

How are Schools Racist?

Let Me Count the Ways

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It is accepted by virtually everyone from most political perspectives that a person's education is a key to their freedom. Although definitions of freedom may vary widely, there is not as much difference in people's definitions of education. Images of pencils, (pesticide-laden) super-red apples, and desks in neat rows quickly come to mind. But where do these images come from, and why are they the ones that even political enemies share? Surely, in the thousands of years that native North Americans thrived before the arrival of Europeans, their young were educated—that is, introduced into the ways that their communities worked and encouraged to find socially meaningful work for themselves. With the arrival of the whites, this general educational tradition—which varied from tribe to tribe—has been on the retreat, and has nearly been stamped out entirely. A rich oral culture was subsumed by necessity, as the need for literacy grew due to the exigencies of making treaties and negotiations with whites.

Although it is not my wish to romanticize the Native education, it is useful to think about, particularly in today's educational context. To return to the original statement of this essay, I add this twist: A people's education is a key to their collective liberation. For Native Americans, and African-, Mexican-, Asian- and Arab-Americans and Puerto Ricans, the quest for liberation in this land of the white has been thwarted in no small part because of how their educational opportunities have been controlled by the white ruling elite. Although I am not positing that a common school, or a public school as it has come to be known, can of itself create a free society, I am arguing that schools are institutions that steadfastly uphold the racial divide that pervades the rest of U.S. society. With some exceptions due to immense struggle, the history of American education has been the elevation, imposition, and maintenance of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. This continues to this day.

In popular cinematic depictions of inner-city schools with majority people of color students, which often, though not always have 'happy' ending, the theme often conveys that non-white characters (be they students, teachers, or principals) can achieve some form of salvation by adopting a WASP outlook. Whether it's accepting a white heroine teacher (*Dangerous Minds*), a 'good' teacher exacting revenge (187, *The Substitute*), or an authoritarian wielding a Louisville Slugger and bullhorn, keeping all the scum out, and whipping the students into shape to pass the test designed by whites (*Lean on Me*), such films play to the values of the dominant culture rather than develop a critical analysis of it or even portray people of color building real community

power. Of course, it is not of celluloid dreams that liberation will come; however, it will neither come by some accident of benevolence passed on by the ruling elite—that is clear. From the pure denial of education to the separate but unequal schools, for the Chicano kids of the southwest to the Puerto Rican kids of New York City to the African American kids of Chicago, the history and present of the U.S. school system is filled with racism.

First, a little history: It should not be necessary to allot much time to describing how schools have contributed to the domination of all people of color in the United States, but a few helpful facts and anecdotes might remind us. The legacy of segregation (and its return due to such factors as de-industrialization and white flight) cannot be overestimated. The education in most non-white schools was vastly inferior, as it was intended to supply an underclass of people who would accept a social position of underemployment and perpetual landlessness. From 1899, hear William H. Baldwin, president of the Long Island Railroad, in a statement widely accepted by liberals and ‘progressives’ of the time: “Know that it is a crime for any teacher, white or black, to educate the Negro for positions which are not open to him.” The type of education they received in the late 19th and early 20th century is epitomized by the Hampton Institute—attended by Booker T. Washington—where young black students were taught in the ways of hard manual labor. This curriculum was adopted later on as the general track into which most African American students were placed. In fact, in many one-race school districts the “general track”—one that did little to prepare a person for college or a job—was the only one available.

Though school administrators and social reformers who influenced American education all varied in their approach to dealing with ‘Negro,’ ‘Indian,’ and ‘foreign stock’(which for a while included Southern Europeans, Eastern Europeans and Irish), they were fairly unanimous in their desire to impose the dominant culture on them. Whether it was to acquire Indian lands, bring African Americans into the employment pool, or curb the spread of Catholicism, these efforts were very successful.

The English Language has been the major force of deculturalization of youth of color in schools. There is a long history of Native Americans, blacks, and immigrants being forced to learn English and made to lose their native tongue. Obviously, with the passage of Question 2 in last year’s election, which barred teachers from using students’ native languages in the classroom, the forces of reaction in the form of English-only zealots are alive and well. This deculturalization, which includes many other elements beyond language, has always been best imposed by appealing to logic, market forces, and an overall nod to ‘what’s best for the kids.’ This is seen in the development of so-called proper English or standard English—the historical basis for which is murky at best: If people don’t know ‘proper English’ they won’t be able to get jobs and do well. But who really knows ‘proper English’ and what allegiance should we have to it? Similarly, the racist rollback of 1960s and 70s-era bilingual education programs, programs that worked to a large extent and increased the bilingualism of whites, is achieved by appealing to the American value of equal opportunity. Whether put forth by nakedly racist and anti-immigrant factions or someone such as Rosalie Porter, who spearheaded local support for Question 2 by appealing to ‘equality,’ the deculturalization policies are still working.

Funding of majority non-white schools is still substantially lower than majority white districts in virtually every instance. Because school funding is largely tied to property taxes, this is the way in which it is easiest to see the vast political and economic forces at work and the racism that persists. Thus, especially in this time of state fiscal crises, it is not uncommon to see a severe dearth of textbooks (to say nothing of how outdated they are), as well as great structural

problems within the schools themselves, including ceilings falling in on kids' heads—the same as what Jonathan Kozol described happened in Roxbury schools in 1967 in *Death at an Early Age*. Though we hear much through mainstream media about the wasteland of inner city schools in regard to how violent they are (though most high-profile schools shooters have been white and in mostly-white districts), it is the school buildings and the toxins they harbor that are more of a threat to students of color in poor urban schools.

The face of authority and knowledge is white. Although 33% of students enrolled in public schools are “minorities” and that number is expected to climb to 42% within the next few years, only 13% of all teachers are “minorities,” and that number is expected to shrink to as low as 5% in the next decade. Numbers for administrators are even lower. Much of this can be attributed to the growing power of graduate schools of education and the related teacher-certification process which excludes many people of color due to cost prohibitions, and lack of recruitment and retainment programs. It is interesting that the AmeriCorps program allows for non-certified college graduates to teach in inner-city public schools, and that many of those who enroll are white and middle class, some of them doing their Clintonian charity work before moving on with their careers. The assumption is that these young graduates will have at least a modicum of competence—enough to teach the colored kids, anyway. But there would never be a program that allowed for a large number of non-certified, non-college graduates of color to teach in any school, regardless of how great their desire to do so. In the end we are left with a lot of white faces at the front of a lot of non-white students. For many working class people of color there may develop either feelings of deference or animosity—or some combination of both—toward their children's teachers. But mostly they might just wonder, ‘Why can't someone from our community teach our kids?’

The form and content of school is racist. In the most contentious subjects—social studies, history and English—the story is still told from a very white point of view. Although many textbooks have been ‘upgraded’ to reflect the contributions of people of color to civilization and, in particular, the United States, they are still tools to foster obedience and conformity to, as bell hooks calls it, the capitalist-white supremacist-patriarchal system. So, though we see a few more black, brown, and Asian faces, major criticisms of the U.S. by people of color are avoided or are left out altogether. The reason for this can be gleaned from the celebrated liberal establishment historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who has said that students should be united around a core set of values derived from White Anglo-Saxon Protestant traditions. He says of the United States: “The language of the new nation, its laws, its institutions, its political ideas, its literature, its customs, its precepts, its prayers, primarily derived from Britain.” Thus we have curriculums that admit the gross injustices of slavery and Japanese internment but hold that whites also set up a great system under which all people can succeed.

Furthermore, standards of excellence have been created by white people, and for white people. These standards deny the cultural forms that many non-whites used to or still employ. What is excellent? A score of 1400 on the SATs, or an intricately woven blanket? Writing an essay for judges to score or rapping a song for friends on a street corner? School is not about finding out what's worth doing, or about figuring things out, it's about other people taking up your time—this is true for youth of color more than anyone.

In further incursions on time and freedom, these standards have increasingly been measured through standardized tests, which largely serve to marginalize people of color and working class whites who don't have the same community resources to ensure their success on such tests. These

tests also reinforce the myth of a standard English, completely ignoring the nuanced, lyrical and effective way in which non-white and non-native English speakers communicate.

The standard weapon of defense by social justice and anti-racist advocates against the conservative culture warriors has been to call for multiculturalism in the school curriculum. This has resulted in some positive results: a rethinking of the Western canon to reflect the writings of people of color and women; a mostly positive reflection on the civil rights movement and some of the aspirations of 'key leaders' like Martin Luther King, Jr.; and, at times, and in different places, strong support for bilingual/ESOL education, and various units and projects about the quest for civil rights. In some places, a push for multicultural education has also led to different methods for teaching math concepts. What multicultural education has not ushered in is a complete re-vamping of all kids' schooling, where all students become at least bilingual and study different cultures. As educator James Banks says, multiculturalism should pervade the curriculum and general life of the school, including bulletin boards, lunchrooms, assemblies, everything. In my view, what multiculturalism has come to mean has been self-esteem building for people of color—it has even been described as such by both advocates and opponents. This is lamentable, because mere pride in one's heritage does not translate into attaining freedom. We would do well to heed the lesson of W.E.B. DuBois, who urged for educating blacks to be discontented with their social position. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois describes John, before his meeting with the judge, standing on a bluff with his younger sister:

Long they stood together, peering over the gray unsettled water.

"John," she said, "does it make everyone—unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?"

He paused and smiled, "I am afraid it does," he said.

"And, John, are you glad you studied?"

"Yes," came the answer, slowly and positively.

Zach de la Rocha, formerly of Rage Against the Machine, whispered a variation on that sentiment in *Freedom*, on Rage's debut CD: "Anger is a gift."

So, what can be done about the racism that pervades every aspect of U.S. schooling, where young people of color are prepared for incarceration and/or dead-end jobs and consumption? It might be tempting for some folks to recommend Grace Llewellyn's *Teenage Liberation Handbook* or her *Real Lives*, about African-American girls who drop out of school, but there are two major problems with that: first, when a working class youth of color drops out of school (s)he immediately commands the attention of cops and courts and forfeits many already bleak job opportunities, and second, it is not a broad strategy. Therefore, though it may seem to some contradictory, we must defend public education and call for the expansion of 'free' schooling. This means arguing for education to be considered a human right for everyone, and demanding access to higher education without charge and with whatever remedial help people need. Also, bilingual education programs must be defended and struggled for, arguing boldly and eloquently against the 'logic' of the market and English-only propaganda.

For those who think they might want to teach, be they white or non-white, by all means do so...but only if you're preparing to learn as well as teach, and only if you're going to teach, in hooks' words, 'to transgress.' There's plenty else to do, too. During Reconstruction, many

former slaves took the initiative to form their own schools. These efforts can be replicated in the form of ethnocentric schools, social justice schools, and free schools, and they should be supported. Also, support the self-organization of young people of color, whether they're forming clubs, demanding park space, organizing poetry and hip hop nights, or starting liberation schools.

Increased mechanization of the modern public school in the form of disciplining and teaching to tests is doomed to failure. Thus, as has been the case over the last 150 years of schooling when things have been too racist, or too religious, or too authoritarian, the social controllers and ruling elite will ease up a bit. Perhaps they won't add twenty more tests, as some might like. But there is no doubt that U.S. schools will seek to continue to elevate WASP culture and retain its racist character. In that context, radicals and revolutionaries must seek to support communities of color in building power against the racist state school and support the struggles of youth of color against the social factory that is the contemporary school and recognize their power as revolutionary agents.

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