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Racism and Public Education

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Racism and Public Education

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This paper will describe the present character of K-12 public education in the USA in terms of race and class and attempt to explain how racism (anti-black oppression) is a major determinant of the educational achievement gap between Blacks and Whites. In addition, it will give a general critique of the racial and class curriculum in schools.

American Culture and White Supremacy

From the slave era through the period of legal segregation to the present period of largely de-facto segregation, American society continues to operate on the premise that Blacks must be kept in a subordinate position. Hence, whatever training or education Blacks receive is basically designed to support the system of White supremacy. Historically, the American intellectual establishment has held the belief that blacks are mentally inferior to Whites. This belief is deeply ingrained among the White population. White scholars in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries claimed that this belief was based on scientific studies. Thus, they accepted this belief as a fact, which provided the justification and rationalization for White supremacy. For example, Robert Bennett Bean, a professor of anatomy at the University of Virginia Medical School attempted to provide scientific support for the wide spread view among psychologists that Blacks were innately brutal, vicious, and stupid. He maintained that the "Negro brain" developed normally as far as perception, memory, and motor responses were concerned, but logical critical thinking or the comprehension of abstract ideas were beyond its grasp because of its arrested physiological development. And Albert Bushel Hart, distinguished Harvard historian and influential figure in American scholarship, wrote that the theory that the Negro mind ceases to develop after adolescence perhaps has something to it (Gossett, 1963; Rose, 1968; Grant, 1916; Winston, 1971; Smedley, 2007). Although the White education establishment formally rejects the myth of Black mental inferiority, the evidence is abundant that blacks are viewed and treated as though they are mentally inferior. This is clearly apparent in the public school system in which the education curriculum for Blacks is inferior. This is the broad context in which racism and public K-12 education will be examined in this paper.

Education Apartheid

Racial segregation in public education is growing. Although public school enrollment is increasingly diverse, racial segregation in public education has also been increasing since 1986. Furthermore, most Blacks attend schools where the majority of students are poor. In contrast, most Whites attend schools where the majority of students are middle class. Frankenberg and Lee (2002) used exposure indices to calculate the racial isolation of Black students from White students by calculating the percentage of Black students in school of the average White student. They also investigated the racial isolation of White students to determine whether their schooling experience was becoming more integrated as the Black share of the public school enrollment continued to increase in 2000-2001. They found that since 1986, in almost every district examined, Black students have become more racially segregated from Whites in their schools. In addition, the literature suggested that Black schools were highly correlated with high-poverty schools and these schools are also associated with low parental involvement, lack of resources, less experienced and credentialed teachers, and higher teacher turnover.

Landscape of Racialized Schools

The racial composition of a public school is largely determined by the racial make up of the residents in a school district. In the United States residential space is largely racialized. In their studies, Massey and Denton (1993) analyzed how racial residential segregation is consciously imposed on Blacks to deliberately isolate them from valuable socioeconomic resources.

Powell (2001) points to historical evidence that shows that the government at all levels as well as the real estate industry deliberately designed policies to create and perpetuate racially segregated residential areas. He argues that Whites have been able to re-isolate minorities in the declining urban core and older suburbs, away from jobs, growth centers, a strong tax base, and other opportunities. He explains the creation and maintenance of racialized residential space and the concentration of poverty in predominantly Black residential areas by focusing on the central role of government in the history of sprawl, especially through its housing policy. To qualify for a loan, you had to live in a "racially homogenous community," meaning an all-White community. The government was the first to draw a red line around communities of color, prohibiting loans. Newly constructed homes were preferred over existing homes, thus encouraging the development of suburbs. And then the federal government built highways so people could get from their new suburban homes to their jobs in the cities. The private lending industry had the same racist policies for making home loans as the federal government. The evidence is overwhelming that the government and the housing industry consciously intended to restrict Blacks to residential areas in which public facilities, most importantly schools, would be of inferior quality.

Race and the Achievement Gap

It is common knowledge that there is a critical academic achievement gap between Blacks and Whites in the United States. This gap, which exists at every grade level in every single state, can be illustrated by the example of Minnesota, which is a leader in public school education. In the

Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) only six of the forty-one nations outscored Minnesota in math, and only one outscored it in science. In the United States the Minnesota public school systems is the leader. "The students and teachers in Minnesota once again find themselves at the top of the list when it comes to academic achievement nationally," said state Education Commissioner Alice Seagren. "By focusing our energy and staying the course with our statewide accountability system, we will close the achievement gap." Unfortunately, Seagren's praise only applies to White students. But, after all, they are the ones who really count. The declaration of closing the gap is more empty rhetoric.

College Preparation Gap

In Minnesota, which has the highest ACT scores in the nation, the racial achievement gap is greater than it is in many other states. The ACT test assesses high school students' general educational development and their ability to complete college-level work. The ACT assessment comprises four curriculum-based achievement tests designed to assess critical reasoning and higher order thinking skills in English, math, reading, and science. The test reflects students' skills and achievement levels as products of their high school experience and serves as critical measures of their preparation for academic coursework beyond high school. Post-secondary institutions use the results for admissions, academic advising, course placement, and scholarship decisions. The ACT score range is 1 to 36. The average Minnesota score was 1.3 above the national average of 20.9. In 2004, the composite score for Blacks was 17.5 compared with 22.5 for Whites.

The SAT is another widely used test to assess high school students' general ability to complete college-level work. In 2005 the average black score on the combined math and verbal portions of the SAT test was 864. The mean white score on the combined math and verbal SAT was 1068, 17 percent higher. Minnesota Schools

The gap between Blacks and Whites on the ACT could be easily predicted from the performances of Black and White students in their earlier grade levels. For example, in the largest school district in Minnesota, the Minneapolis Public Schools, a large proportion of Black students performed below the state achievement level in reading and math on Minnesota Comprehension Assessments. The second-largest school district in Minnesota, St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) has a multicultural student population of more than 42,000 students. Of this total, the African American student population in 2006 was approximately 13,500. Two-thirds of SPPS Black students' reading scores fall below the national average, versus 10 percent of White students' scores. (Holder, 2007).

The Politics of the Gap

The racial achievement gap between Blacks and Whites is neither a genuine concern of the White population nor of the White elite. The reasons are these:

- Despite denials, Whites in general believe that their mental abilities are superior to those of Blacks.

- Whites get some psychological gratification from the belief that they are intellectual superior.
- The gap serves as justification for the economic disparity between Blacks and Whites.
- The gap serves to explain the disproportionate percentage of Blacks incarcerated.

If it is not a real concern of Whites, why is it discussed so much in public discourse? And why has President Bush's administration been a strong advocate of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 known as the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB)? The claim of the law is to improve education and reduce the racial achievement gap by making schools accountable through validating annual student progress through testing. Anyon (1997) criticizes testing as a strange solution for problems that are rooted in history and economic conditions. She offers her own solutions that sweep across the entire spectrum of educational, social, and economic conditions. These solutions include state tax reform, greater federal support of city schools, jobs, health care, teacher and administrator training, instructional improvements, and revitalization of cities. Tests, free-market choice plans, and charter schools, she argues, are the solutions offered by self-proclaimed free-market ideologists to problems resulting from economic and social conditions.

Bracey (2004) argues that the real intent of NCLB is to set up public schools for failure so that for-profit educational management organizations can make inroads to the hundreds of billions of dollars spent annually on K-12 education. He explains how this would work. All schools that accept Title I money from the federal government are compelled by the law to show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). If they do not, they are considered "failing schools" by the U. S. Department of Education. This opens the door for private educational companies like Edison Schools, Inc. The law makes provisions for "secondary providers"-private firms to tutor low-scoring students and provide other services. The Wall Street Journal estimated that there are some 24.3 billion dollars for companies to pursue in aid to high-poverty schools, reading programs, technology improvements, and building and running charter schools. Educational Testing Service vice president Sharon Robinson is said to have called NCLB a full employment act for test publishers.

The Global Power Gap

The achievement gap that the American power elite is genuinely concerned about is the academic achievement difference between American white students and students in other countries. It has a vested interest in increasing this gap in America's favor to maintain its imperial status as a super power. This requires the U.S. to produce leaders in science, technology, and math in order to continue its military and economic dominance. The leaders of the U.S. power elite are quite explicit about this.

- President George W. Bush said, "We need to encourage children to take more math and science, and to make sure those courses are rigorous enough to compete with other nations. ... If we ensure that America's children succeed in life, they will ensure that America succeeds in the world."

- U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings stated, "High school reform is not just an education issue. It's also an economic issue, a civic issue, a social issue and a national security issue. And it's everybody's issue."

The following is an official declaration of U.S. Department of Education:

Innovating and improving education is critical not only to America's financial security but also to our national security. Today, not one but 3,000 satellites circle the earth. U.S. soldiers use the latest technology and communications to fight the global war on terrorism. Advanced math skills are used to identify and undermine terrorist networks. Government and the private sector look to engineer new ways to protect lives and infrastructure from harm. And the effort to spread freedom to other nations and cultures demands speakers fluent in languages such as Arabic, Farsi, Chinese and Russian. Addressing these challenges will advance opportunity and entrepreneurship at home and promote democracy and understanding abroad.

Of all of the recommendations contained in the National Academies' report *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*, the highest priority is to vastly improve K-12 math and science education. Schools must help students develop the skills they will need to compete and succeed in higher education and the workforce, which are increasingly connected in this changed world. They must develop a pool of technically adept and numerically literate Americans to ensure a continual supply of highly trained mathematicians, scientists and engineers.

The Class Character of Schools

The government's message is primarily targeted to students in white middle and upper class schools. In her approach to help us understand how the public school system reproduces the class stratification system, Anyon (1980) studied a variety of elementary schools which she categorized into four types; working class, middle class, affluent professional, and executive elite. She provided empirical evidence that the content and rigor of the academic curriculum varied according to the social class of the students and their residential environment. Her descriptions of the four types of curriculums were as follows.

- **Working-Class curriculum:** It can be characterize as a body of knowledge, skills, and programs designed to prepare students for low level jobs in which the workers will make very few decisions and adhere to rigid schedules. These jobs tend to be low pay and insecure.
- **Middle-Class curriculum:** It is designed to train students for skilled and professional jobs in which the workers have a broad range of autonomy, above average salaries, and steady incomes.
- **Affluent Professional curriculum:** This curriculum emphasizes conceptual learning. Students engage in creative activity carried out independently. They are taught to see cause and effect connections between events. These students will fill high status professional occupations.

- Executive Elite curriculum: This curriculum prepares students for leadership positions in the economic, political, and social structures of society. It stresses creativity, autonomy, decision-making, and critical thinking about problems.

Working class schools predominate in Black residential areas. Given the nature of the education programs found in these schools, most prominently the special education programs, it is easy to see why the achievement gap as measured by the ACT and SAT is so great. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education noted that:

A major reason for the SAT racial gap appears to be the fact that black students in higher-level mathematics courses such as trigonometry and calculus, whites hold a large lead. In 2005, 47 percent of white SAT test takers had taken trigonometry in high school compared to 35 percent of black test takers. Some 28 percent of white test takers had taken calculus in high school. Only 14 percent of black students had taken calculus, one half as many as whites. Thirty-two percent of white SAT test takers had taken honors courses in mathematics compared to 19 percent of black SAT test takers. Also, whites are far more likely than blacks to have taken honors courses in science and social studies.

Black schools for the most part are not designed to be vehicles of upward social mobility or the producers of scientists and engineers. In fact, many function as warehouses for youth whom the white establishment has deemed unworthy of a quality education.

Ideological Racism and Schools

Students are socialized to believe that America is: 1) democratic, which implies that it is free of oppression, 2) meritocratic, which implies that a person's social location is determined by ability and effort, and 3) just, which implies that whatever unfortunate circumstances that may exist, they can be overcome, and that fair play is the rule, and privileges are earned (Huber and Form, 1973).

In their study of beliefs about inequality, Kluegel and Smith (1986) found that a large majority of whites believe there is nearly equal educational and job opportunity. Whites believe one's socioeconomic status is determined by her/his individual attributes such as ability and effort. Another prevalent belief they hold is that economic inequality is necessary and beneficial. Moreover they endorse the idea of economic and societal equity as the just criteria for the distribution of income.

These basic beliefs constitute whites' ideological justification for socioeconomic inequality. Thus for whites in general, the American class structure can be morally defended as a system which is fair because, although it is not based on the principle of equality, it does provide equal opportunity for success. Given these beliefs, they logically conclude that those who are at the bottom of the social structure are there because of some deficiencies in terms of ability and effort rather than other factors related to historic and continuing forms of oppression. These beliefs undergird the racial and class based social stratification system.

Unfortunately, most students have been woefully miseducated about their country. Much of what they believe about America is based on myths, lies, and propaganda that they have been taught in schools. The process of miseducation begins very early in their lives and continues throughout their lifetimes. They are conditioned to accept a fictional image of America.

When children begin their formal education, they are routinely introduced to school rituals, which are designed to instill a sense of pride in America. Rarely are they introduced to ideas which would stir intellectual curiosity about America. The fictional image of America that is presented to the young students is one that is lovable, but it is also one that is largely based on myths and deliberate lies. For instance, in many schools students are required to stand with their hands across their hearts, while facing the American flag, and recite the pledge of allegiance to America. Included in this pledge are these words. " ... one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all." Every thinking person knows that this is patriotic rhetoric.

However, through repetition this big lie assumes the status of a quasi truth along with the fables about George Washington, the Father of America who "never told a lie." This all serves a major goal of American education which is to teach students to love their country, but not to deeply understand it. It is no wonder that so many say "love it or leave it" to people who criticize America.

In many history classes it is rarely taught that relations between Blacks and Whites in America began as a relationship based on Whites debasement of and control over Black people and that this basic relationship has persisted to the present. This profound and obvious fact is often ignored. Consequently, students cannot fully understand the political, psychological, social, and economic dynamics of U.S. society.

The schools continue to promote an image of America as a country firmly committed to the humanitarian values of freedom, justice, liberty, and democracy. But, the reality is that America is a ruthlessly competitive society driven by the pursuit of material wealth, social status, power, and control. Further, it is a hierarchical society destructively divided along racial and class lines. This was the reality in Jamestown in the early 1600s when America was in its embryonic stage, and it remains a reality today.

Blacks and the American Constitution

There is probably no greater myth in American history than the one about the American Constitution. Americans glorify this historical document as a model of democratic principles that should be emulated by all countries seeking to become democratic. Moreover, it is praised as a guarantor of human rights and a protector against tyranny and oppression. The Framers of the American Constitution are likewise revered as compassionate, democratically minded, fatherly figures who were primarily interested in the well-being of others. These very powerful images work very well among the miseducated. The American education establishment as well as the mass media systematically fosters these images to perpetuate the illusion that America is a democratic country founded by honorable men.

Even a cursory look at Black history provides insights which quickly debunk the myths about the American Constitution and the "Founding Fathers. " There are three sections in the American Constitution that legitimize the dehumanization of Black people. First, Article I, Section 2 stipulates that Black slaves (the Framers carefully avoided using the term slave in the Constitution) would be counted as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of distributing power among the White ruling elite; second, Article 1, Section 9 provided for the protection of the slave trade; and third, Article IV, Section 2 declared runaway slaves (freedom seekers, refugees) to be criminals who had to be returned to their slave master. Thus the legal foundation for racism was firmly set in the American Constitution. But, this would come as no surprise if one studied historical facts rather than fiction. This helps explain why the Constitution was a pro-slavery, anti-democratic document primarily designed to sanction and protect the interests of the wealthy White ruling elite.

Blacks and the American Justice System

Students are taught that the American system of justice is the fairest in the world, one worthy of emulation. This image enjoys credibility despite the fact that historically the courts sanctioned the most dehumanizing form of slavery until the end of the Civil War in 1865. And then after slavery, the courts legalized a demeaning form of racial segregation. The American legal establishment has always been anti-Black. It has never respected Black people as first-class American citizens. For about 250 years American laws legalized the enslavement and debasement of Black people. During this long period of slavery, the courts defined Black people as subhuman (Barker & McCorry, 1980.) The American system of "injustice" continues to be the main mechanism used to control and weaken the social fabric of the Black community.

To the detriment of Black people, the reality that the myths about the United States are more widely known and believed than the historical facts points to the serious problem of miseducation. For these myths perpetuate and reinforce the racist idea that Black people are incapable of doing things for themselves, and that they need a white savior to rescue or lead them. Some serve to make Black people invisible while others portray them as pitiful inferior beings who need white help and guidance. The great myths in American history are also an obstacle to racial harmony. They instill and foster patriotic feelings of righteousness and superiority in whites. These myths make whites less able to understand themselves and their society. Progress toward interracial harmony necessitates an assault on American chauvinism which is a product of miseducation.

Conclusion

The public school system is structured along racial and class lines. In this stratified structure, the highest quality schools are located in upscale white residential areas and those of lowest quality are found in impoverished Black areas. In essence, there is a racial and class tracking system in public education that reproduces the race and class structure of the society. Powerful political and economic forces determine these tracks. By design the public schools perpetuate racism. There are clearly unequal educational opportunities based on race as well as on socioeconomic class.

Further, school play a principal role in perpetuating ideological racism through a social studies curriculum that is designed to promote white supremacy by distorting American history in such a way that it portrays whites as agents of progress and builders of civilizations and Blacks as insignificant objects or deficient characters. The racism that inheres in the U.S. public school system can only be fully dealt with through a vigorous sustained political struggle by the masses of Black people to radically transform and democratize American society.

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