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**Economics of Education:
Supplemental Issues for the
United Nations Minority Issues Forum on
Minorities and the Right to Education**

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by

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Introduction

BlackEconomics.org[®] is an organization with specialized expertise in Black American economic issues—including education. BlackEconomics.org[®] plans to contribute to the United Nations (UN) Minority Issues Forum on Minorities and the Right to Education (henceforth, “the Forum”) that is to be convened in Geneva, Switzerland on December 15-16, 2008 by providing economic analysis of minority education issues.

All economists agree that human capital formation (education) is an important precursor to effective economic development. Consequently, the Forum is an important undertaking because it can assist the UN in forming economic developmental policies and instruments that accelerate economic development in nations that include minority populations.

Forum organizers have developed a list of very important topics to discuss. However, we take this opportunity to highlight and analyze four topics that are not on the list: (1) Measuring education output; (2) the adverse role of sports in minority education; (3) indirect adverse effects of media-based stereotypes on minority learning; and (4) stereotype threats to learning.

Measuring education output

While it is important to discuss problems and opportunities associated with minority education, a key problem/opportunity is measuring the real output of education. The Forum may help develop recommendations for enhancing educational opportunities and performance for minorities. However, current methods for measuring the real output of education are inadequate to properly track improvements that may be precipitated by implementation of those recommendations. Without adequate methods for measuring the real output of education, it is impossible to accurately assess when real progress is made in delivering educational services to minorities. Questions that surface in this regard include:

- (1) Is “pupil hours” the best measure of the real output of education?
- (2) How should pupil hours be quality adjusted (class size, teacher quality, test scores, etc.)?
- (3) Should we focus on outcomes or output when assessing the effectiveness of education delivery methods and systems?

Fraumeni *et al.* (2008) provide a good analysis of these questions.¹ It seems reasonable that the forum might recommend using available methods and future improvements that are discussed in Fraumeni *et al.* (2008) for measuring the real

¹ See Fraumeni, B., Reinsdorf, M., Robinson, B., and Williams, P. (2008), “Price and Real Output Measures for the Education Function of Government: Exploratory Estimates for Primary & Secondary Education,” *NBER Working Paper Series 14099*, June. Available on the Internet at: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14099>.

output of education and/or to suggest that the UN take action to advance research on this topic.

Adverse role of sports in the education of minorities

The confluence of many circumstances often results in an apparent over-investment in athletics by minorities, which has adverse consequences for minority educational attainment. In the case of the United States and Black Americans, the case is made that the vast majority of Black youth would experience improved long-term economic well-being if they invested less in athletics and more in education. In a recent commentary on the subject, I pondered how powerful the result would be if Historically Black Colleges and Universities would produce "More Physicists, Few Fullbacks."² Given the seemingly natural creativity of Black Americans, it stands to reason that innumerable high-quality intellects would usher forth from Black communities when the current levels of time and energy that are dedicated to athletics are redirected to the pursuit of education. The Forum should seek to determine whether over-investment in athletics is prevalent and injurious to minority education. If so, then the Forum should seek a prescription for this problem.

Indirect adverse effects of media-based stereotypes on minority learning

How can one expect a non-minority to provide fair and unbiased educational service to a minority when the former has been conditioned by media that is laden with adverse images of minorities? These images present minorities in a negative light and form the basis of negative stereotypes about minorities. A logical answer to the foregoing question is that the aforementioned expectation is irrational.

To clarify and sharpen the question with respect to Black Americans, consider the following scenario. A recent White American college graduate is appointed to teach mathematics to a class of mainly inner-city Black male high school students. The teacher grew up in a suburban Midwestern United States environment with very limited exposure to Black Americans. Her immediate residential community included no Black Americans. Her elementary and secondary schools had populations that were less than two percent Black. Blacks constituted less than five percent of her college's population. Her life-long exposure to Black Americans was primarily through media, which projected a preponderance of adverse images of Black Americans: Mainly as criminals (drug dealers, rapists, and thieves), prisoners, athletes, musicians, comedians, and law enforcement officers. Can one expect such an instructor to hold unbiased and positive expectations about educational attainment and life achievements for her students? Should one expect the teacher's attitudes about academic success for her students to affect her classroom performance and to ultimately have an impact on student educational attainment and achievement?

The above-described scenario highlights an important indirect effect of adverse stereotypical images on minorities' prospects for obtaining a high-quality education.

² See Robinson, B. (2008), "More Physicists, Fewer Fullbacks," *The Root*. Available on the Internet at: <http://www.theroot.com/id/48008>.

Another important and similar indirect effect occurs just beyond academic life and effects minorities' prospects for capturing gainful employment. An effective analysis of the economic mechanisms through which the later events flow are described in Robinson (2009).³

To counteract these scenarios and to place minority students and prospective employees on an "even playing field," it is essential that teachers and decision makers receive appropriate training to counterbalance their biases. One of the Forum's key recommendations should be that instructors of minority students receive "bias reduction" training so that instructors can prevent their biases from hampering minorities from obtaining a high-quality education.

Stereotype threats to learning

It is common knowledge that minorities reflect "stereotype threat" behavior. That is, minorities' test performance declines when a test is preceded by a reminder that "minorities traditionally exhibit sub-par test performances when compared to non-minorities." A considerable amount of good research has been performed on this concept. I recommend that, at a minimum, Forum staff members consider the following sources when analyzing minority education issues: Kang (2005); and Ayres and Brooks (2005).⁴

The fact that stereotype threat behavior is part of the education landscape, it seems important for the Forum to issue a recommendation to the UN to support research that enables scholars to develop methods for inoculating minorities against this threat.

Conclusion

It is difficult to overstate the importance of educational opportunities and actual educational attainment in improving the quality of life for minorities. Therefore, the UN is well founded in convening a forum on Minorities and the Right to Education. However, the current list of topics excludes critical issues—the resolution of which must occur if true progress is to occur in minorities' acquisition of high-quality education.

BlackEconomics.org[®] has presented four supplemental issues that warrant consideration during the Forum. This paper places the four issues in context and provides sources that provide further clarification and analysis. We hope that Forum organizers will perform due diligence and find these issues to be worthy of consideration.

³ See Robinson, B. (forthcoming in 2009), "Black Unemployment and Infotainment," *Journal of Economic Inquiry*, p. 1-20. This article is available from the author upon request until published.

⁴ See Kang, J. (2005), "Trojan Horses of Race," *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 118, No. 5; pp. 1489-1593. Available on the Internet at: <http://harvardlawreview.org/issues/118/March05/KangFTX.pdf>. Also see Ayres, I., and Brooks, R. (2005), "Does Affirmative Action Reduce the Number of Black Lawyers?" *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 57, No. 6; pp. 1807-1854.

In any event, BlackEconomics.org® stands ready to provide assistance and support during the remaining stages of the Forum's efforts to develop recommendations for the UN on minorities' right to education.

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