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EDUCATING BLACK YOUTH FOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Democratic Economic Participation and School Reform Practices and Policies

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School reform is complex and multidimensional. Much attention has been given to urban school reform, particularly regarding equitable school financing, increasing teacher training and credentials, smaller classroom size, curriculum reform (either for more prescribed directed teaching, or for more arts and culture in the curriculum), enhancing school-community partnerships, improving parent and family resources, and increasing supplemental education. Most of those reforms are found to have had impact over time (see, e.g., Danielson, 2003; Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Glasser, 1989; Gordon, Bridglall, & Meroe, 2005). One focus, however, that is continually neglected in curricular reform is economic content, and the connections not just between the political economy of schooling and school achievement but between the ways economic theory and practice are taught (or not taught) in schools, as well as the connections between economics education, educational achievement, and motivation.

In the 21st century, economic inequality remains a blight on our society as well as a societal challenge. The systemic challenges to democratic economic participation for African American students are daunting and belie the myth of achievement through hard work alone. It is crucial, therefore, to understand not only what skills and mastery our current economic system requires schools to develop but also the possible economic experiences our schools could make available if the curricula were relevantly transformed (see Gordon Nembhard, 2005; Skilton-Sylvester, 2003). Teaching African American students the “inspiring” economics of alternative development strategies and the cooperative model increases their academic skills, helps them to think more innovatively, and empowers them to be change makers in their communities.

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My exploration into teaching democratic economic participation at both the high school and college levels leads me to investigate innovative economic practices in primary and secondary schools as well as strategies for teaching alternative economics at the postsecondary school level as examples of how the use of transformative economics curricula enhance both schooling and community development in African American communities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Black students increase academic confidence, motivation, and sometimes achievement as they learn certain economic content and practice alternative economic development in a school setting (Gordon Nembhard, 2005; Skilton-Sylvester, 1994).¹ They learn about economics as a transformative body of knowledge and experience entrepreneurship and working with alternative economic structures so that they have more options when they leave high school and/or college. At the very least, these experiences enhance their credentials in the larger world, often leading to greater personal and community well-being and deeper school-community partnerships. The potential for increasing school achievement is high.

In my preliminary investigation into this relationship, I note that African American students who are involved in cooperative businesses and alternative economic activities in high schools and middle schools, for example, often better apply what they have been learning in a variety of subjects, learn entrepreneurship and team work, may stay in school longer, and often go on to college having earned some of their own money to attend college (Gordon Nembhard, 2005; Pang, Gordon Nembhard, & Holowach, 2006). In addition, these student entrepreneurs often provide needed services to their community through their businesses, contribute to the development of their communities, develop leadership skills, and train other students (Gordon Nembhard & Pang, 2003). Therefore, expanding the type of economics education also expands the purpose of education beyond being just for individual achievement and preparation for future employment and higher education. A school's larger purposes can now include meaningful school-community partnerships, community and economic development, and social change through economic transformation. African American students learn how to create economic opportunities for

themselves and their communities by engaging in democratic economic activity, at the same time that they continue their education.

Implications for education policy include the promotion of entrepreneurship, economics and cooperative economics education, and cooperative business experiences in curriculum development and teacher training; and the allocation of adequate funds for these activities.²

In the first section of this chapter, I offer four major reasons why adding more economics and alternative economic analyses and experiences to the school curriculum is a strategy that may increase African American students' school achievement, facilitate genuine school-community partnerships, and enhance community economic development. The second section of the chapter is an exploration of the economic content in high school social studies and economics classes, with a focus on the lack of education about alternative and cooperative economics. In the next sections, I summarize the kinds of experiences African American students have practicing cooperative economics in their schools and in school-related programs and introduce a discussion about teaching alternative economics in college courses, particularly in African American Studies' departments and for schools of education. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of some implications for school reform policy and societal economic benefits.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHING ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS AND ENGAGING AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH IN COLLECTIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Expanding the economic content and rigor of the school curriculum by including alternative economic theories and practices is important to African American students for several reasons: (1) additional and often different kinds of skills are needed to prepare students to function in the current (and future) deindustrialized economy; (2) the number and type of economic inequalities are increasing, which limits the effectiveness of academic achievement; (3) local economic and community building challenges also reduce the effectiveness of academic achievement but

provide pedagogic opportunities; and (4) participatory democracy in the 21st century requires economic literacy.

First, the requirements of the “new economy” (a deindustrial global information-based network) suggest that what we teach and what students experience in school should correspond better to their economic needs. Specifically, in terms of African American students, it is important that the curriculum be aligned with the needs of marginalized communities for the purposes of both social mobility and social change.³ While many interpret this to mean that curricula should focus on more technical skills,⁴ or more vocational education, “cooperative education” (matching students with business internships), and junior achievement programs aligned with the corporate agenda,⁵ my research suggests that schools include political economic analyses and alternative economic experiences for their students as part of a transformative curriculum. The curriculum can better prepare African American students to be more proactive economic actors in a very competitive and ever-changing economic milieu if it includes the study of the current economic system, the economic conditions students experience, and engages students in creating economic development opportunities in their communities.

What is this changing economic milieu? Over the past 30 years or more, the U.S. economy has been shifting from being based on manufacturing to one based on service; from production dependent on craft to a dependency on technology and information; and from being domestically centered to an expanding international, multinational, and global transnational focus. This has changed both the nature and the requirements of work in the United States, yet school curricula have not changed commensurately. The consequences have been particularly severe for African American youth (Darity & Mason, 1998; Gordon Nembhard, 2000; Skilton-Sylvester, 2003; Williams, 2000). African Americans continue to be left behind both academically and economically. Skilton-Sylvester (2003) notes,

The question of whether the information economy and the “new work order” will leave behind the urban ghetto poor is really no longer a matter of speculation. It has happened, and the question for educators is whether we will find ways to push back the growing inequality. (p. 3)

Current conditions in industry suggest that students now need to be trained more flexibly, to “think on their feet,” apply knowledge in a variety of contexts, use technology, communicate well, and be team players who can also be leaders (Haynes & Gordon Nembhard, 1999), and to “do the thinking between the tasks” (Skilton-Sylvester, 2003). Many public and inner-city school districts, however, are embracing directed learning and standards-based reforms that give “lip service” to some of these skills, but do not actually facilitate problem solving or democratic decision making. Too often, the high level skills are not being taught.

While opportunities to participate in democratic economic decision making may be limited, the returns of having such a skill are relatively high for both employees and employers, when appreciated. For example, occupations that require more autonomy and decision-making opportunities pay higher salaries (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004; Wright & Dwyer, 2000/2001), and businesses prosper when such skills and relationships are nurtured among employees (Case, 2003; Fenton, 2002; Krimerman & Lindenfeld, 1992; Levine & Tyson, 1990). In addition, deindustrialization and the decline in steady well-paying jobs means that young people must be prepared to take their careers into their own hands, create their own opportunities, and rely less on finding that one good long-term employer, who no longer exists.

Second, our economic system is becoming more unequal as the wealthy become wealthier and the poor, poorer (Davies, Sanstrom, Shorrock, & Wolff, 2006). In the United States, the net worth of African American families, for example, is only about 15.7% of the average wealth of White families (Gordon Nembhard & Chiteji, 2006), and income inequality persists. Economics education in high school and college is important if we want to empower African American students to understand the system and how to make change in it.

Third, with increasing globalization and the movement of industry and finance across national borders, local economies struggle to maintain their residents’ standards of living. Many of the localities in the United States where African Americans are concentrated, for example, are experiencing decreased economic activity and a loss of resources. Many central city areas have few jobs, little formal official economic

activity and even fewer financial services. Those that are revitalizing are doing it by gentrifying—moving out the long-term low-income residents and small businesses of color and replacing them with middle- and upper-income Whites and large corporations or their franchises. Our young people can be encouraged to fill the resource void in their neighborhoods by becoming involved in community building and community-based economic development during their school years and once they graduate (Gordon Nembhard & Pang, 2003). This will help them economically and can also help their families remain in their neighborhoods.

Schutz (2006) suggests that urban schools not only use community collaborations “to participate in struggles against the exclusionary dynamics of the market, governments, industry, and the like, that prevent even accomplished students from advancing,” but also help their students to find “other paths for survival and success” (p. 727). I am finding that early involvement in entrepreneurship, business development, and democratic management in their communities gives African American students more options as they face a shrinking traditional economy and persistent racial, class, gender, and regional economic inequality. This is one way that schools can help African American students create other paths for survival and success. Cotton (1992) addresses the importance of collective economic action:

Interdependent Black utilities or material well-being is . . . better realized as Black inter- and intra-community cooperation or “Black community help” [rather than “Black self help”]. For if each Black person’s material well-being is dependent on that of all other Blacks then community cooperation rather than individualistic competition should prevail as an economic behavioral norm in the Black community. (p. 24)

Involving African American students in cooperative economic enterprises thus help develop such an economic behavioral norm.

Such involvement also engages African American students in community building and community development that benefits their families and neighborhoods as well as their schools and themselves. While some African American students come to school with a community

orientation, interested in bettering or being involved in their community, others need opportunities to become more involved in their communities. The development of a school or community business can provide outlets that allow them to become involved. Helping students to organize democratic workplaces and own and manage their businesses cooperatively involves them in their communities and gives them experience with democratic participation and collective decision making. This is a strategy that addresses the need for a “collective sense of community and shared destiny” that Schutz (2006) concludes is crucial for inner-city schools to develop in their students. He argues that “only by establishing roots and making commitments to their communities can youth begin to envision long-term membership in the local as a concrete option for them” (p. 727). Similarly Gordon (2005) recommends that “the supplemental educator can utilize the impulse to resistance that is a stumbling block to academic achievement within schools to motivate students to take part in and learn from these programs of instruction” (p. 99). He finds that

through these programs, students will develop, in the service of resistance, critical thinking, literacy, and other skills and knowledge that can also be utilized to achieve academic success. Programs such as these [with political goals] will demonstrate to students that many of the skills taught in schools do have potential for use on the behalf of their communities and themselves. (pp. 99–100)

Moreover, educators are finding a correlation between vibrant school-community partnerships and student achievement. Schutz (2006) finds, for example, that

a growing collection of scholars, often from very different corners of the field, have increasingly come to understand that without robust community participation there is little hope that most comprehensive school reform efforts can be sustained over the long term. (p. 726)

Forging genuine partnerships, however, is difficult to achieve. Schutz contends that

despite limited research, participation in a range of community development efforts seems to be a

critical method of rooting schools more deeply in their local environments. Scholars, educators, and community leaders must give more attention, however, to efforts that harness the myriad resources of youth. In general, community-based efforts seem much more promising than those dependent on the altruism of schools for fostering more “authentic” forms of participation. (p. 725)

Involving students directly in their communities—problem solving, developing relationships, and creating businesses—harnesses the resources of youth and contributes to building more authentic school-community partnerships.

Fourth, participatory democracy requires some level of economic sophistication, if only for the training of productive citizens. Campaign finance inequities and the power of wealth to control lobbyists and candidates undermine grassroots political participation. In addition, as more companies practice workplace democracy, and many jobs require flexible thinking and employee participation, there is growing agreement that economics is an important general prerequisite subject matter in high school and college (Rosenzweig, 2000; Skilton-Sylvester, 2003). With increasing calls for government, nonprofit, and even corporate transparency and accountability, economic literacy becomes increasingly important.

These points suggest that students, and particularly African American students, who gain some facility in economics and learn to be proactive economic agents (for themselves and their neighborhoods), work collectively, and think “out of the box,” are better prepared in and out of school for a variety of contingencies. This is important because changes in our economic system have not eliminated economic discrimination and inequality, although the nature and manifestation of these disparities may be different. If education is to be one of the solutions, then educating African American students about the nature of the economic system and about alternative economic strategies, and providing them with opportunities to develop and experience innovative practices, are crucial pedagogic tools. Such innovations will contribute to the overall development of Black youth as well as to social change in African American communities.

HIGH SCHOOL ECONOMICS AND A MISSING COMPONENT: COOPERATIVE ECONOMICS

Economics education appears to be a growing field in public education. Over a decade ago, Grimes (1994) wrote,

The results suggest that students in public schools may learn more economics than students in private schools (holding everything else constant, including student ability, aptitude, and prior exposure to economic concepts.) Thus, public schools appear to be doing a better job in the teaching of economics than private schools do. (p. 27)

Moreover, Walstad and Rebeck (2000) note an increase in economic education for students of color:

In 1994, a significantly higher percentage of high school graduates who were black, Hispanic, or Asian/Pacific Islanders took economics relative to those who were white. These percentages increased dramatically over the years, especially for Hispanic students. A likely reason for this increase is that the states that have mandated economics (such as New York or California) have higher proportions of these racial or ethnic groups relative to states that have not mandated economics courses. (p. 98)

In sum, students of color as well as public school and urban students, and those in the college track, are more likely to take an economics course in high school. The question is what kind of economics is being taught?

Forty-six percent of all high school graduates take a course titled “economics” before they receive their diplomas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). While there are no basic national or even statewide standards for what to include in an economics curriculum, the National Council on Economics Education (NCEE) delineates 20 “voluntary content standards” for economics courses from the 4th to 12th grades. The growing scholarship portraying economics as an analysis and decision-making tool is reflected in each of the principals (Siegfried & Meszaros, 1998). The standards reflect mainstream economic thought and highlight issues of scarcity, marginal analysis, competition, rationality, trade specialization, investment strategies, and the role of government.

Traditional economic content in school curricula, however, ignores information about labor market discrimination (racial and gender discrimination in the workplace), and its consequences. Therefore, Black students may not learn to recognize current signs of economic discrimination or to develop strategies to combat the discrimination. This handicaps Black students' knowledge about structural racism and how to address it. Black students may believe that if they do not succeed, especially once they achieve the academic credential, it is their own fault. This lack of knowledge may result in a failed opportunity to provide Black students with tools such as political economic analysis to help them uncover, understand, and navigate through structural inequalities and institutional discrimination and to introduce them to concepts such as cooperative economics, community ownership, and collective action that direct them to achievable solutions.

Additionally, typical economics curricula tend to ignore the subtle as well as obvious interdependencies, supports, and collaborations involved in economic activity and focus on individual action—the single entrepreneur or the single consumer. Economics education students rarely learn about different ownership structures and alternative community economic development strategies, whether in high school or college, even though they are widely used and have an impressive success rate. Economics education tends to ignore social and community entrepreneurship, and the alternative business structures that arise from such entrepreneurship, although attention is paid to a traditional perspective on entrepreneurship.

Left out of the equation, for example, are the cooperative enterprise, the social entrepreneur—those businesses and entrepreneurship activities that are created and produced through the joint efforts of partners and teams for the benefit of the group and the community.⁶ These alternative structures are entrepreneurial, innovative, creative, and viable.⁷ The bias against cooperatives is reflected in the most commonly used textbooks. Hill's (2000) survey of 19 leading Canadian and American introductory economics textbooks finds that nine, or about half of them, mention cooperatives. Eight include some analysis of cooperatives, but not one of the textbooks include more than a page describing or analyzing cooperatives. This is despite the fact

that the “[r]esearch about co-ops has expanded considerably in the last few decades [and] . . . the example of co-operative firms raise a variety of interesting positive and normative questions” (Hill, 2000, p. 287).

Cooperatives are often a response to market failure (affordable goods or services are not readily available or provided by private companies or public enterprises) and economic marginalization (certain populations or communities lack access to certain markets or are discriminated against in certain markets). The cooperative model helps address market failure and equitable development in urban and rural areas, asset building among low-resource people, greater worker participation and control at the workplace (Gordon Nembhard, 2004a). African American students and their communities can use cooperative business ownership as an alternative economic development strategy in the face of economic discrimination, lack of employment, and urban decline. This is empowering and motivating. Few African Americans, however, are exposed to the model or know the history of African American cooperative ownership (Gordon Nembhard, 2004b). Learning about cooperative businesses and their potential benefits increase the relevance of the economics curriculum and can be exciting to African American students. This omission is therefore glaring and shortsighted.

Also missing in economics education is the economic agency of African Americans. Too often entrepreneurship is viewed as something African Americans do not or cannot practice; and economic innovation is only recognized as something that can be accomplished by Whites. Broadening the purview of economics education to include for African American students, therefore, expands their vision of what they can accomplish as economic agents.

I study cooperative enterprise development and community-based economic development based on democratic economic participation.⁸ I examine ways that entrepreneurship training and the experience of running cooperative businesses help African American students gain important knowledge and skills for participation in the economy as well as their academic achievement and their leadership in economic transformation. There is increasing evidence that Black students who engage in entrepreneurial projects, especially cooperative businesses,

gain benefits such as more confidence, increased general and technical skills, more motivation to learn, and incentive (and sometimes funding) to go on to college (Brooks & Lynch, 1944; Dorson, 2003; Food From the 'Hood, 2005; Gordon Nembhard, 2005; Nagel, Shahyd, & Weisner, 2005; Skilton-Sylvester, 1994). Participation in and creation of cooperative business endeavors teach students business, math, research and communication skills, resourcefulness and problem solving, teamwork, and facilitation skills needed to participate in democratic enterprises. At the same time, participation in cooperative businesses also fosters concern for community and facilitates community-building strategies among youth (Gordon Nembhard & Pang, 2003; Pang et al., 2006).

Curriculum development sensitive to the needs of democratic businesses can combine teaching critical thinking, problem solving, and team building, along with the necessary technical and business skills (Skilton-Sylvester, 2003).⁹ Schools can facilitate experiences that develop good learning habits and creative, flexible thinking by teaching cooperative economics and providing cooperative entrepreneurship experiences. Through school-based cooperative economic experiences, African American youth can also become active participants in democratic enterprises and civil society.

As the number of democratic businesses increase, primary and secondary schools continue to lag behind in teaching students how to participate and operate in such a climate (see Skilton-Sylvester, 2003), and teacher education programs still do not adequately prepare teachers to prepare their students for democratic economic participation. Cooperation is included as an eighth-grade-level benchmark, for example, in the NCEE guidelines pertaining to collective bargaining and labor unions, but not as a business organizing principle, an entrepreneurial response to a business problem, or a community economic development strategy. In addition, cooperative economics is taught in some farming communities in schools and during the summer, usually through or with the help of cooperative associations and farmer's unions. Wisconsin's law that teachers take a course in cooperatives is an important first step but appears not yet to translate into significant co-op education in that state's public schools. In Canada, particularly in Quebec Province, public

schools are increasingly teaching cooperation and cooperative economics from preschool to high school (I. St. Pierre, personal interview, October 23, 2003). These are still limited and isolated cases. The norm is to ignore cooperatives and democratically run businesses in economics education and in school curricula.

The next section provides several examples of programs that help youth of color incorporate cooperative business development into their school experience to enhance the curriculum, gain skills, raise money to attend college, and contribute to the revitalization of their communities.

PRACTICING COOPERATIVE ECONOMICS AMONG BLACK YOUTH

The lack of cooperative education in the high school curriculum may be a significant oversight particularly for youth of color. Inner-city youth of color, for example, are likely to experience a lack of capital, a lack of access to capital (loans), to experience racial discrimination in the workplaces, and to live in an economically underserved or underdeveloped community. At the same time, they may have strong bonds with their peers and interest in helping their communities. Cooperative business development is a viable strategy to help Black students creatively bring capital to a demand, to produce a good or service on their own terms. Educating inner-city youth not only in economic decision making and firm structure but also about cooperatives can help them to use peer bonds in legitimate businesses. These businesses allow them to work together, share ideas, learn skills, earn money, and minimize financial risks. Cooperatives facilitate entrepreneurial activity as the engine of economic growth and originality. There are tremendous barriers to entry in starting businesses in inner cities such as raising the necessary start-up money, finding space and affording a good location, training employees and managers, and securing clients. A strong, creative economics education curriculum that includes the study of cooperatives and a practicum in business development can help students expand their economic potential by exposing them to a variety of economic business options, increasing their skill sets, and reducing barriers to entry. School-based cooperative businesses also face fewer barriers since space is usually provided by

the school, and sometimes funding and clientele are secured by the school.

School-based cooperative businesses range from in-class role playing and model city experiments such as “Sweet Cakes Town” described by Skilton-Sylvester (1994); to schoolwide credit unions and school stores, to school-based and established farmers markets and buying clubs, and other businesses and projects that operate on school grounds during the school day, after school, and during summer programs. In addition, I include youth development programs initiated outside schools using students from a particular school or class or that provide services, workshops, or training to school-age children, sometimes in a school setting, during or after school, or in summer programs. The examples in this section focus on school-based programs serving predominantly African American students in low-income urban areas.

Incorporating entrepreneurial education in inner-city schools is not new. One study finds that inner-city youths have been quite receptive to this education. Kourilsky and Esfandiari (1997) conducted an empirical study on entrepreneurship education and lower socioeconomic Black high school sophomores. The study was based on the survey conducted by Gallup (1996) on Black high school students’ attitudes and knowledge with respect to entrepreneurship education. The study confirmed that Black lower-income students know little about entrepreneurship, recognize their knowledge gap, and, by an 84% positive response, want more entrepreneurship education in schools. The results of their study confirm that “appropriate curricular innovation can significantly affect the acquisition of entrepreneurship concepts and skills by lower socioeconomic black students” (Kourilsky & Esfandiari, 1997, p. 212).

There are also historical examples. The young people’s branch of the Consumers’ Cooperative Trading Company, for example, a Black-owned cooperative enterprise in Gary, Indiana, operated its own ice-cream parlor and candy store in the 1930s. In addition, members of Consumers’ Cooperative held weekly educational meetings for 18 months before opening any of their businesses. In 1933, they instituted a cooperative economics course in Roosevelt High School’s evening school. By 1936, it had the largest enrollment of any academic class offered by the night school (Hope, 1940).

At the national level, in the early 1930s the Young People’s Cooperative League connected Black cooperative movements from around the country and helped young people start cooperatives (Schuyler, 1932). Ella Jo Baker was the League’s first Executive Director and was a champion of youth development and cooperative education for youth. During the 1930s and 1940s, some African American-run schools and several “Negro colleges and universities” were experimenting with cooperative business ventures and teaching cooperative economics (Brooks & Lynch, 1944; Pitts, 1950).

More recently, cooperative entrepreneurship is being fostered in some schools as part of the school gardening experience. In the Fall of 1992, students from Crenshaw High School in South Central Los Angeles revitalized the school garden to help rebuild their community after the 1992 uprising and, in particular, to donate the food to the homeless. After turning a profit from selling in a farmer’s market the produce they grew in the school gardens, they focused on the economic potential of their project. They developed a business plan to produce salad dressing. Their business, “Food From the ’Hood” began selling salad dressing made from what they grew in the school garden. Food From the ’Hood is managed by the students and run similarly to a cooperative business. At least 50% of the profits are saved to award scholarships to students who wish to attend college. Over the past 10 years, 77 student managers have graduated and were awarded more than \$180,000 in college scholarships (Dorson, 2003; Food from the ’Hood, 2005).

So Fresh and So Clean is a student owned company out of The Learning Tree Cultural Preparatory School in Bronx, New York (Nagel et al., 2005). Students began with a school garden and later decided to make soap out of the excess herbs from the garden. They farm during the summer school session, receive entrepreneurship training in the fall, and produce the soap. They also began to make shampoo and insect repellent. While students from a variety of grades participate in the gardening, the eighth graders use the business development, production, and sale of the product for their senior project before graduating to high school. They are assisted by a business advisor who helps each eighth grade class plan and execute her or his business.

Similarly, the University of Pennsylvania has partnered with the West Philadelphia Partnership

and Philadelphia Public Schools on a school-based community health promotion collaboration, the Urban Nutrition Initiative (UNI, www.urbannutrition.org). The interdisciplinary program uses college students who are learning horticulture and nutrition to teach high school students horticulture and nutrition. High school students teach middle school students, who teach elementary school students about health, nutrition, and business development. This is a learning-by-doing experience for all involved, at every level. It is a “dynamic educational process based on experiential learning and community problem-solving” integrated with public service (UNI, 2002, p. 3). The program combines a community health curriculum, school-based urban gardens, and entrepreneurial and business development.

The students, the majority of whom are African American, combine learning about nutrition, teaching nutrition to others, growing healthy food, and creating businesses to sell and market the food. The businesses they create are cooperative purchasing clubs, food co-ops, and farmer’s markets. As part of the Center for Community Partnerships’ summer jobs program (using school district funds) in 2003, for example, six students from University City High School Eco Tech learning community worked with UNI to develop plans for a food cooperative in the neighborhood (Rossi, 2003). The purpose was to supplement the Saturday farmer’s market that the UNI had already established. Students and the community wanted to provide affordable healthy food for the neighborhood on a daily basis, as well as jobs for the students using an empowering ownership structure. Through such projects, the young participants develop entrepreneurship and many related skills (math, science, marketing, and communication). Students engage in school and community service through a “democratic collaborative process” (UNI, 2002, pp. 8, 3).

Another project combines youth entrepreneurship and sustainable transportation. Chain Reaction is a project of the EcoDesign Corps of Shaw EcoVillage in Washington, D.C., founded in 1997. Youth in the EcoDesign Corps participate by creating educational workshops and creating and implementing their own community development and urban planning projects (Shaw EcoVillage, 2005). High school students work with college-aged leaders and professional mentors.

The youth corps created Chain Reaction to educate youth about bicycle transportation; equip youth with bicycle repair skills; and to repair, recycle, and resell bicycles in the Shaw neighborhood (Shaw EcoVillage, 2005; Varney, 2003). The EcoDesign Corps used as a model a New York City youth bike repair program. Since 2001, when the full-service bicycle shop opened, about 120 youth have become active members and mechanics, cooperatively managing the business. They also run bicycle repair training workshops in schools around Washington, D.C. and sponsor in-school bike safety clubs and vocational training camps, in addition to community Bike Festivals (Varney, 2003). By 2005, six youth mechanics (each in the program for at least 2 years) had graduated to careers in the bicycle industry. More than 50 young people have been trained in basic bike repairs and safe riding techniques (Shaw EcoVillage, 2005). All revenues are reinvested to support the work of the youth mechanics and for inventory and educational workshops. Chain Reaction won the Washington Area Bicyclists Association award in 2003.

Toxic Soil Busters Co-op is a lead abatement business created and owned by youth in Worcester, Massachusetts (www.WorcesterRoots.org). As part of an extracurricular project sponsored by the nonprofit Worcester Roots, students learn about environmental hazards and environmental racism and learn to be proactive about environmental sustainability—helping to detoxify their communities and advocating for environmental policies. They produce skits that they present to other students and at community events to advertise their services, communicate their message, and educate their audiences about lead poisoning and other toxic wastes in their homes and backyards. The students first research the issue, receive training in soil cleansing, and hone their communication skills. The cooperative is a lead abatement business owned and run by the young people themselves. They provide consultation and detoxification services. While not explicitly school based, Toxic Soil Busters is part of a youth development program that combines study, policy advocacy, and economic action, with self education and public education.

These examples illustrate the range of activities available to schools and after-school programs to involve African American students

more in their own economic development as well as their community's well-being. In these examples, the students use cooperative economic principles to set up and manage their businesses that enable them to benefit materially as well as academically and personally. Preliminary analyses of these programs show that students increase academic confidence, gain academic, communication, and business skills, sustain viable businesses, and educate other students and residents about their business and their goals and mission.

ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS IN THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM

It is usually the case that only a limited number of African American high school students receive economics education and a very few have experience forming and managing their own businesses. Therefore, they typically enter college with some exposure to economics as a field of study, but very few receive exposure to alternative economic theories, cooperative economics or Black political economy, or experience with setting up their own business. Once in college, most economics departments do not teach alternative economics or cooperative economics courses, though some departments do teach political economy. I conducted a cursory investigation into economics and alternative economics courses taught to undergraduates in African American Studies departments (Gordon Nembhard, 2008), particularly looking for discussion of alternative economic paradigms and cooperative economics.

Some African American Studies programs teach courses about "race, class and gender," or "caste and class," mainly addressing labor conditions and class differences. One or two courses in a few of the departments cover economic development, mostly in Africa in relation to decolonization, and U.S. urban development. Three departments sponsor internships, placing students in community organizations. I found no courses that specifically mention cooperative economics or cooperative enterprise ownership. Many courses focus on Black intellectual history, political thought, and social change, particularly in relation to the Civil Rights Movement, without much economic analysis. I found two departments in addition to my own department that offer public policy courses.

Examining titles and course descriptions on the Web may not be the most effective method for determining course coverage and content, however. In my own example, I do teach cooperative enterprise ownership in the courses I have taught at the University of Maryland, College Park. However, in only one course—community economic development—does the course description specifically identify cooperatives. I am familiar with more than 90% of the Black economists and social scientists who study or teach cooperative economics in the United States,¹⁰ and therefore without recourse to a formal survey, I have a fairly accurate picture of what is available to students. Few campuses offer such study at all and fewer still provide in a course devoted to the topic, particularly for undergraduates—and none in courses for teacher training.

Interestingly, however, during the 1940s some Black colleges were teaching about cooperatives. Brooks and Lynch (1944) surveyed 75 "Universities, Colleges, and Junior Colleges for Negroes in the Southern States" in the fall of 1943 about courses taught on "consumer problems" and the "cooperative movement." Of the 57 institutions that responded, 37 indicated that the study of cooperatives was currently included in their curriculum. There was some overlap with respondents who considered discussion of consumer problems to be similar to teaching about cooperatives. It became clear that at least 25 or so different institutions did teach about cooperatives, with eight indicating that they taught an entire course on "the cooperative movement." Twenty-three responded that there was a cooperative organization now functioning on their campus. In addition, about twice as many of the accredited colleges as nonaccredited devoted "the equivalent of half a course or more to each of these subjects"—consumer problems and cooperatives (p. 435). The faculty was very conscious that teaching about cooperatives helped students to be more economically literate and to address problems in their communities, while developing leadership and agency. The authors conclude that the cooperative "movement does offer possibilities for the up-building of the Negro" (p. 436).

In terms of African American students, many mainstream economics departments discourage African American students from studying economics. Anecdotally, we are finding that this is because most economics teaching and course

content overemphasize mathematic analyses and use sterile theoretical models whose assumptions often ignore issues of concern to communities of color. The implications of these traditional models often lay the blame on the victims' behavior, and offer no viable solutions for suffering communities. In addition, many of the intermediate-level economics courses are designed to weed out a certain number of students—and Black students often end up among that group, without help or support to make it through.¹¹ Ijere (1972) also found that dissatisfaction with the teaching, difficulty grasping the topic, and lack of mathematics preparation explained much of why Black students were not majoring in economics in the early 1970s. Mason and wa Githinji (2008) suggest that African American Studies programs as well as economics departments house too few Black economists; thus, many Black students do not have the role models or mentors they need. As a result, many Black students lose interest in economics and/or are discouraged from taking economics courses and, therefore, miss important opportunities to engage in the national discourse on economic issues and think proactively about economic development. Even when Black economists are present in higher education, there are few opportunities to train Black students in economics, help them to earn economics degrees, or teach them about alternative economics and creative ways to address economic development. African American Studies students receive very little training in economics, political economy, or alternative economic development strategies, even if they may have been exposed to the topic.¹² Additionally, education departments do not train students in this area.

One of the first challenges, then, is to help African American students overcome their reluctance to study economics and/or think mathematically and to make certain that they enter college with the mathematics training that they need. Because they cannot avoid some mastery of statistics and mathematical concepts, it is also important that we provide African American students with extra help in mathematics and economics courses, so that these are accessible. A close second challenge is to offer innovative ways to teach economics, such as teaching political economy. A focus on political economy helps students to understand economics as a discipline that is more than just mathematics. In addition, we can provide pedagogical

experiences that help them to learn about economic innovations, as well as design and experience economic transformation that is similar to the types of innovative economics/business curricula some high schools have begun to offer.

I teach alternative economic development strategies and cooperative ownership as solutions to wealth inequality, underdevelopment, and inner-city urban redevelopment in the public policy undergraduate courses I teach in African American Studies. I challenge my students to think creatively about alternative strategies after exposing them to some examples. I ask them to review the existing strategies and the policy history and then devise a nontraditional approach. I also expect them to explain why they think their approach could work. Many of my students have difficulty with this assignment (probably because they are not asked often enough to think “out of the box”), but a few are quite thoughtful and creative. Even those who do not master the assignment well end up learning from it and thinking differently afterward.

When I teach African American public policy or community development courses, I begin with an alternative definition of economics. I also provide them with a working definition of political economy and Black political economy. Black political economy, for example, focuses on the study of the political and economic relationships relative to African American existence and applied economic strategies relative to Black communities. According to Conrad, Whitehead, Mason, and Stewart (2005), the definition of Black political economy begins with

the premise that race matters—and then proceed with an analysis of the implications of race and racism for the economic status of African Americans and for the operation of the American economy. This approach challenges the adequacy of neoclassical mainstream economic analysis as a useful paradigm in explaining the persistence of racial inequality. . . . The intellectual origins of this approach lie in the last three decades of scholarship generated by black political economists in the African Diaspora. (p. 1)

I also provide my students with an overview of how Black communities have used alternative economic development strategies throughout history. I give a short history of African American cooperative business and agricultural ownership and provide examples of how Blacks have used

cooperative ownership to provide the economic independence needed both to support their families and engage in civil rights activity in the face of racial economic, social, and political discrimination. Freedom Quilting Bee, in Alabama, for example, was started in 1966 by women in sharecropping families who needed to supplement the meager sharecropping earnings (when there were any). They sold their quilts through the cooperative that was able to buy land and build a small sewing “factory,” and a day care center. By the early 1990s, the co-op was the largest employer in their town. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the income from the cooperative enabled many of the sharecropping families to transition to their own farms. Many of the families were evicted from the leased farms by White landlords who were angry that they had registered to vote or participated in civil rights activities. The cooperative provided a safe haven and the independence needed for these families and some of their neighbors to start new—no longer dependent on the “plantation bloc.” The co-op sold or leased land to evicted sharecroppers so they could buy their own farms. At its height, Freedom Quilting Bee sold quilts around the country through the Sears catalogue and in department stores such as Bloomingdale’s (Federation of Southern Cooperatives, 1992; Freedom Quilting Bee, n.d.).

An additional strategy would be to provide students with opportunities to apply their knowledge, to work with communities on economic alternatives and community-based economic development, and to start their own cooperatives. There are examples of cooperative businesses on college campuses owned and run by the students, though few among students of color. While cooperative housing is more prevalent on college campuses, some students also own restaurants, grocery/health food stores, book stores, ticket sales, and other enterprises such as a media collective.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS: TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE ECONOMICS

Thinking like an economist involves problem solving to take the raw materials of human need and productivity, supply and demand of goods

and services, natural resource preservation, and the creation of stores of value and means of exchange, to design sustainable systems that use diverse inputs and balance competing needs. Students proficient in this special form of problem solving may become adept at entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs, acting on the principles that economics teachers espouse, are prized for their ability to combine demand, capital, and innovative thinking to add value to their own and the lives of others. Entrepreneurs are often thought of as the driving force of the U.S. economy.

African American students are not often provided the opportunity to be economic problem solvers. Too often, they are not taught entrepreneurship or encouraged to be community change makers, but rather are taught how to be good workers and follow the rules, even when it is not clear that doing so will increase their economic or personal well-being. Persistent and in some cases increasing economic inequality require that our education of Black youth be more innovative and proactive. Teaching African American students the “inspiring” economics of alternative development strategies and the cooperative model increases their academic skills, helps them to think more innovatively, and empowers them to be change makers in their communities. Schutz (2006) predicts that

only through collective struggle on the local level (and more broadly) will the “dumping grounds” of global society [central cities] be able to develop even the minimal resources necessary to provide for human development. This is a radical challenge for schools, because nearly all levels of education focus on the empowerment of relatively isolated individuals. (p. 727)

Educating African American youth about the values not just of entrepreneurship, but of collective and social entrepreneurship, and about how cooperatives can facilitate entrepreneurial activity within areas that current market forces neglect or exploit, gives them new perspectives and increases their opportunities to help themselves, their families, and their communities. With innovative economics training, African American students can increase their options to creatively solve complex problems. Economic experiences with democratic economic participation provide high school students with skills for employment, future entrepreneurship, and college—and often with earnings that help pay

the costs of higher education. Similarly, college students benefit from an economics education that encourages them to think “out of the box” as they gain economic knowledge and entrepreneurial skills.

That few economics curricula identify or expose students to the cooperative model, and the ways co-ops address current issues in economic development is perhaps understandable but shortsighted. The lack of such content in most economics curricula suggests missed opportunities both for how we train our youth and for prospects in community economic development (see Gordon Nembhard, 2005). Studying cooperative economics and democratic business structures provides an expanded analysis of the many ways that capital, management, and labor can interact, that profits or surplus can be generated and distributed, and that businesses and communities can work together. Educating African American students to think critically and innovatively, and about alternative economic development strategies, can empower them to be proactive about democratizing our economic system and transforming their neighborhoods. Skilton-Sylvester’s work (1994, 2003) also addresses these issues. He articulates a similar notion to theories that I have articulated:

The challenge facing teachers has at least two parts. First is the challenge of social change: preparing students to be active agents in changing the social structures of society. Second is the challenge of social mobility: preparing students to be successful in the *existing* social structures in the meantime. (2003, p. 5)

Teaching cooperative economics and facilitating students’ experiences developing cooperatively owned and community-based democratic businesses has the potential to achieve both goals. So far, we have anecdotal evidence in support of this theory. More empirical research is needed. There is limited research about the benefits of an education in cooperative economics for African American youth. More research is needed to gain an understanding of if and how student involvement in cooperative business ownership increases educational achievement, transition to adulthood, job acquisition, and college enrollment, as well as innovations in community economic development, for example. Education policy can promote and support more programs in schools that teach students

about economic alternatives and aid students in forming and managing their own cooperative businesses. This would also require that more teachers be trained in cooperative economics, business development and experiential learning. In addition, monies would need to be allocated to teacher training and to cover minor start-up costs to initiate the school-based businesses.

Giving African American youth opportunities to build their communities, be involved in leadership development, and study and practice economic democracy in action involves them early in economic activity and may motivate them to be academic achievers. While it is important for all students, it is particularly important for African American students to have more technical skills and advanced credentials to compete in the “new” economy; these skills and credentials will not be enough. Success in the new economy rewards a wide variety of skills and often requires participants to create their own opportunities. Moreover, economic discrimination still exists, so that being proactive about one’s place in the economy and attaining some level of economic independence are important goals. The more economic knowledge that African American students possess, the more this knowledge will benefit them. This carries over into higher education. Important goals then for higher education are to teach more African American students economics and alternative economic theories and practices, and to teach teachers how to teach alternative economics and learn how to provide economic experiences for their students. Not only does this make sense from the perspective of providing economic education to enhance their careers and generate entrepreneurship but it is also good pedagogy. Teaching African American students to be proactive “movers and shakers” in the economy can increase their engagement in academics, keep them in school and help them to help their own communities. Such economic engagement develops critical thinking, uses interdisciplinary methodologies, combines experimental and theoretical learning, promotes intellectual as well as social engagement, and emphasizes guided and self-directed research and retrieval, organization of information, and persuasive presentation of arguments. While more research demonstrating and evaluating these achievements is needed, it is clear that there are myriad benefits from teaching African American students about alternative economics and providing them with collective entrepreneurial experiences.

NOTES

1. Gordon (2005) similarly finds that involving Black students in political goals, particularly through supplementary educational programs, motivates them for academic success and develops critical thinking, literacy, and other academic skills and knowledge.

2. While funding is needed, especially to start some of these projects, successful programs are often self-financing or generate income, such as Food From the 'Hood described in Section 3 where students earn money from the sale of their product and that revenue is used both to support the continuing business and for college scholarships.

3. Skilton-Sylvester (2003) provides a thoughtful discussion of this dichotomy—both in terms of how to teach inner-city students better and more meaningfully and in terms of the tensions between teaching for social mobility versus for social change—that is, using practices associated with “progressive education” or aligning the curriculum to the needs of business (and what happens when they overlap).

4. In Gordon Nembhard (2005), I note that the necessary new skills include both highly technical skills, particularly in computer sciences and mathematics, along with communication skills, critical thinking, flexibility, and ability to work in teams. Skilton-Sylvester (2003, p. 9, note 7) refers to the abilities delineated by R. J. Murnane and F. Levy (*Teaching the New Basic Skills: Principles for Educating Children to Thrive in a Changing Economy*, 1996), which include a 9th-grade level in reading and mathematics; effective oral and written communication skills; and the ability to solve semistructured problems where hypotheses must be formed and tested, to work in groups with people of various backgrounds; and to use a personal computer at least for word processing.

5. In the 1930s and 1940s, members of the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Brotherhood of Pullman Car Porters (the first Black labor union) opposed Junior Achievement business programs for teaching Black youth “how to circumvent existing labor laws and how to oppose organized labor” (Chateauvert, 1998, p. 151). These African American women leaders promoted and formed consumer cooperatives to recirculate union/labor dollars and help union families better control access to and the quality and price of the goods and services they needed. They also developed a youth program (the Junior Economic Council) to work with young people to promote consumer education and cooperatives.

6. Cooperative businesses are enterprises owned by their members (consumers, producers, or employees) who organize the business around the production of a needed good or service, jointly own the business, and govern it democratically. Cooperative businesses operate according to a set of principles that include

open membership, “one person one vote,” returns based on use, continuous education and concern for community (see the National Cooperative Business Association, 2006; the International Cooperative Alliance, 2007). “Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity” (International Cooperative Alliance, 2007). Cooperatives are community-based businesses that anchor and increase economic activity in a local community.

7. Approximately 120 million people in the United States are members of more than 47,000 cooperatives that operate in almost every kind of industry and range in size from a Fortune 500 company to a single store front (www.ncba.coop).

8. I identify this field as Democratic Community Economics, which focuses on the study of people-centered local economic development that is community based and controlled, collaborative, democratically or at least broadly owned and governed, through a variety of structures. These structures include worker, producer, and consumer cooperatives and credit unions; community land trusts; democratic ESOPs (Employee Stock Ownership Programs) and other forms of worker ownership and self-management. Other structures include collective not-for-profit organizations involved in social entrepreneurship; community-controlled community development corporations, and community-controlled development planning and community development financial institutions.

9. More and more companies worldwide use democratic organizational structures and management-labor cooperation in operating their businesses to address increasing competition. Today's successful industries, for example, are changing from

a management system of ‘command and control’ to a system that can be described as ‘high-involvement management’—a term used to describe organizations that aspire to give employees more meaningful involvement in the organization and a stake in its performance. (Skilton-Sylvester, 2003, p. 6, partially quotes E. E. Lawler III in *High Involvement Management*, 1986)

There is increasing documentation that democratic firms, which practice flexibility, teamwork, decentralized control and participatory governance, are more effective and competitive (Levine & Tyson, 1990; see also Case, 2003; Fenton, 2002; Krimerman & Lindenfeld, 1992).

10. I am an officer on the board of directors of the National Economic Association whose members are African American economists and economists who study the African diaspora; and I have convened

the only public gathering of African American economists who study cooperative economics at a session sponsored by the NEA and one sponsored by the Cleveland Urban League in Ohio.

11. While this is anecdotal data, I cannot ignore the many students (on my campus and at other universities) who tell me that they have dropped economics or will not even pursue economic training for those reasons.

12. See the articles in the forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Black Studies* on “Black Political Economy in the 21st Century: Exploring the Interface of Economics and Black Studies.”

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