

HOW CAN MALCOLM X HELP US SOLVE THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION?

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Malcolm X and Afrocentricity: Education for Liberation

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HOW CAN MALCOLM X HELP US SOLVE THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION?

(Outline)

1. Introduction

- a. what are we discussing today and why?
- b. key link is what can be learned from Malcolm X (from his time) that is relevant to the crisis in education (for our time)
- c. this is a two step process:
 1. Step one is the Malcolm revival
 2. Step two is rebuilding a movement for Black liberation

2. Education Crisis: We are stuck at best with yesterdays schools for tomorrows society in todays crisis

- a. yesterdays schools
 1. education reflects economics, culture, politics
 2. rethinking the DuBois-Washington debate
 3. achievements of public schools
- b. tomorrows society
 1. the economic revolution is underway
 2. will society remain the same?
- c. todays crisis
 1. commitment to education
 2. control of education
 3. content of education

3. Malcolm X

- a. who was ~~Malcolm~~ ^{is?}
 1. Malcolm Little
 2. Detroit Red
 3. Malcolm X
 4. Omowale

pro

- b. lessons
 1. think for yourself
 2. Learn from History
 3. build unity
 4. fight back
- c. dangers
 1. reformism
 2. false leaders

4. Conclusions: Rebuilding

- a. study
- b. organize
- c. communicate
- d. struggle

HOW CAN MALCOLM X HELP US SOLVE THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION?

Good morning.

It is significant that we meet at this time, in this place, to discuss this topic.

This time. This time is called by most people Black History month based on the program established by Dr. Carter G Woodson in 1926, but since 1971 some of us have been working to up date the occasion by renaming it Black Liberation Month, so I take this opportunity to greet you here at this meeting to focus on the essence of Black History which is the fight for Black Liberation.

This place. This place is dear to us as a living tribute to the late great Harold Washington, and as such it is appropriate for us to have our conference here. This library center should become the center for community dialogues. Harold would have approved of this as a fitting memorial to his memory.

This topic. Our focus is clear and to the point. We are

here to discuss one of the great problems we face, the crisis of Black education, and the basis on which we can solve this problem, learning the lessons of the Black liberation movement and especially lessons to be learned from Malcolm X.

Again, it is significant that we meet at this time, in this place, to discuss this topic.

My remarks are organized to discuss three points:

1. What is the crisis in education?
2. Who is Malcolm X?
3. How can we begin to solve the crisis in Black education?

There is a logic to this approach. The key link is to find out what can be learned from Malcolm X (from his time in the 1960's) that is relevant to the crisis in Black education (for our time in the 1990's). Furthermore, learning lessons is a necessary process but not sufficient, because what difference does it make if you know a lot about a problem but you don't do anything to solve it. So, in terms of solving problems, we've

got to get our "mojo" working through a two step process: step one is grasping the current unprecedented and massive revival of interest in Malcolm X, and step 2 is applying that knowledge to the necessary task of rebuilding a new Black liberation movement. We have to be informed by the past in order not to repeat it. We aim to build on the past by forging a new vision for a new time.

1. WHAT IS THE CRISIS IN BLACK EDUCATION?

My general answer is that we are stuck with yesterdays schools for tomorrows society in todays crisis. Let me repeat that: WE ARE STUCK WITH YESTERDAYS SCHOOLS, FOR TOMORROWS SOCIETY, IN TODAYS CRISIS.

It seems obvious but it is essential to point out, that education always serves the economic life of a society, and is expressed through its culture. So, the structure and function of education has to be understood within the historic development of economic and cultural relations. The traditions and experience of education in Africa were fundamentally disrupted by the European invasion and Atlantic slave trade. This led to the racist

domination of the slave system, where education for Black people was limited since there were no schools, there were laws and customs against teaching slaves to read, and the organization of work utilized little complex technology so little or no education was necessary for slaves to be economically productive as unskilled labor. After all, how much did one need to learn to plant, chop, or pick cotton.

The first educational programs for Black people in the USA were in the northern states, set up in the 17th century, with the earliest schools founded in the 18th century. However, it was the mid-19th century Emancipation that led to the wide spread development of schools for Black people. This involved schools set up by the Freedmans Bureau (government), the American Missionary Society (white liberals), and Black people themselves. For example, when Black soldiers got their severance pay after the Civil War was over, there are many cases in which they turned their checks over to assist in the building of schools for the new communities of free Black people.

The overall fight for Black schools is a great story and contains the recurring historical truth that when Black people have fought for and won democratic gains for themselves, other excluded groups make gains, and there is a progressive transformation of the overall social relations in society. When we fight, everybody with similar problems wins.

DuBois indicates in his great book Black Reconstruction that there were two obstacles to a free public school system in the wake of slavery: the property owners were against it and the white laborers didn't demand public education. DuBois wrote:

It was only the other part of the laboring class, the Black folk, who connected knowledge with power; who believed that education was the stepping-stone to wealth and respect, and that wealth without education was crippled. Perhaps the very fact that so many of them had seen the wealthy slave slaveholders at close range, and knew the extent of ignorance and inefficiency among them, led to that extraordinary mass demand on the part of the Black laboring class for education. And it was this demand that was the effective force for the establishment of the public school in the South on a permanent basis, for all people and all classes. (page 641)

These public schools were initially set up to serve two basic functions: first, to provide leadership for the organization of the emancipated Black community, and second, to enable

Black people to begin the long march into greater economic productivity and independence, more skill and more control. The first need was met by the colleges serving to develop Black middle class elites and the latter by the more basic schools for the masses.

From the mid 1800's to the mid 1900's the Black population was transformed from being a rural southern agriculturally based people to an urban northern industrially based people. The more this transition took place the more there was a need for schooling. In 1870 over 90% of Blacks were in the rural south and about 10% of Blacks aged 5 to 20 were in school. In 1930, Blacks were about 60% still in the rural south but up to nearly 60% of those 5 to 20 years were in school. By 1980, about 85% of the Black population lived in cities and of Black people from the ages of 5 to 17 well over 90% were enrolled in school, and at this level Black people had achieved near parity with whites. The average education for Blacks in 1940 was about 6th grade, and in 1980 it was high school graduation.

The driving force for this increase in school attendance has been the demand for industrial labor and the requirements for survival in a modern urban setting. This opened the road to political action, and the desire by some Blacks for full participation in all aspects of the society including power and control. The main ideological expression of this transformation in education was expressed in the debate between Booker T Washington and WEB DuBois. This was captured in an insightful poem by that Detroit poet Dudley Randall:

BOOKER T. AND W.E.B.

"It seems to me," said Booker T.,
"It shows a mighty lot of cheek
To study chemistry and Greek
When Mister Charlie needs a hand
To hoe the cotton on his land,
And when Miss Ann looks for a cook,
Why stick your nose inside a book?"

"I don't agree," said W E B
"If I should have the drive to seek
Knowledge of chemistry or Greek,
I'll do it. Charles and Miss can look
Another place for hand or cook.
Some men rejoice in skill of hand,
And some in cultivating land,
But there are others who maintain
The right to cultivate the brain."

"It seems to me, said Booker T.,
"That all you folks have missed the boat
Who shout about the right to vote,
And spend vain days and sleepless nights
In uproar over civil rights.
Just keep your mouths shut, do not grouse,
But work, and save, and buy a house."

"I don't agree," said W E B
"For what can property avail
If dignity and justice fail?
Unless you help to make the laws,
They'll steal your house with trumped-up clause.
A rope's as tight, a fire as hot,
No matter how much cash you've got.
Speak soft, and try your little plan,
But as for me, I'll be a man."

"It seems to me," said Booker T.--

"I don't agree,"

Said W E B

This debate is over the nature of industrialization and the relationship between education and political power. As long the economic survival of Black people was in semi-skilled jobs on farms and in factories, with little hope of destroying the racist apartheid of segregation then Booker T had a point and places like Tuskegee and Snow Hill were great examples of Black self determination led by a Black middle class. On the other hand, DuBois expressed the scientific and technological dynamism of an advanced industrial economy. DuBois was a militant middle class reformer dedicated to defending the interests of the entire Black community.

Now in a real way, even though Booker T and WEB disagreed, they were both examples of the talented tenth DuBois wanted the Black middle class to become, a leadership class dedicated to serving the Black community. The Black teacher in the past has been this kind of a person, someone who served Black people by assisting them to become successful in getting jobs and leading decent family lives. The public school has been a great institution, a place where former sharecroppers from the fields of Mississippi were transformed into industrial workers producing steel, automobiles, running the railroads, and developing a whole set of institutions uniquely adapted to their urban environment.

In fact, the school was modeled after the very factory

and bureaucracy that the workers were being trained and educated to work in, and its achievements parallel the productivity of high quality products that set standards for the world. Further, it is essential to point out that these schools were really a combination of opportunity and coercion – the forced assimilation of immigrants into an English language "Anglo-conformity." The desired result ~~was~~ better workers who would submit to exploitation and make profits for the industrial capitalists in order to improve the quality of their own lives.

But this great experience in yesterdays schools is now faced with the challenge of tomorrows society, and for some people tomorrows society is virtually here already. The vast majority of the US labor force used to be in agriculture and now about 5% produces more food than any other society in world history. This revolutionary transformation of the labor force extends to industry, and is making a similar impact: for example, large factories in steel and auto which employed thousands are now employing hundreds, general labor and semi-skilled jobs are being replaced by computers, robots and a smaller work force with a higher percentage of skilled workers. **The mechanical cotton picker kicked Blacks out of the cotton patch, and now the robot is throwing us out of the factory onto the streets.**

The new society based on the high tech information revolution, has no use for the mass based community institutions of public education that were set up to serve the industrial economy. What ruling class interest will be served by having literate motivated workers if many of them will suffer unemployment,

homelessness, a lack of insurance, limited health care, as well as face the attacks of AIDS, drugs, and a shut down of most mental health facilities. The opposite is true. The workers of the declining industrial economy are of little value in the kind of high tech society that these captains of industry want to build, and therefore there is little interest in making sure that there is a solution to the education crisis that we face today.

✓ The crisis that we face today is for the very survival of Black people and all other oppressed nationalities in the 20th century. For the first time since vital statistics have been kept in the US the average life span of the Black male is declining, Black infant mortality ranks with third world countries, and inner city ghettos are becoming "forbidden zones." Unfortunately it is all too often that even Black people write people off and assume genocide against thoes in the "forbidden zone" can't be stopped.

The Chinese use two characters (symbols) to represent crisis, one means danger and the other means opportunity. This captures our current situation caught between the old and the new, the end of something and the beginning of something else. This is a crisis of the 3 C's: commitment, control, content.

1. COMMITMENT to education;
2. CONTROL of schools and school systems;
3. CONTENT of education

Now when I speak of commitment I am not switching gears to make a rhetorical appeal in search of declarations of intent. People are not committed because of what they say, but rather

because of what they do. My sense is that commitment has to be measured in terms of how we allocate scarce resources, especially time and money. We've only got so much, and what we do with what we've got tells the whole story.

Many of the reformers place the blame on the victim. Some would exhort the teachers to give the students homework and the parents to curtail television [as the time commitment we need.] Some would find deficits in Black culture and community life styles and therefore suggest lowering or changing our expectations because these Blacks might be doing all that they can reasonably be expected to do. This discussion means that the critical commitment is on the part of the people themselves. How committed are Black people to education. History clearly reveals that Black people have been quite committed to education for the past century because it made good sense. What were people after: literacy, basic math, and other things to qualify them for better jobs and for the prestige within the community because people respected academic achievement.

has But, today, when there is a declining investment in education and the connection between going to school and getting a job (is) become even more tenuous than its been, ^{py} people are not exactly crazy when they lose some of their enthusiasm for going to school. ^{py} On the other hand Black people are still eager for education when they are convinced that it places them on track for a job and decent quality of life. In other words what I am saying is that the crisis has more to do with the failing of this society, especially the government, than it has to do with the

shortcomings of Black people themselves.

There can be no errors here unless one completely misunderstand the point. The state is responsible for the education of the population as the most important public investment in the public interest. To do so means that social progress is probable, to fail to do so means that social degeneration is certain.

Let me share just two revealing facts for the entire society, first commitment, and then results: the average length of the school year in the US is 180 days, in German it is 235, and in Japan it is 243 days (fully a 1/3 greater time commitment than the US)*. On achievement, everybody has to face up to these facts: on an international science test given in 17 countries in the mid 1980's produced these results: the 10 year olds were led by Japan, South Korea, and Finland with the US 8th; the 14 year olds were led by Japan, Hungary, and the Netherlands with the US 15th; and of the 13 countries tested for 17 year olds the US was in last place on Biology, 11th on Chemistry, and 9th on Physics. These data are clear, commitment leads to results. The US lags behind because the government lacks the commitment to educate the people, and this means whites as well as Blacks and Latinos.

When we turn to the issue of commitment as funding, we are struck by the clear and unmistakable pattern of class division. Johnaton Kozol, in his recent book ^{PY} Savage Inequality, ^{PY} states: ✓

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This leads to the issue of CONTROL, the question "Do we

* Recent (2/5-7, 1992) reports indicate that the length of the school year, i.e. # of days does not correspond to success on standardized test comparisons. ✓ new stats

have Black Power?" There are two levels of control, administrative control in terms of local policy and the political control at the state and national levels. The fact is that at the local level, while there is still allot of progress to be made, about 25% of Black elected officials are in education, and most large cities with majority Black school populations have a Black school superintendent. So in terms of positions of decision making, yes, Black people have a great deal of "hands on say so." When Black youth go to school they usually go to a Black majority school and there are plenty of Black people in high positions -- teachers, principals, and superintendents. Here in Chicago there is an interesting test case of local control through the new elected Local School Councils. Note that this new development did not occur as a response to a mass based community control of schools movement like we had in the 1960's, but as an initiative of a Republican state government.

Now, just as this has happened the Republican conservatives have redefined education from a national to a local commitment (along with most other governmental services) and therefore just as there is a deep fiscal crisis in the cities, local governments are being held accountable for more and more of the education budget. Finally there is the issue of privatization. This is proposed as the alternative to the local fiscal crisis of the cities, let private businesses begin to run the schools. We all know that there are all kinds of private businesses, from McDonalds and Walt Disney to IBM and Encyclopedia Britanica. Privatization for the inner city poor will likely be designed to

increase the consumption of hamburgers and cartoons, while for the rich suburbanites it will be a direct route into productive jobs as part of the high tech information economy.

This leads us to the third C, the CONTENT of education. Here we have the greatest current debate raging throughout the country, the Afrocentric challenge to the dominant ideology of Eurocentrism. [^] This has been a racist "theory of world history" and a "global political project " of European domination. The issue here is correcting 500 years of lies and deception.

Afrocentrism makes its challenge on three critical questions:

1. What is the origin of civilization?
2. What are the continuities and retentions from Ancient Africa to the present?
3. What are the dissimilarities between African peoples, other third world peoples, and European peoples?

The current scientific information, from the scant material objects of archeological field research to the bio-chemical investigation of DNA genetic codes, the origin of humanity and civilization is linked to Africa. ^{fact} This [^] has yet to trickle down into the curriculum. Research is also pointing to more African retentions than previously thought, including the syncretic religion of Santeria and Voodoo from the Caribbean. Check it out, in some cases there is more direct retention of Africa in this regard in the Latino community than the Black descendants of slavery in the USA. Anyway, the historical origin of these language communities is really where the slave ship stopped and

who got off where. Most other things ^{re} a really quite similar.

These two points are essential in correcting the racist lie that Black people have not contributed to world civilization.

Expand [On the basis of research we can then construct the multicultural curriculum of inclusion.

It is the third point that is still troubling, because even when one argues effectively that the particular features of unique cultures have to be understood and respected, one has to also affirm the universality of human beings and therefore also build a core set of skills and ^a basic body of knowledge everyone needs to have and be competent in. We have to remember that a narrow Black orientation can have limitations.

An example of this is the foolish notion of the African personality put forward by Leopold Senghor of Senegal. He wrote that the African was the lady of the races and was a specialist in music, poetry, dance, and emotional life in general; whereas white people were cold, calculating, mechanical and were dominant in the realm of reason. Black people are fun loving people who like to play, while white people are rational thinkers who enjoy being successful at work. I don't think we want to end up with this kind of a "racial" fantasy. The facts are more likely that all human beings have the basic biological capacity for both emotion and reason, but certain historical forms of economic and cultural organization force people to develop one ^{trait} more than the other. We must fight to transform our society in such a way that the full and total capacities of all people are allowed to develop. Cultural differences are likely to remain for centuries,

within each a person should be able to fully grasp the computer and the conga drum, poetry and physics, art and algebra.

Here we have to face the reality that there will be a drive toward the national standardization of achievement tests. This is already a reality with the SAT, ACT, GRE and other exams. But consider that as we fight for Black selfdetermination, and our right to proclaim that A stands for Africa, the society will be requiring our youth to take exams in which A will stand for algebra.

Now I started by noting that we are faced with the crisis of having yesterdays schools face the challenge of tomorrows society in todays crisis. A system of education based on urban industrialization is inadequate for a high tech economy where the production of knowledge is the greatest source of value. This contradiction is exacerbated by the current crisis that covers all aspects of society, but especially education. The crisis involves a weak commitment to education, powerlessness, and a need to construct a curriculum that includes a place for everyones cultural experience while employing universal scientific and technological knowledge.

But this is the problem side of things. Lets now turn to solutions by first seeking lessons from the life of Malcolm X.

3. WHO ^{was} IS MALCOLM X?

Malcolm X, with the collaboration of Alex Haley, wrote a classic autobiography in the great tradition of the 19th century slave narratives of Gustavus Vassa and Frederick Douglas, and the

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20th century texts by Booker T Washington, WEB DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, Ida B Wells, Zora Neal Hurston, and Maya Angelou. In American letters this book is as great as the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, and in world literature it must rank with the narratives of St Augustine's *Confessions* and Che Guevarra's *Reminiscences*. This is a great adventure story that grabs the imagination, opens up the soul of a people through the authentic language of a pilgrim. This text has been adopted by Black people as their own, as their 20th century classic.

? There were four stages to Malcolm's life: 1. a small town boy from a broken family trying to get ahead; 2. a big city hoodlum dealing in drugs and robbery; 3. a proselytizing Black nationalist minister in the nation of Islam; and 4. a leading spokesperson for a radical Black tradition. The first stage represented a positive attempt to succeed with the American dream, while the second stage responded to negative racist reaction and acted out success in an equally American but illegal career mode. The last two stages embraced radical Black mentors, organizational participation, personal study and travel, and the historical context of the high tide of Black struggles in the 1960's.

Malcolm was born May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska to Rev Earl and Louise Little. He ^{is father} was a Georgia born Baptist preacher and organizer for Marcus Garvey's UNIA, and ^{his mother} she was a Grenadian born outspoken activist in the UNIA as well. He had 9 brothers and sisters. When Malcolm was 6 his father was brutally murdered

by white racists, and six years later his mother succumbed to the pressures of the welfare system while trying to raise her children and was committed to a mental hospital where she stayed from 1937 to 1963. Malcolm was a Black youth alienated from his family through racist violence, and thrown into the street.

After spending three years in a foster home/detention home process and still not escaping institutional racism and individual prejudices, he moved to Boston with his eldest paternal half-sister Ella. In Boston, he rejected what he perceived to be the hypocritical and imitative life style of the Black middle class status seekers and took to the street. First in Boston and then in New York ^{City}, Malcolm explored the full range of illegal alternatives, everything we know of as dominating our community today -- drugs, prostitution, and robbery. He formed a gang in Boston and ended up in prison in 1946: in his 21st year he was a school drop out, a drug addict, a loser.

It was while incarcerated that Malcolm came to understand how he had been isolated and rendered powerless other than as a source of vulgar naked violence. In this depth he experienced one of the great reversals of the 20th century, the rehabilitation and conversion of a hardened criminal. He met Bimbi, a prison intellectual, and was introduced to Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. These two men guided him to self emancipation, reading and writing his way to intellectual growth, and to a reversal of habits to reinforce a new life style and moral code. He went into prison a degenerate criminal and after seven years was a model of commitment, dedication, and discipline

when he was released in 1952. He was now a whole cleansed man, moving in the path of his father. Malcolm was becoming a Black nationalist organizer attempting to save Black people from the destruction of a white racist society.

For the next 12 years Malcolm became the main spark for the nation of Islam to grow from 400 to 40,000 members, with Temples organized in virtually every major city in the United States. Malcolm went to Detroit first, where his brothers were Ministers in the Nation of Islam, and then he went on to Chicago, where he lived and studied with Elijah Muhammad. He was assigned to lead the Temple in New York^{City} and then became the national representative of the organization. Inside Elijah Muhammad ruled supreme, but outside the Black community increasingly came to know the Nation through Malcolm's voice.

Malcolm was silenced December 3, 1963 and he formally announced his independence from the Nation of Islam on March 8, 1964. There have been many points of view expressed about this rupture. Malcolm reports most clearly that the student and the leader each failed in each other's terms. Muhammad failed by violating his moral code by fathering "outside" children by his young secretaries, and Malcolm failed by violating Muhammad's order to remain silent on the assassination of Kennedy the US president. Another major point of view is that the underlying tension had to do with a power struggle in the organization in anticipation of the old leaders death. There was tension between the old conservative ministers and members from before the 1960's and those who joined in era of a more militant activist movement,

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tension between the National headquarters bureaucracy and the dynamic expanding east coast under Malcolm's leadership, and between the extended family of the old leader and the emergence of a new family dynasty around Malcolm.

After leaving the Nation of Islam, for the next year Malcolm spent nearly 6 months abroad, and the rest of the time criss crossing the country, for speaking engagements, tv interviews, and organizational meetings. He led the formation of the Muslim Mosque INC. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. In this last year Malcolm emerged as an international representative of the Black liberation movement in the US, and a leading symbol of militant anti-imperialism for the entire African world, and for progressive third world peoples, organizations, and governments as well. Malcolm turned every progressive forum into a classroom, an arena of ideological combat and political mobilization. Every enemy of his enemy became a potential friend, and this extended to all anti-imperialists and socialists, including white people. However, after several attempts, Malcolm X was assassinated. This too remains a mystery in fact, though it is all too clear who benefited from this evil deed.

What can we learn from this life? First, he experienced and overcame all of the major social obstacles that are supposed to stop us, the ones the sociologists explain are the reasons why Blacks remain at the bottom. Second, he emerged as a significant force on the American and world political scene from within the radical tradition of Black people demonstrating a latent power of an independent Black historical reality. And, third, out of this

particular Black reality Malcolm emerged to at least begin chart-
ing a path leading to a universal project for human emancipation. ① alt
what he would call world brotherhood and justice. 196