

Leading black education historian sets record straight

Brian Mickelson

By some accounts, the achievement gap between blacks and whites is driven in part by cultural misperceptions that communities of color do not share the same values on education as mainstream society.

But according to James D. Anderson, professor and head of the department of educational policy at the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, that couldn't be further from the truth.

Anderson, a leading scholar on the history of education in African American communities and the author of the award-winning book "The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935," casts some of the blame on the "gap hysteria" that started around the late 1990s.

"Everybody was talking about it," he said. "The president was talking about it, governors were talking about it. So I decided to do some work on the historical context of the achievement gap, understanding it over time and trying in part to, if not erase, then reduce some of the hys-

teria surrounding it."

During his research, he discovered an all too common and convenient scapegoat: the nation's misconception that the achievement

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— James Anderson

gap could be blamed on the African American community.

"It's a subject that gets grossly distorted because it's an easy answer," Anderson said. "It's easy for people to say, 'Well, the problem is their culture; they don't value education.' And

you get these invidious comparisons to high-achieving Asian students or West Indian students or even African immigrant students; that these students and their parents value education. In contrast to that, people point to the African American communities and say that there's drugs, gangs or single parent households, and blame the culture."

Anderson made his points clear in Boston during the recent "Race, Education and Democracy" Lecture and Book Series held at Simmons College. Sponsored by Beacon Press, which plans to publish a book of Anderson's lectures, the series aimed to provide historical evidence supporting African Americans' longstanding commitment to education, which dates back to the days of slavery.

When he first began writing his book, Anderson read slave diaries and found one pervasive theme — an insatiable desire to become literate.

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Ekua Holmes (right) acted as exhibition coordinator for the art gallery at the Piano Factory on Tremont Street, March 25, 2007. The exhibition celebrated contemporary works by Boston's female artists, including Maddu Huacuja (left), who discussed her most recent work. (John Keys photo)

HICCUP a slam dunk, gets b-ball court built

Brian Mickelson

March Madness is the time of the year for millions of college basketball fans to watch the best teams in the country compete for a national championship.

But for the youths living in Bos-

ton's Harbor Point Housing Development, basketball is much more than just a game.

To them, basketball is a vital part of the Healthy Initiative Collaborative-Community University Partnership (HICCUP), a program charged with teaching them about leadership, re-

sponsibility and community activism.

These kids, most ranging in age from 9 to 17, have met every Wednesday for the past five years at the Walter Denney Youth Center and Geiger Gibson Community Health Center with students from the University of Massachusetts Boston and their project leader, associate professor Joan Arches. Since its inception, the group has had one simple goal: getting a basketball court built in or around Harbor Point as a means of getting youth off the streets and giving them something fun and pro-

ductive to do.

And after five years, they were still waiting.

In the program's first year, HICCUP members conducted surveys and began drafting a proposal for the court, to be built on the rarely used tennis courts in Harbor Point. But when they presented the proposal — and 400 signatures from community members supporting the courts — to the Tenants' Task Force, Harbor Point's management council, their request was refused.

"Initial problems were security,

hours of operation and cost," said HICCUP member Arthur "Bookie" Jones.

Although they were discouraged, the HICCUP kids decided to try for a new location — the John W. McCormack Middle School in Dorchester. They wrote letters to Mayor Thomas M. Menino, held bake sales and car washes to raise funds, and last year organized a Halloween party for the community's senior citizens. They even used visual aides to communicate their concerns about the state

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Nobel Prize winner and Nigerian literature laureate Wole Soyinka (center), along with other protesters, march through a major street in Lagos, Nigeria, Sept. 14, 2005. Police watched from open-backed trucks as thousands of Nigerians marched to

protest steep rises in domestic fuel prices, heading toward the Lagos state governor's office to present their grievances in a petition. Soyinka has long been an advocate for action against injustices in his native Nigeria. (AP photo/George Osodi)

Wole Soyinka: 'The writer is first a citizen'

Dulue Mbachu

LAGOS, Nigeria — When Nigerian Nobel literature laureate Wole Soyinka contemplates the role of a writer in society, he defines it in terms of action.

In 1965, upset that a politician who had rigged the vote was about to claim victory in a radio broadcast, Soyinka, then 31 and already a famous writer, stormed the radio station armed with a pistol, and substituted the politician's tape with one denouncing the usurper.

Arrested and charged, Soyinka was acquitted on a technicality. For the writer, poet and playwright, now age 73, it was one incident in a long career of politics — interspersed with arrests, spells in jail and years of exile — combined with a literary and teaching career.

"There came that moment when the robbery of the people's voice was about to be legitimized," Soyinka, recalling the event, told The Associated Press in an interview in Lagos. "And I happened to be one of maybe three, four, five people who knew. It was a moment when an individual had to take a decision ... take stock of yourself and act."

Soyinka's most recent arrest was in 2004, when he was taken by police amid swirls of tear gas for participating in a protest in Lagos, Nigeria's biggest city, against President Olusegun Obasanjo's government. He was released without charge hours later.

Age has not slowed the writer, whose hoary Afro and matching white beard are recognizable around the world. In between lecture tours, a recent residency at Harvard Univer-

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