

Anti-Literacy Laws

by Trude Diamond

Anti-literacy legislation outlaws the teaching of literacy to a group or groups of people. Laws prohibiting the education of Blacks persisted through the Jim Crow era (post-Civil War through 1968) but began during slavery, after abolitionist David Walker's 1829 publication of *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, which openly advocated rebellion, and Nat Turner's slave rebellion of 1831. [1] Anti-literacy laws existed in all the slave states except Maryland and Kentucky before and during the American Civil War, prohibiting education for slaves, freedmen, and in some cases all people of color. The concern that engendered these laws was that if slaves were literate, they could forge documents of freedom, successfully seek freedom, and eliminate the vast source of free labor. [2] The laws also existed in non-slave states. In 1833, when black and white abolitionists founded a boarding school for African-American girls in Canterbury, Connecticut, the state government prohibited the education of "colored students who were not inhabitants of the state," and the school was burned down shortly thereafter. [3]

After slavery, share cropping required the workers, mostly Black, who worked in exchange for a share of the crop, to purchase from the landowner supplies, food and equipment, which the landowner marked up exorbitantly. Lacking an education, the sharecropper could be told that there was little to no profit to share, perpetuating the system of the landowners' dominance over the laborers. This system created a generation of largely illiterate people. The interpretation of the 1896 Plessy v Ferguson decision resulted in schools that were separate but definitely not equal, perpetuating the system of dominance and suppression. Books were frequently out-of-date, and Black teachers had larger class sizes, less equipment and significantly lower pay than White teachers. [3]

The assumption that Blacks are intellectually inferior to Whites is, of course, disproven by the very fact that Whites felt the need to prohibit their education. But that assumption remains subconsciously in the minds of many United States citizens today. In the late 20-teens, the Brookings Institution conducted a survey on "Black-White, Hispanic-White, and wealthy-poor gaps" that included a question about how people currently explain those gaps. In response to the question "How much of the difference in test scores between White students and Black students can be explained by discrimination against Blacks or injustices in society?" nearly half (44%) of the respondents chose "None," and only 10% chose "A great deal." [4]

Everyone has a lot more to learn.

Resources:

1. [Jim Crow Laws](#) (History.com)
2. [Anti-Literacy Laws – There were laws against teaching Blacks to read?](#) (AmazingBlackHistory.com)
3. [Anti-Literacy Law](#) (definition & laws in southern US states) (Turkaramamotoru.com)
4. [The Banality of Racism in Education](#) (Brookings.edu)