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The More You Know, The More You Wish You Didn't

Many have heard the expression: "Knowledge is power." However, many students could argue that increased knowledge on their social situations has become a crippling weakness. Students go to class expecting to learn the standardized curriculum, but they walk away with the new found knowledge of their inferiorities. As this phenomenon continues, students find themselves deeming knowledge as a burden and fearing the pain that understanding can bring.

When a person learns that there are outside social constructs affecting their opportunities in life, they become hypersensitive to encounters. In "Whistling Vivaldi" by Claude Steele, Steele describes the first time he "learned" he was African American. As a young child, Steele became accustomed to not being able to swim at a local pool on certain days. At that age, he deemed it an unwarranted restriction; he would later learn the reason for this limitation on his recreational time: "I found out that we black kids -- who, by the way, lived in my neighborhood and who had been until these encounters just kids couldn't go to the roller rink except Thursday nights. These segregations were hard to ignore" (2). At this moment, Steele gained a level of knowledge as to why certain limitations related to a characteristic of who he was. After giving other examples of similar situations he further states, "I didn't know what being black meant, but I was getting the idea that it was a big deal" (2). Similarly, when I was nine years old I experienced this type of limitation due to being black. After moving to a new neighborhood, my parents wanted to treat my older sister and me to a big breakfast at the local iHop. This was a big deal to two inner city kids who rarely experienced dining out. As we sat in the huge restaurant eagerly awaiting a fat stack of pancakes as advertised on television, I noticed something strange. Every waiter walked passed our table as if we weren't there. My parents told us to be patient since the restaurant was pretty packed

but as 5 minutes turned to 15, I started to question why people who arrived later than my family were already eating. It was then after a solid 20 minutes passed and the only nonwhite server approached our family I noticed the other customers were sending glares toward our table. Looking back I realize that was the moment I learned I was black, but the memory holds negativity as the child me wished I didn't know. The nine-year-old me would never imagine the more severe occasions she would face with the new found reality of what being "black" would have on her life and future.

I use these anecdotes to set a premise as to how the same burden of knowledge can be carried over into the world of academia. Identity plays a major role on how well (or poorly) a student performs in school as they balance their self potential with worldly expectations (or lack thereof). Identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them (Erikson 22). As members of the society we live in, we are constantly curious to understand who we are and what that means for the lifestyle we want to live. However, in the pursuit of that understanding we often times encounter information that disturbs our ambition. Allow me to set the scene. Imagine sacrificing social interactions for four years of high school to maintain a GPA that qualified for big name scholarships. You apply to one of the most prestigious universities in the nation, get accepted and can afford to go with the scholarships you worked hard to earn. Only to arrive on campus and be greeted with derision. Psychology professor Claude Steele noticed this event repeatedly at the University of Michigan. He openly approached students on his campus asking them about their experiences thus far. "They were proud to be students at such a strong university. Their families were proud. They had been successful in high school" (18). Though the students'

families were impressed by the scholarship they received, other classmates treated it as a weakness. The minority students felt their white counterparts didn't think they belonged at such a prestigious university. Steele noticed his minority students "worried that teaching assistants, fellow students and even faculty might see their academic abilities as less than those of other students" (19). These students were subjected to the burden of knowledge. With the realization that their classmates thought less of their academic abilities for being minorities created a looming presence that follows them throughout their academic journey. The knowledge of their skin color and the social/academic stigmas it carried made the students foster an ever growing self doubt.

The awareness of negative knowledge can lead students to behave in one of two ways. This could drive them to work harder to make up for the assumptions those around them have already formulated without knowing the students ability. Or this could lead the student to no longer strive for excellence because they have lost their self worth. A large body of research has shown that labeling and exclusion practices can create a self-fulfilling prophecy and result in a cycle of antisocial behavior that can be difficult to break (Noguera 343). Researcher Pedro Noguera states, "As they internalize the labels that have been affixed to them, and as they begin to realize that the trajectory their education has placed them on is leading to nowhere, many simply lose the incentive to adhere to school norms" (Noguera 343). In other words, when a student learns that those around them don't believe they have a chance at academic success, they stop trying to learn. Imagine if teachers handled this situation more effectively instead of "giving up" on "problem children." There is a strong possibility the same problem child would work harder academically if they didn't know that their teachers no longer believed in their abilities to succeed. Famous social reformer Frederick Douglass wielded the same double edged sword of knowledge. Eager to learn all he could as a child in hope of changing his social status, Douglass sought to teach himself to read and

write. Upon successfully acquiring the ability to read Douglass was met with an unexpected disadvantage. He stumbled across the book titled "The Columbian Orator" which gave him a deeper understanding of his social situation and what it meant to be a slave. Douglass states, "My learning to read had already come, to *torment* and *sting my soul to unutterable anguish*. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing" (2). Luckily for the United States, Douglass was able to keep pursuing education despite the pain he experienced for learning more about the world around him. That was no small feat, a weaker person would have crumbled and succumb with such odds stacked against them. Although Douglass did not cave, he does inform the reader that it was a difficult obstacle to overcome as, "In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity" (2). It may have been possible for Fredrick Douglass, but what about the thousands of others who would have cracked under the pressure. He could have easily given up like the "problem children" Noguera describes in his research paper who lacks support from their educators.

At the start of this essay I quoted Francis Bacon, from his *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597) saying knowledge is power. However, I'd like to end with a line from *The Paradise War* by Stephen Lawhead saying, "Knowledge is a burden--once taken up, it can never be discarded." The moment you become aware of something, it's challenging to behave as if you don't. There are infinitely many things to learn, and it is your choice whether you run away from knowledge like a problem child or avidly seek it, despite the difficulty it can bring.

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