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Educational Genocide: Examining the Impact of National Education Policy on African American Communities

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Introduction

> *"…educational policy has been virtually hijacked by the wealthiest citizens, whom no one elected and who are unlikely ever to have had a child in the public schools." (Delpit, 2012, p. xv)*

Just about everyone has a problem with schools, and battles continue to wage about who should be educated, how they should be educated, who should educate, what should be taught, and what parts should be assessed (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Giroux, 1983; Spring, 1996). As these battles are waged at the political level, more than half of African-American students leave their schools prior to graduating in four years (Stillwell, 2010). Many also leave school unable to read critically, with diminished self-confidence, and with limited trust in most American institutions, including education, health care, criminal justice and policing, financial institutions, taxation, and even public transportation (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ferguson, 2000; Jones, Curry, Malone, Jefferson-Frazier, & Hanson, 2006). And, while many white Americans do not believe racism exists, many African-Americans acknowledge continued barriers in every arena of their lives (Bell, 2003; Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997; Tatum, 1997). Yet schools across the country do not prepare most children, particularly African-Americans, to navigate the United States' racial biases, much less to transform societal institutions into

civilly just, equitable-minded democratic institutions (Knaus, 2011; Macedo, 1994; Noguera, 2003; Shor, 1992).

In her book "Multiplication is for White People," Lisa Delpit argues, "The cultural framework of our country has, almost since its inception, dictated that 'black' is bad and less than and in all arenas 'white' is good and superior" (2012, p. xviii). While many white youth (and adults) are sheltered by this cultural frame and taught to deny how the societal structures privilege them (Lipsitz, 1998; McIntyre, 1997; Tatum, 1997), many African-American youth grow up keenly aware of how they are negatively framed (Dance, 2002; Ferguson, 2000; Tatum, 1997). Consider Justin, a young African-American man who left school after his 16th birthday because he "didn't want to swallow the racist shit [teachers] forced down my throat." The cost of "acting White and being what [teachers] are not scared of" was a choice Justin did not believe would be in his best interest. Marco, a 49-year-old African-American serving a life sentence in prison, echoed this awareness. "If school wasn't so against me since my first day in Kindergarten...but each and every thing I was being taught, even if there was a good message in the lesson, was still taught in a way that meant me being quiet...not talking, and not being a rambunctious child." Marco's point was that success in school required him to make concessions in who he was as a person, and these are the choices schools force five-year-old children of color to make.

For many black people around the world, such a forced choice strongly encourages dropping out of school to maintain a positive sense of self. Xolisa, a 15-year-old Xhosa township resident in South Africa, also left school because she felt her educators were encouraging her to give up her culture. "To do well in school, to be a

good student, that means you don't speak Xhosa, you don't act Xhosa, you don't dress Xhosa," Xolisa argued, and in response to being asked why she left school, she replied, matter-of-factly that "I'd rather be Xhosa." Globally, education and schools are used to silence, demean, debase, and otherwise convince black children that the way they think, act, sing, move, eat, talk, and live is offensive, ignorant, and in short, always in the wrong, always less than (Gay, 2000; Knaus, 2011; Macedo, 1994; Noguera, 2003; Tatum, 1997).

In the United States, such negating purposes of education are apparent in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, a Bush-era policy that continues the long line of federal policies purported to level the playing field (Bell, 2008; Bell, 1998). Yet NCLB in practice continues to foster schools and structures that evaluate children based upon overly simplistic criteria that has repeatedly been shown to be linguistically, culturally, racially, and economically biased (Au, 2009; Kohn, 1999; Knaus, 2007a; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Popham, 2001). Meanwhile, urban schools and communities are impacted by outside agencies that foster an elite-educated, temporary teaching force that is predominantly white and often unexposed to cultural nuances, linguistic differences, local contexts, and racial struggles that shape classroom dynamics and out-of-school life (Naison, 2011; Bell, 2002). These efforts, symbolized by Teach for America and other national recruitment programs (and also increasingly colleges of education with similar philosophies), foster instability for urban children who have limited access to long-serving educators from the local community. Such outside-in approaches also contribute to local unemployment, as preferences for outside temporary educators not committed to long-term development of children or communities ensure

teachers' jobs are given to those living outside the neighborhood (Delpit, 2012; Epstein, 2012).

In this paper, we argue that the process of such schooling results in what we term "educational genocide" for both African-American children and educators. While our professional focus centers on black children, we recognize that the current education in the United States happily and vicariously silences indigenous people and other people of color, particularly those forced to live in poverty. The result, for an increasing number of young men and women of color, is a turn away from schooling that such youth see as racist, offensive, and irrelevant to their life chances. For the vast majority of children who make such decisions, school failure directly places them on track to prison. We argue that educational policy must transform the current educational focus on punishing children (and their educators) to one that promotes and fosters culturally responsive, community-centric education that prepares black children to successfully navigate the racism and classism that limits their chances of economic, social, and emotional success.

In what follows, we present four arenas that shape the future of schooling in the United States (and globally) for black children. The first is an analysis of educational policy trends that maintains a force of white teachers intentionally removed (both physically and culturally) from local communities of color. This is followed by a discussion of the role of racism in shaping education for students of color, and the ways in which federal policy implements the structures of racial bias. The third section illustrates how standards-based definitions of literacy continue to exclude and silence African-American youth. The fourth section presents the promotion of math and science skills as the way in which corporate interests dictate what matters in schools in ways that

further exclude African-American youth. We conclude by arguing that NCLB and current reauthorization approaches are by themselves not the problem. More overarching is the prioritization of top-down standardized approaches which are meant to narrow the curriculum in an effort to minimize differences in classroom performance without regard to the racial disparities that they are designed to maintain. As has been demonstrated by previous research, such approaches continue to lead students of color (and low-income white students) to leave school early (Ayers & Ayers, 2011; Crumpton & Gregory, 2010; James, 2009; Knaus, 2007b; Kohn, 1999).

Designing a White Teacher Workforce

Despite the fact that most urban school districts teach students who are mostly of color (Cooper, 2012), 84% of K-12 teachers in the United States are white and 82% of university faculty are also white (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a; Feistritzer, 2011). White professors are preparing mainly white teachers to teach an ever increasing number of urban children of color, but are failing to provide the type of culturally-responsive training that will enable new teachers to reach students who live in poverty and who need caring teachers the most (Epstein, 2005; Green, 2010). Epstein (2005) clarifies some of the barriers that promote a white temporary teaching force in urban schools:

> The various financial and standardized test requirements essentially operate as a job reservation and segregation system for whites. Since so few credentialed teachers are nonwhite, suburban school systems are under little pressure to integrate their teaching faculties. Whites who

choose teaching are assured of a plentiful supply of openings, even for college graduates who do not wish to be teachers, but who use urban teaching as a two-year temporary job to pay off student loans. (p. 4)

When one of the authors of this study thought about becoming a teacher, she thought about working with children, giving them the necessary tools to navigate in a clearly white-biased society and exposing them to a rich and varied curriculum. Teaching wasn't about raising test scores or measuring effectiveness based upon how well the students performed on tests designed by people who had never visited the classroom. One of the educators connected to an urban education program in Northern California argued that:

> When we recruit new teachers of color, we ask them why they want to become educators and the answer is never about test scores. We have them teach a lesson to children and look for their ability to connect with students before allowing them into our program. We believe the most fundamental part of being an educator is the desire to work with and love children. (personal communication, 2012)

Imagine how discouraged potential teachers of color can become as they are forced to jump through hoop after hoop before they can ever get into an actual classroom. Rarely does higher education prepare teachers to make their classrooms platforms for critical thought, for students to challenge the current education system and bring to light its tendency to create a widening disparity amongst students of color (Halagao, 2003). In poverty-stricken areas where the need is greatest, teachers are leaving university programs with a foundation in educational theory, but few concrete strategies to deal with

an eight-year old calling a teacher a "bitch" – for the second time. Because teacher education is largely delivered by a majority-white group of educators who haven't taught in an actual urban classroom for years, even decades, new teachers find themselves lacking skills needed to engage a diverse group of children. Additionally, with the lack of teachers of color entering the profession, schools of education continually fail to provide the type of preparation that will allow African-American teachers to reach students who live in poverty-stricken areas and who need caring teachers the most.

Those who have already successfully navigated post-secondary institutions and want to become teachers are never happy that they must go back into a world that, for many people of color, was difficult, silencing, linguistically and culturally absent, and drastically unequal (Lewis, 2006; Obidah, Buenavista, Gildersleeve, Kim, & Marsh, 2007). Some teachers of color jump the hoops because they believe that classrooms can be transformative spaces, particularly for African-American children. One Oakland teacher reported that she teaches because "I didn't have good teachers, and I don't want that to be the case for our children" (personal communication, 2011).

However, many teachers of color choose to find other ways to work with children (after-school programs, community-based organizations, churches, and through volunteering) for the same reasons that African-American children drop out of school: They cannot stand to see themselves becoming part of a process designed to silence people of color. Every year, beginning teachers of color morph from transformative and excited professionals who want to create classrooms that would be different from those they experienced as youth, to jaded, deflated balloons who tire of battling within schools that are designed as test prep machines.

These same teachers who were silenced by the oppressive, traditional, and mainly white professoriate found in college education programs, slowly become the silencer of children living in poverty. New teachers without tenure who question curriculum, create spaces where children's voices are valued, heard and responded to, and where test scores take a back seat to creative, responsive curriculum are ridiculed. They are told that they need to follow heavily-scripted curriculum designed to ensure that children are not "left behind," and threatened with removal if they do not comply. Teachers who resist because they care more about children than district pacing guides are removed, leave on their own, or are pushed out. For many African-American teachers, the cost of fulfilling the colonizing mission of schools is much too high. Ironically, this is the same result for many of our dropouts who don't see themselves in the curriculum and who can't find adults who have time to care.

National recruiting programs, like Teach for America, who search for prospective teachers from the nation's most elite Universities in an effort to "serve" low-income neighborhoods for two years, augment the white teacher reservation system. Borrowing heavily on the U.S. Peace Corps model of sending the elite-educated into less "developed" global communities, the notion is that young, primarily white, high-achieving females will be able raise test scores and move "less developed communities" forward because they themselves had a high GPA. This type of program fits in well with the NCLB ideal of leveling the playing field, despite research that suggests these teachers do less well than traditional university-prepared teachers (Heilig & Jez, 2010). As Kumashiro (2012) notes, "The metaphor of teacher-as-savior has a long history in American schools, and Teach for America capitalizes on this image" (p. 13).

Yet contrary to the white savior model reinforced by popular films like Dangerous Minds (Smith, 1995) and Freedom Writers (Gruwell, 1999; LaGravenese, 2007), little brown children are not waiting to be saved by colonizing white teachers. "Our children are more than capable of learning and excelling; our teachers need to acquaint themselves with the population they serve, and they must be open to new strategies and techniques that have proven effective with African-American and Latino students" (Kunjufu, 2009). In most cases, this means having the young, novice, white teacher learn from the older, more experienced African-American teacher with a demonstrated track record of creating a positive classroom culture for brown children and whom might have already developed relationships with other African-American families in the local community (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

In one urban school district, an African-American male teacher was in the middle of his first year teaching. He was from the school community, having graduated from the local high school, and was excited about being able to give back to the next generation. He was welcomed on the campus by the afterschool coordinator, custodian, secretary, and a number of students, all of whom were excited to see their first black male teacher on the campus. This teacher, however, did not feel included into the teaching community by his peer teachers and the principal. As the only African-American teacher on campus, numerous African-American boys would find their way to his classroom before, during, and after school. Finally, after much cajoling, he arranged a Black History program that was extremely well-received. The next week, he learned that one of his students' parents was ill and could not drive her daughter to school. Because this teacher lived in the community, he picked up this student each morning until her parent was better.

Despite this commitment, his principal decided to remove him from the classroom because he "didn't move the children far enough." Teachers who demonstrate their commitment to the local community, to the children and their families, are often the first ones asked to leave, even as the teachers who stay tend to leave on their own within a year or two anyhow. Thus, our fascination with test scores and not leaving children behind is, indeed, leaving many even further back than before.

Racism in Education: Outside-In Control

James was a black South African teacher candidate when one of the authors of this study met him after giving a university lecture about the importance of teacher commitment to their communities. James wanted the author to understand that he should never have chosen a career that placed him in front of children. "I wanted to be a doctor," James argued, "but my test scores only allow me to be a teacher." He was disgusted at himself for not doing well enough in school, and in completing his qualification to become a teacher, he resigned himself to a career of what he considered, "low paid babysitting of little Xhosa children." When asked why he did not choose a different field, he replied, matter-of-factly that "teaching is the only thing left. It is my last resort." Like the vast majority of students who take their matriculation exams (the equivalent of a high school exit exam), James did not pass with high enough scores to go into a competitive field like medicine. Instead, he felt forced into education, where, "I knew I would be guaranteed a job."

Much of U.S. education can be framed around South African educators like James; people who never wanted to be teachers in the first place and certainly not of

impoverished black children, are recruited into classrooms for temporary teaching posts, often with just five weeks of training. As Stacey, a former Teach for America teacher articulated, "I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, and this impassioned young person told me – at exactly the time I felt most confused – that I could teach. I sort of bought into her idea that I could save children." After two years in New Orleans, Stacey left the classroom, in part because she felt like she did not know the community, and that she was yet another outsider. "It felt like a battleground there," Stacey reflected, "all these white Mid-Westerners – like me – were fighting for resources, but none of us were from there." Stacey left teaching after two years to become a divorce attorney in the small Wisconsin town she grew up in.

But she was recruited into schools in part because those who do not interact directly with students shape what happens in schools. National politicians debate what should be taught across the U.S., textbook companies decide what children learn and how to measure learning, and education-focused foundations (like the Gates, Broad, and Walton Foundation) decide upon how schools should be structured (including through small schools' movements and increasingly through charter schools). One outcome of these outside-the-school influences has been the increase in teachers who also do not want to directly teach *those* children each and every day. Indeed, the vast majority of stakeholders who shape education for urban youth are not, and do not plan to be, part of urban communities. Despite recurring educational research that suggests that the teachers who are most effective, who have the greatest impact on a child's life, tend to be long-term educators familiar with the community in which the children live (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009), many of the educators and those responsible for

shaping education are unfamiliar with the context in which the vast majority of black urban children live. This is in part because most outside teachers will not move to the most impoverished areas to teach in the schools located there, much less live there for a long time.

One South African principal, Mr. Kudza, explained that an underlying issue is the designation of experts as often being those most removed from the schools they claim expertise about. "South Africa still does 'outside-in' education," he argued. "Whenever we need someone to fix things (which is always), we ask someone from outside the community, and often, outside the country." Mr. Kudza was frustrated precisely because his own firsthand knowledge was continually framed as irrelevant; in short, no one ever asked him what he thought was needed in his school. Instead, he was forced to continually welcome in experts, typically white business leaders or university professors, but none who ever worked regularly, much less lived, in his township community. Mr. Kudza continued, "…outside is what got us in the mess we are in, where test score increases mean more than the survival of black children. We used to call this colonization, and we cant use 'racism' anymore, so now I call it stagnation." This stagnation, an intentional denial of the expertise and perspective of those who directly work with black children, is exactly what shapes education in the United States, though the contexts may look dissimilar. Efforts to maintain what is framed as quality teaching have maintained a white teaching force while also ensuring that the notion of learning becomes quantifiable and removed from any social context.

While national educational approaches have aligned to continue to support outside-in teachers, NCLB had established provisions to seemingly increase local

parental accountability. NCLB required districts to enable parents to take their child out of a school that did not meet adequate yearly progress (Kim & Sunderman, 2004; Knaus, 2007). Giving parents increased school choice (a controversial topic connected to voucher movements in Milwaukee, among other places), however, has not shifted the nature of unequal schools: Most low-income parents simply do not have access to schools that are either farther away or that create barriers to enrollments (through complicated enrollment forms, early enrollment deadlines, or less-than welcoming entry procedures). The deeper concern is that reducing parental accountability to the right to remove a child from a low-performing school does nothing to improve either the local school or the next school. NCLB legislated the right for parents to take their children out of schools, but never actually required another school to take them in, much less to give them a voice in shaping what their children's education should look like (Knaus, 2007).

In short, the lack of parental involvement in influencing curriculum, teachers, school buildings, or resources, have extended through NCLB and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization. Urban parents are increasingly excluded from both national policy creation and through the development and implementation of their local education. Looking at the front pages of many urban city newspapers clarifies the struggle: Each summer, urban schools are closed due to decreasing enrollments. Yet these enrollment shifts are largely a result of the failure of the small schools' movement to sustain its smaller schools (this movement was also funded by the Gates Foundation). Small schools, however, were never intended to include parents in their structures; other than adding one or two parents on site-based leadership teams, small schools just continued the same quick-fix solutions that came

from outside local communities. NCLB and other efforts, while framed in ways to address the achievement gap, have been unified in the shared notion that what is best for communities of color comes from outside those communities, and is most often implemented without regard or consultation with local urban families.

One-Size-Fits-All: The Economics of Silencing Difference

The No Child Left Behind Act was not a new approach: Schools, districts, states, and the federal government have long claimed to want to narrow the achievement gap. What set NCLB apart was a focus on funding and school takeover; schools that failed to meet adequate yearly progress were placed on a takeover timeline, and had to increasingly implement NCLB-defined solutions. These solutions were framed as "research-based best practices," yet what counted as best practices were often drill-and-kill scripted curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Forcibly implementing afterschool programs and curriculum tailored to standardized tests ultimately aligned the notion of school improvement to increasing reliance upon corporate-designed curricular packages. Schools that still failed to meet adequate yearly progress were ripe for district takeover. What this meant in practice was that districts could begin to phase out schools that were now defined as low performing, and reconstitute these schools without direct input from local communities, including families that may have attended those schools for generations.

The Obama and Duncan administration then ushered in a new wave of school takeovers, with the reauthorization of the ESEA, which strengthened NCLB provisions by allowing even more ways to take over so-called low-performing schools (U.S.

Department of Education, 2010b). With the guise of reauthorizing the NCLB Act, the ESEA Blueprint was framed as increased accountability to local communities, through offering four options for schools determined to be underperforming: 1) Transformation Model, which requires principal replacement, staff "strengthening," and more instructional time for students; 2) Turnaround Model, which required replacing the principal and no more than 50% of the teaching staff; 3) Restart Model, which required closing the school and reconstituting as a charter school; and 4) School Closure Model, which simply closed the school entirely (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b).

All four of these options essentially made it easier for already established charter management organizations to expand further into urban districts, primarily because the first two options are based on teacher hiring practices that must reflect already established teacher contracts. The School Closure Model is typically used when districts need to close schools due to budgetary concerns. The Restart Model dramatically reinforced, as national policy, the charter school movement, which had already taken a strong foothold in a number of states. While local urban families could in theory organize to create their own schools, the realities of creating a charter petition, navigating legal language, and local district politics has proved a significant deterrent to urban families with limited professional support structures (due in part to poverty, decreased employment, and historical lack of engagement with local school districts; see Abowitz & Karaba, 2010; Chin, Garcia, Hunter, Araiza, & Kim, 2004). While there are examples of charter schools developed and sustained by community-based organizations, many charter schools are developed through already established charter management organizations or individuals with ties to corporate funding and/or developed by support of

standards-focused high-stakes testing centered leadership incubators (Abowitz & Karaba, 2010).

Add to this new focus on charter school development a shifted focus on federal funding, including Race to the Top and alignment of federal grant programs through the Innovation in Education (i3) grant effort. The i3 grant process compiled a number of federal grant programs into one, and defined "research-based best practices" in a way that heavily favored quantitative demonstrations of test-score increases, without the need to clarify whether these increases actually correlate to graduation rates or if they are just a result of pushing more difficult-to-teach students out of schools. These efforts put federal programs directly in line with private funding influences, furthering corporate "donations" designed to dictate the scope of education for America's poor (Barkan, 2011). What this meant was that programs that have not demonstrated significant increases in either student achievement or community involvement were now able to receive additional federal funding that previously would have gone directly to schools and districts. Programs that receive exorbitant private funding, such as the Harlem Children's Zone, increasingly guide federal funding efforts; two federally funded grant programs (Promise Neighborhoods and Full Service Neighborhood Schools) were directly modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone.

Additional direct student funding now goes increasingly to charter management organizations (essentially hybrid districts that operate across states) and to national teacher recruitment programs (that increasingly place temporary teachers in the newly reconstituted schools). These programs may be able to report increases in test scores, but the problem lies in the measurement tools, essentially one-size-fits-all assessments that

are racially biased and assume college going for all students without addressing the reality that most youth, of all races, do not attend college; just 27% of all students graduate from college (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2012).

This increased federal alignment and a one-size-fits-all approach to education also dramatically ignores research on student disengagement, and the potentially positive impacts of culturally responsive approaches on a wide range of student indicators, including belief in self (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). But perhaps more importantly, this nationally aligned movement towards increasing test score performance for students also codified, into national policy, definitions of intelligence that are rooted in biased testing programs (Epstein, 2012). When student success is dependent upon standardized tests that even the test makers argue are not intended to measure intelligence, the purpose of schooling as preparing youth to participate meaningfully in the economy or in a democracy shifts. This testing regimen, instead of addressing 50% dropout rates amongst African-American and Latino youth, shifts public focus to meaningless tests that measure adherence to scripted curriculum and national curriculum standards that do not reflect student diversity, geographic differences (between, for example, Kansas, Alaska, Maine, California, and Texas), nor a host of previously required subjects. The standardized assessments that matter most in determining teacher, principal, and school effectiveness are math and English language arts; music, athletics, history, geography, and social sciences are relegated to the sidelines of school. Multicultural education and culturally responsive approaches that do not directly impact student test scores in English and math are deemed irrelevant, as are traits that are more difficult to measure, such as whether or not a student is a "good" person.

Because there are increased funds for programs that claim to support test score increases, urban districts (and increasingly states) are adopting wholesale curriculum packages sold by corporate textbook publishers, which increases standardized one-size-fits-all content for millions of different students. Such reliance diminishes teacher capacity to develop and implement local curriculum, thereby further excluding local communities from influencing neighborhood schools in urban areas. The use of corporate-developed curriculum relegates educational expertise to the sidelines of schooling, and positions businesses at the core of deciding what is taught in public education. Such for-profit businesses then balance their bottom line of making money through increasing factory-like efficiency of educating children, as if the art of teaching is something that could (or should) be standardized.

Those educators who try to resist through utilizing student voice and engagement in the classroom are told often that they are not effective because their student test scores have not risen enough. Many teachers who focus on teaching the lowest performing children are dismissed as not following the curriculum pacing guide, and teachers who focus on the easiest to teach (and most likely to improve test scores) are rewarded by principals and districts. This comprehensive focus solely on an increase in test scores limits teachers who troubleshoot with parents, discourages culturally responsive approaches designed to encourage students to show up to school, and penalizes educators who focus on reducing the 50% dropout rate, which requires NOT teaching to the test and "drill and kill" methods that would never be tolerated in affluent white schools (Ayers & Ayers, 2011; Crumpton & Gregory, 2010; Delpit, 2012; James, 2009; Knaus, 2007b; Kohn, 1999).

For the urban students who do not choose to commit themselves at a young age to completing meaningless worksheet packets, there are precious few ways to resist the math, science, and standards-based empire of education. This is the new educational system in the United States, a foundation set upon NCLB, and institutionalized by the Obama administration. Yet this focus is not limited to the United States: Indeed, proponents of the one-size-fits-all approach have exploited educational markets abroad. Much of schooling in Africa increasingly reflects standardized approaches, and high-stakes testing (despite decades of research documenting racial, gendered, and class-based disparities) has become a global phenomenon. And non-coincidentally, the global conversation has not relented in framing the problem as a student one: The goal of education appears increasingly to reward students for complicity and silence in memorizing and regurgitating information disjointed from daily life. National policy, both reflecting and leading the global push for schools that silence student voice, commodifies learning by requiring the purchase of tests to assess student education levels, and requires a curriculum that prepares youth to adhere to one-size-fits-all childhoods.

Rethinking Literacy

"I wanted my teachers to like me. I learned commas, colons, semicolons. I wrote compositions with clear sentences that were dull and boring. Nowhere was there an original thought or genuine feeling" (Goldberg, 1986, p. 1).

The whitening of the teacher force relies upon an outside-in model, but also requires questionable definitions of academic progress, wherein multiple definitions of

intelligence and knowledge are silenced (Au, 2009; Macedo, 1994). This silencing is seen in standards-based literacy tests that shape top-down standardized content and teaching methods; students are coded and classified as proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic in reading and English language arts, but these definitions do not allow for variation. Instead, children are taught that regurgitating the "right" answer is what earns higher grades and test scores, not recognition of their own personal context (Ayers & Ayers, 2011; Freire, 1970; Popham, 2001). One of the ways in which student context is framed as irrelevant is through the ways in which many standardized tests are constructed. In *The Truth About Testing*, W. James Popham (2001) presents sample items from standardized tests. Though slightly outdated, these sorts of questions will be familiar to any child attending urban schools today; indeed, not just tests, but many of the scripted curricula used in urban schools provide quizzes in exactly the same format. Popham (2001) argued that the content of many questions actually assess the "very real presence of SES-linked content that gives an edge to children whose parents are middle- or upper-class…" (p. 59).

One item he presents is a 4th grade reading question:

"My father's <u>field</u> is computer graphics.

In which of the sentences below does the world <u>field</u> mean the same thing as in the sentence above?

A. The shortstop knew how to <u>field</u> his position.

B. We prepared the <u>field</u> by plowing it.

C. What <u>field</u> do you plan to enter when you graduate?

D. The nurse examined my <u>field</u> of vision." (p. 60)

In Popham's example, neither reading comprehension nor vocabulary are actually assessed, but instead, socioeconomic status of the student's parents are. Popham suggests that children "from families in which one or both parents are professionals…" (p. 60) are likely to be more familiar with the career-framed interpretation of the word. The class bias in the sentences can also be seen in the reference to farming in answer B, and gender bias is also present (from the reference to male-dominated baseball).

Popham (2001) ultimately argues that 65% of the Language Arts standardized test items he judged were linked to socioeconomic status; this is exacerbated by limitations in curricular access in urban schools, where students are not always provided the information they are then tested on and may not have teachers qualified to teach such material (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Recent visits to schools in South Africa and California suggest such item bias is just as prevalent today. A standardized test in a 4th grade class in a township on the outskirts of Cape Town asked students to determine if the following sentence was correct: "The thief was unable to mask his entry into the home." The teacher reported to one of the authors of this study that none of the students got the question right because they all thought a mask was "something that covered your face." The teacher argued that the students, all black, were learning that how they talk is incorrect, when what they need to learn is "how to think for themselves."

Children are taught to read through reading booklets (rather than entire books), and are taught standardized English in ways that require students to state, for example, the main idea of a particular paragraph, without regard to the notion that perhaps some children (and adults) might have differing perceptions of the main idea. An Oakland language arts teacher shared a question from a worksheet adapted by the district for the

scripted reading program. The question, copied directly from the whiteboard in the classroom, was used, in combination with some 50 other similar items, to assess student comprehension in preparation for the state's standardized testing regimen:

"The main idea of the previous passage is:

A. That American Robins have a red breast.

B. That red is a pretty color.

C. That we should know more about birds.

D. That birds are often named after people."

Without needing to read the previous passage, the issue with this type of question is that the four options are subjective, and, likely solid interpretations of something relevant about the previous passage. The teacher led a discussion about the question with the class, trying to determine why most students got it wrong. The correct answer was "A," but no one got that right because students thought the picture of the robin's breast on their test booklet was orange. "C" made more sense: Most students agreed that after reading the paragraph, they should know more about birds because they had learned new things about the robin; why, they had asked, would they read a passage in school that was not designed to teach them something? After the discussion, the class was convinced even more that the incorrect answer, "C," was right. The point is that many questions that ostensibly assess reading comprehension actually assess a particular way of thinking that not all students share. The real question should be: Who gets to determine what the main idea is? As Lisa Delpit (2012) argues, "The 'main idea' of a passage is merely someone's interpretation of the author's intention (p. 140).

What this type of testing regime results in are quick-fix corporate curricula that are tightly scripted so that urban teachers can just implement without difficulty; having one right answer means no interpretation, no need for discussion. Just teach, and students will learn. Shor (1992) cautions that such "passive, direct instruction puts [student] learning habits to sleep (p. 104)," but more importantly, this sort of framing of one interpretation as the "correct one" also limits development of creative and divergent thinking and perspectives. Indeed, as Wayne Au (2009) argued, high-stakes testing, particularly for reading and writing, ensures that "home cultures, home languages, home discourses, and local knowledge are left out of the curricular content… (p. 126)." In short, literacy is defined, in this high-stakes testing, standardized context, in ways that deny culture, language, social context, and critical interpretation based upon understandings of race and racism, but also silences students who just think differently than the way the tests and curriculum are framed as correct.

Yet writing and expression are, in many ways, the most important outcomes of education. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) clarifies that the way in which those defined as "unable to write" have been dismissed throughout history: "Writing has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilization and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively, or having distance from ideas and emotions" (p. 28). The U.S. has a lengthy history of trying to keep African-Americans from learning to read and write, and while basic literacy has improved dramatically, the problem is that literacy is now defined by test score performance. Linking literacy gains to test score increases separates any meaningful notion of critical literacy; instead

regurgitation of the structures of language becomes the goal of teaching reading and writing in schools (Au, 2009; Freire, 1973).

One of this study's authors has been a reader for admissions exams at two major elite universities on the West Coast, reading thousands of freshman admissions essays over the years. The most interesting essays used the most exciting language and often conveyed the most passion, and not coincidentally, typically received the lowest scores, in part because the use of standardized writing conventions were infrequent or sometimes incorrect. Other essays that had little to say read as formulaic and dry, and tended to receive much higher scores, despite the fact that most readers agreed that the creative essays were "better." Yet the students who were admitted, on the whole, tended to adhere to standardized structures and in short, had little of interest to say.

The same author also reviewed required university-level placement exams for English writing at two universities, and found the same: The students who used creativity and their own voices were most often placed in basic English courses, whereas the students who used standardized conventions received the highest scores. In many ways both cases represent test-reviewer bias: Shifting through hundreds of papers, those that adhere to convention are easiest to grade. The papers that stand out typically are framed as problematic or in need of additional writing remediation, even as reviewers of both sets of essays realized that the systems were rewarding conformity over difference.

Standardizing writing and expression for students has a dramatic impact on teachers as well. June Jordan (1995), a professor who developed the Poetry 4 the People courses at UC Berkeley, argued that, in teaching poetry, she was "learning how not to hate school: how to overcome the fixed, predetermined, graveyard nature of so much of

formal education…" (p. 5). Part of what Jordan was forced to overcome was a reliance upon a very narrow notion of the canon, or what should be taught in schools. NCLB has gone beyond just a narrowed notion of what is worthy of being taught to promote the idea that the entire curriculum for low-achieving schools should be scripted; that way, even terrible teachers, in theory, can just read the curriculum aloud to students. This study's authors have seen quite a number of teachers sit at the front of their classrooms, reading aloud workbooks, complete with timed passages, so that the teacher can even alter the lesson in case the class is 45, 50, or 55 minutes.

Despite often overwhelming pressures placed upon teachers, and a lack of support to learn refreshing, creative, and responsive teaching strategies, many teachers and professors have committed themselves to redefining literacy as a way that centers on developing youth voice to reflect individual context, languages, families, neighborhoods, and histories. In urban classrooms across the country, this has been reflected in hip-hop, poetry, and spoken word interpretations of literacy development, as well as through a focus on narrative, storytelling, and youth participatory action research programs (Ayers and Ayers, 2011; Brown, 2010; Fisher, 2009; Jocson, 2007; Morrell, 2004; Rogers, Morrell, & Enyedy, 2007). These innovations are often framed as outside the typical curriculum, however, and often students do not receive college credit for such courses.

Yet despite such limitations, forced upon by NCLB and standardized testing-influenced curriculum, these efforts redefine literacy in important ways. Jordan (1995) argues that "poetry means taking control of the language of your life" (p. 3), and a center point of many such efforts is to empower urban youth to develop critical consciousness around the many racial barriers they face (Hill, 2009; Macedo, 1994; Rose, 1995).

Christensen (2000) calls these efforts "'rising up' reading – reading that challenges, that organizes for a better world" (p. vii). The rest of such intentional focus for youth is that they ultimately do begin to write much better, in part because "…students take their writing more seriously and care more about fine-tuning and polishing it if they have real audiences" (Christensen, 2000, p. 74). Giving students a reason to write, a reason to read, and a reason to express themselves with purpose ensures they learn to be literate in 21st century skills, with a clear focus on addressing the racism and classism they face (Knaus, 2011; Fisher, 2007; Hill, 2009). Such critical literacy advocates are also clear that urban youth should also learn to speak "standardized English":

> We must teach students how to match subjects and verbs, how to pronounce 'lawyer,' because they are the ones without power and, for the moment, have to use the language of the powerful to be heard. But in addition, we need to equip them to question an educational system that devalues their life and their knowledge. (Christensen, 2000, p. 104)

Redefining literacy to reflect the lives of urban children requires going well beyond standardized assessments and scripted curriculum. Urban schools must empower urban youth to develop a strong sense of self, to develop multiple language fluency, to be able to navigate their home life, their street worlds, and the world of schooling. This requires much more than one-size-fits-all approaches because each student's context is unique, and their strengths, struggles, and personalities often require (and in a democracy, should demand) individualized attention and support. The goal of critical literacy is not just to question and react to racist educational structures, but to also build community, develop resistance strategies, and learn to transform the day-to-day nature of racism.

Privileging of Math and Science

Math and science literacy rates have increasingly taken central stage in the education reform movement. While math and science have always been important issues in K-12 education (Dewey, 1916) over the past five years, there has been a huge increase of awareness around the high need for math and science teachers (U.S. Department of Education). Secretary of Education Arne Duncan believes that the unemployment rate is linked to the lack of high school and college graduates with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) skills, which in turn is linked to the shortage of teachers with "sufficient training" in STEM-related disciplines. (Arkin, 2012):

> Partners have made a wide range of commitments to the initiative including multiple universities pledging to train between 150 and 1,500 new STEM teachers by 2016. Teach for America pledged to recruit 11,000 new teachers in STEM subject areas… the 2013 federal budget set aside $620 million dollars in state grants that would go to reducing the shortage of STEM teachers" (p. 1).

What is missing in such conversations (and funding) is how these new, predominantly white STEM teachers will reach the majority of urban students. It is not enough to train and recruit more of the same; to truly prepare urban students to obtain the jobs waiting for them in STEM-related areas, it will be necessary to 1) recruit local, permanent STEM teachers, and 2) prepare teachers at the university and district level to teach math and science in culturally responsive ways.

Recruiting more of the same predominantly young, white recent college graduates from Ivy League schools with high GPAs to work in large, urban schools will not ensure that urban children learn more math and science. Without a personal connection to each student, without allowing students to develop their own authentic voice within the classroom and without truly seeing the student – looking beyond dress, speech, and hairstyle to the real person – math and science teachers will continue to not engage urban students.

One of the author's children recently had a negative experience with her math instructor, a TFA recruit. The child, ranked first in her 7th grade class, was receiving an 'A' in math but was not chosen to take the placement exam required to move to the advanced math level. The child found out about the test the week prior to the date for administration and was in tears. When the parent spoke to the teacher, the teacher indicated, "I didn't recommend your child because I didn't think she was mature enough." The parent then shared many of her daughter's extracurricular activities and leadership roles both in and out of school. It was evident the teacher did not take the time to get to know the student, and in spite of giving her the highest grades, did not consider the student for accelerated work. When the parent demanded that her child take the placement exam the next week, the teacher indicated that "it wouldn't be fair" because she had been "working with several students" and had them completing extra assignments to prepare for the test. When asked if the author's child could receive those extra assignments, the teacher indicated that she asked parents "who could afford the books" to purchase them for their children, wrongly presuming the economic status of the

family and excluding academic work for students the teacher decided were not wealthy (or "mature") enough.

Extra training in math and science instruction would not remotely address the perception that the teacher had of African-American students; from her perception, the student should not be chosen to take the placement exam because the study materials would be too costly for her family. At the same time, it is fine to give the student an "A" because she exceeded the teacher's obviously low expectations. Experiences such as this reinforce how recruitment of what is already in urban classrooms will not transform math and science learning in urban schools; it is critical to recruit teachers who will value and respect urban youth.

After recruiting local, diverse STEM teachers, it is necessary for universities and school districts to take on the additional challenge of preparing STEM teachers to deliver curriculum in a way that reaches all students. As one teacher remarked, "I was scared of math when I was in school which is why I want to teach it to young people in a way that they can grasp" (personal communication, 2011). Many have discussed the notion of culturally responsive teaching (Cooper, 2012; Delpit, 2012; Epstein, 2012; Gay, 2000; Knaus, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2009) but few actually know how to use those techniques within the classroom.

One of the authors visited a classroom where the teacher had the class outside shooting "hoops" to explain averages and statistics. Another classroom of first-graders were playing dominoes to demonstrate multiples of five. In a 3rd grade classroom, the teacher was using menus and nutrition information from McDonalds to work with fractions. Finally, in one really interesting 5th grade lesson, students used their own ideas

of owning a business to draft business plans to present to local "funders." All of these examples are culturally responsive, but they are also authentic, real-life applications of mathematical functions. Giving teachers the tools to modify curriculum to ensure that it is authentic, provides active exploration, and can be applied in real-life situations is the missing piece rarely discussed when the call goes out for more STEM teachers. Hiring STEM teachers who use the "drill and kill" method reinforced by NCLB will not ensure that children in poverty will increase their understanding and – most importantly – their usage of relevant math and science skills.

While increased math and science skills are always a concern for teachers and students, it has become much more important as the economy has taken a dive. The Obama administration's counter argument that jobs are indeed available, but our nation doesn't have a large enough number of people with the "correct" skills to fill those jobs (Arkin, 2012), leaves the authors wondering if this new focus on pushing more teachers to prepare students in math and science – without proper culturally-responsive training – will lead to creating schools as factories to fill the industry's needs.

Conclusion

The cumulative result of a focus on math and science without connection to strategies that have demonstrated success with urban teachers and students, combined with narrow (and racist) definitions of literacy, and an overarching, one-size-fits-all approach, continues African-American and urban student disengagement. Efforts to address this disengagement have largely centered on recruiting more temporary, elite-educated, and outside-the-community teachers, which appears to reinforce

disengagement. Yet the direction remains: Increasingly, formal education— at the local and national levels— embraces strategies that repeatedly have shown very limited success with African-American youth. Dropout rates continue unabated and underreported.

Meanwhile, federal policy conversations avoid the difficult work of addressing the racial inequalities built into each and every aspect of the system of education. No Child Left Behind and its various manifestations did not create the racial inequality of U.S. schooling; that had long since been ingrained into the hearts and minds of most adults and children. Indeed, the very ways in which knowledge is defined serve to demean and belittle communities of color and multilingual populations, and until schooling shifts to center multiple ways of thinking, expressing, and assessing all of this, the achievement gap will continue to dominate conversation. Attempts to address the achievement gap have reinforced deficit thinking while increasing the standardization of teaching material and methods that push many children away from school, and away from formal learning experiences.

We thus argue that future efforts must shift the ways in which federal policies dictate what is taught, how it is taught, who teaches it, and assessment procedures for examining the effectiveness of each of these. The overarching problem is one of racism and classism; but the way in which this oppression is fostered in schools is through top-down standardization of middle-class white ways of thinking and expression. In any healthy democratic society, schools should not be in the business of minimizing differences in thinking, and such approaches will, by design, continue to compute

indicators and success rates that value one type of thinking, one type of schooling, and one type of person over another.

What this one-size-fits-all approach ultimately results in is a permanent underclass that fulfills the economic need for a continually replenishing cheap labor pool. The young men and women who opt out of this low-wage labor pool, seeing no other dignified option, tend to opt into the prison pipeline. These are not choices. These are the results of intentional policies and practices that ignore the research on culturally responsive approaches, student engagement, and democratic education. The solutions are clear: In order to empower communities in their children's education, these communities must be included in the fabric of the educational system. Communities, in many ways, are the threads that create the fabric. Local educators, adults, professionals, and residents must be centered through meaningful schools that teach young people to address the very societal problems with which they live each day. Creating schools that matter requires ensuring that curriculum reflects and prepares students for the worlds they live in, and in part, this requires local educators committed to local communities.

When literacy is defined as the ability to engage with (and create) a range of multi-media texts, and when math and science are presented as knowledge that can be applied to real world problems, students engage. When expectations are raised beyond learning skills in regurgitation to where students are required to apply what they learn to their local communities, schools become relevant, engaging, and difficult. Yet this difficulty is precisely the challenge that students appreciate: Give them difficult questions, scenarios, and real life situations, and let them develop collaborative solutions to the very barriers that limit their livelihood. In order to create the schools that students

of color need (and that will benefit all children), educators must acknowledge the current (and historical) context of educational genocide that has been designed to silence urban youth, then work with children to transform the purpose of education to prepare our children to address society's most pressing issues.

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