very big on them knowing their black history, it's a critical part of their education. To me, you know, it's part of American history. I think it's underplayed, it's devalued, so to me that's my priority. I want my children to know the greatness of where we come from, you know, we weren't just enslaved people.

Homeschooling was also presented as the perfect remedy to teachers' poor working conditions as well as to teachers' indifference, if not outright hostility. Indeed, homeschooling often requires one-on-one interactions, and the parent teachers usually care deeply about their children's optimal development, thus their attentiveness and patience toward them. Furthermore, by taking the

pressure of constant testing out of the picture, homeschooling allows time for mastery of content, as opposed to the rapid and superficial survey customary of most public schools. In addition, homeschooling allows flexible routines. While most parents reported following some type of preestablished daily schedule, it was obvious that much liberty could be taken and was taken with such schedule when deemed necessary for educational or social purposes. For instance, impromptu hands-on activities and field trips were regularly added.

Finally, homeschooling, according to African American Educational Protectionists, makes it possible for them to redefine the purpose of education in a manner that is consistent with their own personal philosophy of life. The emphasis was clearly on producing free and independent thinkers, full of creativity, and guided by a strong and clear sense of purpose.

Discussion and Summary

The overall aim of this study was to gain insight into the experiences, views, and actions of African American parents who choose to educate their children at home to protect them from the deleterious effects of the poor quality of education offered by most schools. The curriculum, the teachers, the methods of instruction, as well as the purpose of schooling in America were criticized for contributing to this less than desirable state of affairs. However, our efforts to elicit from our parents a definition of "good education" revealed that for most, if not all, the meaningful and sustained engagement of the African American cultural and historical experience occupied a central place. At stake was Black children's ability to obtain self-knowledge, defined as cultural and historical knowledge, which would in turn allow them to develop a strong sense of self and purpose. Without self-knowledge, our parents were adamant that one could not be considered truly educated, but at best, "an educated fool." Let us note in passing that this finding is not consistent with Johnson (2006) who argued that for Black parents, a good school is automatically a White and wealthy school. In fact, many of the parents whom we interviewed had the means to send their children to expensive White private schools but chose not to, largely because of the common ethnocentrism of such institutions, and the racism that they felt their children were bound to experience there or had experienced there.

Most importantly, one must keep in mind that the decision by an increasingly large number of Black parents to take back their children's education in their hands is part and parcel of the long and rich history of African American parental involvement in the access to, and shape of the academic training and socialization of Black children. Too often, previous research on African American homeschooling has presented it as simply an epiphenomenon of the

failure of public education (Taylor, 2005). While such a view may not be incorrect, it nonetheless fails to appreciate homeschooling as the latest phase of the African American struggle for adequate education, that is, an education that not only takes place in a nurturing environment and provides a sound and rich academic foundation but also acknowledges the historical and cultural experiences and accomplishments of African Americans. After all, there exists a long history of African American struggle to secure access to formal education. Whether it was during slavery, when enslaved Africans were prohibited to learn to read and write, and risked their lives for doing so, or after emancipation, when newly freed Africans resisted attempts to limit their educational options to vocational training or instruction in segregated schools, African Americans kept insisting on their right to be properly educated (Anderson, 1988; Lomotey, 2010). The reason for this emphasis on education is that African Americans perceived the latter as their passport away from the plantations and, generally speaking, away from material poverty and its far-reaching negative consequences. They quite understandably aspired to a better life and identified a solid education as the mechanism that would allow them upward social mobility. For instance, African Americans were the first and most ardent promoters of free public education in the South (Anderson, 1988), and despite the incredible odds that they faced, were able to reduce their illiteracy rate from 95% in 1860 to 30% by 1910 (Anderson, 1988, p. 31), and down to 20% by 1940 (Gatto, 2006, p. 53). More recently, in the face of a deficient educational system, African Americans have turned to homeschooling to ensure the adequate education and emotional well-being of their children.

It is quite ironic, though, that African Americans, who have sedulously fought for access to public school, should divest from it. However, this divestment was made possible by the repudiation of the notion of education as "the great equalizer." Recognizing that the conditions and modalities of public and private education are not favorable to Black students, thus making the attainment of the "American dream" unobtainable by keeping Black children in subordinate positions through inferior, inadequate, or culturally inadequate education, Educational Protectionists have taken on themselves to create better learning conditions for their children. This, they hope, will allow their children to maintain their love for learning, acquire sound academic foundations, nurture critical thinking and a broad vision and understanding of the world, and develop a healthy sense of self as African Americans.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is suggested that future research undertake a longitudinal study of African American homeschoolers to examine the potential benefits of

homeschooling to make adequate comparisons to the nonhomeschooling population. This method would also allow researchers to assess the social and psychological development of homeschooled children, as well as the lifespan consequences of homeschooling, as these children enter college. Future research would also do well to investigate the micro-level dynamics of parent–child relationships in the African American homeschooling context. How do parents—if at all—communicate messages of identity, motivation, and overall success? Also significant would be the assessment of the correlation between parental educational level, income level, residential segregation, and other indicators of wealth and status and the decision to homeschool.

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