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From Colonization to R.E.S.P.E.C.T.: How Federal Education Policy Fails Children and Educators of Color

Rachelle Lanette Ard

Oakland Unified School District, ebavdir@yahoo.com

Christopher B. Knaus

University of Washington Tacoma, activeeducation@yahoo.com

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**From Colonization to RESPECT:
How Federal Education Policy Fails Children and Educators of Color**

Christopher B. Knaus, University of Washington Tacoma

Rachelle Rogers-Ard, Oakland Unified School District

ABSTRACT

This paper applies a critical race theory lens to contemporary national education policy, from NCLB to the reauthorization of education to RESPECT. The authors argue that these policy efforts continue to ignore the unexamined racism that shapes schooling and ultimately fail children and educators of color through embracing white educators' well-meaning intentions that reflect racial exclusion. The authors further argue that reform efforts create school systems where children of color are removed, silenced and increasingly resigned to the inevitability of mass underemployment and incarceration. The authors conclude with implications that challenge who should develop, implement, and evaluate national and local education policy.

**From Colonization to RESPECT:
How Federal Education Policy Fails Children and Educators of Color**

*As real as it seems the American Dream
Ain't nothing but another calculated scheme
To get us locked up shot up back in chains
To deny us of the future rob our names
Kept my history a mystery but now I see
The American Dream wasn't meant for me
Cause lady liberty is a hypocrite she lied to me
Promised me freedom, education, equality
Never gave me nothing but slavery
- Tupac Shakur, Panther Power*

Educational policy efforts to reform and reframe what and how America teaches our children have always been contested terrain (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2011a; Woodson, 1933/1990). Indeed, discussions around which children should be educated were intertwined with manifest destiny and colonization; formal church and state-supported education expanded as a tool to colonize indigenous Americans and Mexicans already living in the US (Spring, 2013). While education was framed as a tool to force assimilation of certain populations, others (African Americans) were kept out of schooling by threat of violence (Spring, 2013; Watkins, 2001). Eventually, educational advocates such as Frederick Douglas, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson, among others, expanded national discussions from who should be educated to a question of how (Provenzo, 2002; Woodson, 1933/1990). After the desegregation movement essentially legislated that the US would educate all children within the framework of white schools, civil rights battles broke out

because of unequal funding, unequal access, and a racially biased curriculum (Motley, 1998; Spring, 2012).

These civil rights battles fought for support from the federal government and away from state control, but ironically were fought in local communities that often had significant control over what was taught and sometimes even who taught (Fairclough, 2007). Since the late 1970s, however, there has been a slow drift toward a structured, standardized method of evaluating student progress, which further limits local district and even local classroom teacher control (McNeil, 2000). Part of Ronald Reagan's platform in 1980 included disbanding Jimmy Carter's Department of Education and giving power back to the states (Bachman, 2011). Concerned that the US would lag behind other countries, lawmakers tried to influence educational policy at the national level (Spina, 2011). However, when President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, this signaled a dramatic shift toward infusing standardized testing and corporate curricula as a required guide, shaping what and how teachers teach (Darling-Hammond, 2007). The national focus on assessment left little room for teachers to tailor instruction for those children who needed more than techniques that were framed by some as best practice. In essence, students of color, English language learners, and poor students—the very students that these policy approaches were framed as helping—increasingly were left behind (Capps, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Linn, Baker & Betebenner, 2002; Meier & Wood, 2004).

Thirteen years later, research indicates that NCLB has failed to increase test scores, failed to narrow the achievement gap, and failed to address the needs of children of color and those in poverty (Apple, 2007; Hursh, 2007; Knaus, 2007; Straus, 2012). More recent policy efforts to fix NCLB include state waivers to avoid facing the failure of NCLB accountability measures; Race to the Top, a competitive approach to augmenting state-level funding; and reauthorization of the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Guisbond, 2012). In April 2013, the Obama administration shifted the nation's attention from reauthorization to a Blueprint for RESPECT (Recognizing Educational Success, Professional Excellence, and Collaborative Teaching), outlining seven critical components to transforming the educational profession, competitive grant competitions, the formulation of a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) teaching force, and a general orientation to changing the teaching profession (US Department of Education, 2013).

Despite these multifaceted, large-scale efforts to reform the educational system, each of these approaches has failed to address the underlying causes of educational inequalities. Indeed, we argue that the nation's efforts toward educational reform have maintained racial inequalities by continually avoiding the root causes of educational inequities. Thus, current efforts flow directly into a perpetual stream of reformulated educational policy circumstances that require educators to continually shift curriculum and assessment tools while ignoring the unexamined racism that shapes how America provides schooling.

In order to examine this perpetual stream of race-avoidance policies, we apply a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework adapted from several sources (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) as a lens to examine national education policy. While we rely upon document analysis and public policy statements (Bowen, 2009; Lindlof, 1995), we use our professional education experiences, coupled with the experiences of urban educators and students, to inform a conceptual CRT analysis.

We ultimately argue that federal policy benefits white communities and educators aligned to white interests, while justifying the very educational inequalities these policies are framed as solving. Further, federal efforts promote economic inequality and racialized ideals of what an

educator and educational leader should “look” and “act” like. Such a homogenization of the educator force situates efforts that empower students, communities, and/or educators of color as threats that must be silenced. We have referred elsewhere to this process of schooling as “educational genocide” in that current policy efforts intend to silence and disempower African American educators and students (Knaus & Rogers-Ard, 2012). The larger context of educational policy that excludes African Americans simultaneously reinforces students of color, particularly African American, Latino, and Pacific Islander men, with a mindset resigned to mass incarceration. In this paper, we center the impact of such educational genocide on young African American male students and outline the rest of this paper using the words of an African American male resistance icon: Tupac Shakur.

Ain't Nothing But Another Calculated Scheme

Particularly because many policy efforts since NCLB have been framed as reaching out to the very students who feel most excluded from schooling, CRT offers a compelling lens for examining the continuation of structural racial inequalities. We recognize that CRT has been used as a lens shaping legal studies, educational research, and even classroom practice and has been extended to include gender, sexuality, ability, and class-based analyses as a complement to a race-based framework (Annamma, Conner, & Ferri, 2012; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Pratt-Clarke, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Trucios-Haynes, 2001). For the purposes of this analysis, we adapt a narrowly tailored definition of CRT that includes four tenets to guide analysis of policy contexts and impacts (or avoidance of impacts): 1) Racism is everywhere and all the time (Delgado, 1995); 2) The purpose of schools is to silence students and educators of color (Knaus, 2011; Knaus & Rogers-Ard, 2012);

3) White interests attempt to colonize every effort that centers students or educators of color (Bell, 2004; Rogers-Ard, Knaus, Epstein, Mayfield, 2012); and 4) Nurturing, valuing, and centering the perspectives of students and educators of color are the way to transform the first three tenets (Foster, 1997; Obidah, Buenavista, Gildersleeve, Kim, & Marsh, 2007).

As many CRT theorists have argued, US educational policy has maintained a firm grip on legal structures that support the continuation of racial inequality (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1999). CRT, however, offers a critical lens from which to examine that grip as a method of dismantling the structures of oppression. Derrick Bell (2004, p. 193), who clerked for Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, sharpening his teeth on the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* cases, spent his career arguing that legal wins were opportunities for the nation to reassert its racist structures:

Just as the *Brown* decision's major contribution to the freedom struggle was the nation's response to the violent resistance of its opponents, so we who were its intended beneficiaries can learn from the myriad ways in which the relief we deserved was withheld.

CRT offers a tool to outline precisely how educational policy, often framed as solving societal inequalities, continue the pathway of white supremacy by subverting, time and time again, every effort to decenter whiteness and white power. Because of the history of civil rights legislation that passed and ultimately failed to produce equitable results (Bell, 1998), CRT insists on centering America as racism. The point, ultimately, is to adopt and validate an analytical lens that identifies the gravity of racism and insists that this racism is structural, all encompassing, and likely never going away. Bell (2004, 192-193) further argued that to be pragmatic about addressing racism requires taking:

A hard-eyed view of racism as it is, and of our subordinate role in it. We must realize with our slave forebears that the struggle for freedom is, at bottom, a manifestation of our humanity that survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression even if we never overcome that oppression.

If America is to take seriously the charge of fully including African Americans into the democratic institutions we so claim, then a fundamental recognition of the depths of racism and how that racism operates through schooling must be accompanied by systemic action.

To Get Us Locked Up Shot Up Back in Chains

Yet embracing CRT's first tenet, that racism is "everywhere and all the time," challenges the worldview and indeed the educational training of most academics and educators (Apple, 1993; Banks, 1993; Giroux, 1983). We see racism as reflected by Bonilla-Silva's (2010) concept of color-blind racism, where abstract liberalism (the idea that liberal notions made to help folks of color have been reversed under the notion that we should treat everyone the same), naturalization (the idea that racial patterns are a natural part of humanity), cultural racism (norms within communities account for some level of racism), and minimization of racism (racism is over now, right?) guide global structures. Indeed, many US schools and colleges acknowledge these forms in their mission statements, which often proclaim a commitment to social justice, equity, or at the least democracy. This claiming of social justice as a professional purpose justifies educator work within economically impoverished, racially segregated schools. Most educators would argue that they are trying to reverse the ravages of racism facing urban youth of color. Yet most educators – and most schools – are not actually dismantling legal or educational structures that continue racism. Efforts essentially reflect the model of affirmative action (and the

notion of the talented tenth) as educators can justify their approaches when one or two or three young students navigate through oppressive schooling to attend an equally oppressive college. Yet the structures that reduce educational access for African Americans remain clearly visible to those who are looking.

Without recognizing— indeed, naming—racism as part of the educational landscape, educators risk rejecting children of color. While the nation continues to tiptoe around recognition of racism, children of color tend to be acutely aware of the way in which racism shapes their educational lives. Just one month after a court ruling justified George Zimmerman’s killing of Trayvon Martin, one of the authors gave two talks at an educational conference. The first talk— about integrating social justice into the curriculum—was given to a room full of teachers, most of whom were white. Out of perhaps 100 teachers in the audience, perhaps seven stood when asked if they had allowed space for their students to talk about Trayvon Martin or the ruling in the past month. Yet in the second talk—about addressing racism in school structures— approximately 80 educators attended; the vast majority were African American and Latino. The difference in which teachers attended which talk is telling enough, but the response to the Trayvon Martin question was even starker. Every educator of color in that room had talked to their students about the ruling. It’s not just that educators of color talk more about racism with their students; those educators felt they could have been Trayvon Martin. Few white educators even talked about the very racialized violence that the educators of color knew might get them and their students killed.

Because race is “like smog in the air” (Tatum, 2003), ignoring that smog can have dangerous implications (Guinier & Torres, 2002). Given that students of color breathe in that smog and may indeed be killed by that smog, educators have a moral imperative to teach not just

whatever the new curriculum package may be (this year, its common core), but the skills and aptitudes necessary for survival in a racist society. Researchers use the term “teaching for social justice” (Kohl, 2000; Kumashiro, 2009; Marshall & Olivia, 2005), but we argue that teaching children to be able to survive in their neighborhoods and to not internalize the negativity schools teach is deeper than social justice and is critical to stop the genocide of children of color (Knaus & Rogers-Ard, 2012).

To Deny Us of the Future Robs Our Names

The second CRT tenet that guides policy analysis is that the purpose of schools is to silence the voices of students and teachers of color. Since the original purpose of the public school system was to create a sustainable factory workforce, early American teachers only taught certain subjects to a select group of children (Spring, 2013). When the national needs were shifted toward global economic domination, educators became worried that the nation’s public school system would not be able to produce young adults who would be marketable and able to compete (Spring, 2012). Around the same time, the nation began desegregating schools, replacing black educators with white ones (Jordan, 2000), pushing children of color and children in poverty further behind (Knaus & Rogers-Ard, 2012).

In response to increased global concern about the achievement gap, and in response to increasing focus on academic competition with other countries, policymakers have responded with more testing and packaged curricula than ever before, leaving very little thought for student voice (Apple, 2007; Hursh, 2007). When students do not see themselves within the curricula, when student thought is not at the forefront of teaching, when teachers cannot reach individual

students because they are more concerned with being on a certain page at a certain date, teaching and learning becomes dry and uninspired (Ayers & Ayers, 2011).

Within this larger context of colonial educational approaches and the maintenance of white supremacy and economic privilege lies a systemic silencing of educators and students of color. Through white-dominated curriculum and assessment and white-dominated teacher development processes, there is little room for educators of color seeking to transform from such entrenched racist structures (Au, 2009; De Lissovoy, 2012; Delpit, 2012; Epstein, 2006). Indeed, the prevailing policy context is awash in perspectives from wealthy philanthropists, elite-educated policy advocates, and global for-profit interests posing as educational experts (Barkan, 2011; Delpit, 2012; Ravitch, 2011b).

Federal educational reforms include an overarching policy context that disempowers and silences local communities while framing these outsiders as experts. This policy context began with colonization of indigenous Americans and the enslavement of Africans and has continued unabated, albeit in more nuanced, politically correct ways (Bell, 1992; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999). This policy arena frames outsiders as knowing how to organize schools and communities in ways that suggest locals do not and ultimately creates glass ceilings for local educators of color who are continually framed as part of the problem (Epstein, 2006).

The takeover of urban schools is another silencing mechanism. School and district takeovers typically occur in predominantly minority regions, with power typically being taken from the local level and being replaced by non-local influences (Augustine & Freeman, 2011; Niquette & Christoff, 2013; Oluwole & Green, 2009). Such takeovers, expanded through NCLB policy, can extend the maintenance of white economic power in part by disrupting urban policy contexts and school stability. In addition to directly maintaining segregated schools and

communities, school takeovers can ensure that wealth, when gentrifying formerly urban ghettos, remains in white hands, even when those hands are not regional.

The maintenance of white economic power has a corollary impact: The very image of what a teacher, school principal, and district leader looks like is framed within the same privileged context of whiteness. Thus teachers who are seen as “too black,” “too ghetto,” have too strong an accent, are too recently immigrants from the wrong countries, or did not attend an elite enough university are framed as problem teachers (Knaus, *in press*). The mantras from urban districts are often clear: The more elite educated and the less one is from a local community, the more that person is framed as an outstanding teacher or leader candidate. This preference for brand-name, university-educated educators is demonstrated across the globe through hiring decisions and aims for elite education, as if the best and brightest really all attend just a handful of universities, and as if these best and brightest really can solve every problem. A faculty colleague of one of the authors recently sent a self-congratulatory email confirming his daughter’s acceptance to Harvard as proof that he did well as a parent. CRT—along with years of policy attempts to extend admissions into the world’s most selective colleges—suggests that who we consider the best and brightest is rooted deeply in racism’s grandfather clause: The policy-level difference between elitism and racism is intangible.

While much has been written about teacher perceptions and race within teacher preparation programs (Joseph & Burnaford, 1994; Jussim, et al, 1996; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), there is little discussion around stereotypical notions of how teachers physically look (Webster & Mitchell, 1995). While 84% of the nation’s teachers are white and 71% of teachers in America are white women, just 0.06% of the nation’s teachers are African American men (Feistritzer, 2011). The overwhelming majority of white teachers teach a rapidly growing

national student-of-color population; forty-eight percent of the nation's children are children of color (Feistritzer, 2011).

This national mismatch between white teachers and students of color can influence hiring managers, who may see teachers who look physically non-white as not part of their faculty (Rogers-Ard & Mayfield Lynch, *in press*). Numerous researchers have written about the need to increase diversity within the teaching workforce (Bireda & Chait, 2011; Boser, 2011; Epstein, 2005; Epstein, 2006; Gordon, 2000; Rogers-Ard, et al 2012). In addition, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the National Education Association, and several other partners presented a “call to action” to recruit and retain diverse teachers nationwide (NEA, 2004). These national reform efforts fail to address the underlying concept of white interests within education, which is led in part by the notion of who is determined to be the disseminator of knowledge in this country. Efforts to address this context of whiteness are essential to disrupt the colonial, and increasingly global, context of white teachers educating children of color with white-framed curricula and white-framed assessment tools.

Kept My History a Mystery But Now I See

Efforts to hire more teachers of color, along with other attempts to expand urban adult influence, are often met with white resistance. The attempted colonization of every effort that centers students or educators of color raises direct implications for national and local policy efforts which rarely involve the communities that these policies are designed to disempower. The Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) is a prime example of the promises of contemporary policy directions that ultimately fail to empower local communities. HCZ is praised as a systematic approach to solving educational inequality through integrating health, housing, and other social

service supports into the fabric of schools (Grossman & Curran, 2004; Spielman, 2007); these efforts have also been shown to increase student achievement (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). HCZ was seen as so successful that President Obama expanded its efforts into large-scale grant processes through the Department of Education—Full-Service Community Schools and the more expansive Promise Neighborhoods (Zelon, 2010). While the integration of services is a powerful (and needed) approach, what these models suggest is that educational achievement is ultimately tied to outside philanthropic funding

The HCZ and resulting federal grant processes essentially model that the success of urban communities rests upon white philanthropic support (Barkan, 2011). Without corporate foundational funding (and much smaller pots of federal funds), school communities are framed as doomed to fail, and when the market turns downward, white funding dries up (Spector, 2009). This reliance upon white funding continues the silencing of educators of color who often offer solutions that differ from the current national policy edifice of outside-in approaches while also ignoring the lengthy history of white philanthropy supporting white-framed educational approaches masked as “black education” (Watkins, 2001).

These contemporary practices reflect historical precedent, with new rounds of educational and social interventions relying upon white funding, without also calling into question the racial structures that created the racial inequality being addressed. Even well-meaning white educators can be hesitant to engage in these types of discussions; not wishing to be viewed as racist, they often choose colorblindness when discussing racist policies that ultimately negatively affect children of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). The problem with colorblindness as a strategy for addressing racism is that it simply ignores race, which makes centering racism impossible. How can one center a thing that doesn’t exist?

Thus, as with efforts like the Harlem Children's Zone, there is no pressing need to actually empower communities of color; instead, one can simply donate the problem away. This pay-for-racism model further reflects the political reality of a black president, which is repeatedly interpreted as proof that racism no longer exists (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Wise, 2009). This complicated context of power, funding, and control creates an environment where it is difficult for educators to have transparent conversations about the ways in which children of color, especially black and brown boys, experience racism as schooling. An undercurrent of individualized racism thus fuels larger societal racism that perpetuates the notion that white people can actually save poor people of color through white philanthropic efforts. The notion of the white savior complex (Cammarota, 2011) is based upon what Trepagnier (2010, p. 15) calls silent racism, or the "unspoken thoughts, emotions, and assumptions about black Americans that dwell in the minds of white Americans." These multifaceted, continually intersecting forms of individual and structural racism continue to reinforce white people as saviors while denying that white privilege is what has created the very problems we are talking about.

The American Dream Wasn't Meant for Me

Recognition of the various forms of racism and recruiting and retaining teachers of color are part of the solution, but re-centering community control over the education of children is another. Missing from both conversations are students; creating opportunities for disempowered students to voice their realities is another way to transform silencing. Nurturing students of color to develop and then express their critical, cultural voices through writing, spoken word, reading of under-utilized poets, and expanding throughout the arts can be a powerful resistance tool, one that goes far beyond the notion of "heroes and holidays" (Nieto, 1995). Yet such student-focused

expression is not part of the standardized curriculum and often results in punishment for the student (Knaus, 2011).

It is difficult, however, to allow students of color to develop and express their authentic voices through written critiques and other pedagogical strategies when the students are not in the classrooms. Black boys, in particular, are constantly being removed from their classrooms, either to a “buddy room,” to the principal’s office, to the on-site suspension room, or simply off campus. In fact, in 2010, 28% of black males were suspended at least once per year, more than three times the amount of suspensions for white males (Losen & Skiba, 2010).

It is natural for teachers of all races to remove children for a “time out” when behavior is not classroom-worthy. As educators, we have moved children to different spaces and desks when the need arose. However, research indicates that children of color—in particular, black boys and Latino boys—are more frequently removed from the classroom (and on the pathway toward removal from society) at an alarming rate (Losen & Skiba, 2010). This removal continues for African American and Latino men well into adulthood, which normalizes boys of color being demonized in the faces of their mainly white female teachers.

The first removal is simply to the “buddy room.” Many schools use this device as a way of keeping the child in school so suspension rates do not rise. Some African American teachers, for example, are often the “holders” of the children other teachers can’t handle because they have demonstrated effective ways of dealing with these children’s behavior. As one educator mentioned, “They send all the black boys to me because I’m the only black teacher at the school” (Personal communication, 2012). Another African American teacher noted, “I get all of the black boys and girls; I teach fifth grade, but you can come by at any time and see children K-5 in the back of my classroom because I’m the only one they can talk to” (Personal communication,

2013). Clearly, there are many good reasons to use buddy rooms when the occasional child needs to step out of the classroom, but when the same few children, repeatedly African American or Latino, are sent out all the time, faculty and staff must begin to look at their data. The tendency to normalize sending black and brown boys out of classrooms as part of daily teaching is troubling.

The principal's office becomes another holding cell. As one parent mentioned to the authors, "At any given time, when you walk into the principal's office, there are six or seven black boys sitting there all day" (Personal communication, 2011). Because few principals are people of color, being removed from a white-led classroom to a white-held principal's office is often not helpful, especially when children of color feel misunderstood or that the punishment for the behavior was not warranted. Going to the principal's office often requires the use of a referral: a small piece of paper that is supposed to outline the reasons why the child has been removed from the classroom society. However, because teachers are extremely busy, and because there may not be a safe learning environment for black and brown boys, research indicates that the most popular reason for sending boys out of the classroom via referral is defiance of adult authority (Colvin, 2009; Gregory, 2008).

The term "defiance" is a broad generalization that can include anything from tapping too loudly on the desk to actually yelling out "no" when told to do something. While classroom management is an essential aspect of any effective teacher's toolkit, it is also imperative to look at the ways in which black and brown boys are demonized within classrooms. Being shuttled out of the classroom via referral is to be handed a piece of paper that effectively tells the student that their behavior is so disruptive to others that they should no longer participate in the classroom they are required to be in.

After so many referrals, African American and Latino boys are effectively removed from the larger society through the accumulation of suspensions. While referrals can come from an individual teacher, suspensions typically come from the principal and/or head of discipline at the school. According to a recent report by UCLA's Civil Rights Project:

More than one-third of black male students are suspended, and black students overall are four times as likely to be suspended as white students. The vast majority of suspensions are for minor infractions of school rules, such as disrupting class, tardiness, and dress code violations, rather than for serious violent or criminal behavior (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

A recent study clarified that the number of suspensions within one urban school district was disproportionate for African American boys:

While African American boys comprised 17% of the student population in 2010-11, they comprised 42% of students suspended. Nearly one in ten African American boys in elementary school, one in three in middle school, and one in five in high school were suspended in 2010-2011. For those African American students with multiple suspensions, 44% were suspended solely for defying authority. African American male students were suspended for a combined total of 5869 days in 2010-2011, representing an average daily attendance (ADA) financial loss of approximately \$160,000 to the district. African American males were suspended at a rate more than six times the rate for white males across the district. In elementary schools this ratio was closer to nine times higher, while in high schools the rate was slightly over double the rate for white males (Brown, et al, 2012).

For those schools not wanting to post huge numbers of suspensions, on-campus suspension, or in-house suspension, is another option. The same numbers of African American and Latino boys are removed from class, but instead of receiving a suspension that might affect one's perception of how black and brown boys are treated at the school site, offending boys are sent to a classroom that has been designated as a holding pen. In this way, while there may be no bars on the windows, black and brown boys are removed, silenced, and taught to sit and wait while someone in authority watches over them.

For those who are sent to in-house suspension, they soon become savvy enough to “work the system.” As one 13-year-old indicated to the authors, “Jacquan knows exactly what time to piss off Ms. Stanley. Every day, at the same time, he is sent to in-house suspension. It's gotten so easy; we all know exactly when it's going to happen” (Personal communication, 2012). For those students who are sent away from school, they often spend time outside the home getting prepared for the next step: arrests.

Black youth are up to three times more likely to be arrested than white youth (Huizinga, et al 2007). In one urban school district, black youth were 73% of all juvenile arrests, although they were only 29% of the city's youth population (ACLU, 2013). Michelle Alexander, (2012) argues:

Many offenders are tracked for prison at early ages, labeled criminals in their teen years, and then shuttled from their decrepit, underfunded inner city schools to brand-new, high-tech prisons. They are...pushed out of schools through racially biased school discipline policies” (p. 150/199).

However, the impact of the silencing and removal of large groups of black and brown students is even more catastrophic. We argue that the large numbers of black and brown men

who are shuttled away from their communities and placed behind bars at an alarming rate are easier to comprehend because of the large numbers of black and brown boys who begin being removed from their classrooms and larger school societies at an alarming rate and at a very early age. When one is demonized within elementary schools, it is easy to rationalize the same treatment more than 15 years later: “This...is the making of these bad boys, not by members of the criminal justice system on street corners or in shopping malls or video arcades, but in and by school, through punishment. It is an account of the power of institutions to create, shape, and regulate social identities” (Ferguson, 2001, pg. 2).

Further, because so many huge numbers of black and brown men are incarcerated, this system defines what it means to be black in America. So then does it define what it means to be a black boy in a system developed, funded, and facilitated by white women: Black boys/black men should be removed and silenced; they are dangerous; their behavior is defiant. Remove them.

Recently, one administrator asked a room of more than 150 educators to close their eyes and picture a straight-A student. He then asked them to raise their hands if the person they pictured was an African American male. No one raised their hand. Similarly, when one thinks of a criminal, few picture a white person; the stereotype of a criminal is of black and brown men. When white criminals are pictured, it is almost always in terms of what is framed as “white” crime: “Whiteness mitigates crime, whereas blackness defines the criminal” (Alexander, 2012, pg. 199).

A further impact of the removal and silencing of black and brown boys has to do with the ways in which girls view black boys. As one teenager mentioned to one of the authors, “I can’t

like Joshua; he's too loud! I only like smart boys, and they're all white!" (personal communication, 2011). Ise Lyfe (2012), an Oakland-based hip hop artist, put it this way:

What little girls are learning is a personal and real time validation of the message that is fed to her through media and society at large: Black men and boys are naturally monsters. They are untrustworthy, irresponsible, and have no self-control. Black men and boys are undesirable, unreliable, and most obviously, you should have a low expectation for them. Every time (yes, every time) we are kicking a black boy out of class or writing him a referral we are adding to the demise of the black family (Lyfe, 2012, pg. 2).

Policy Implications

The nation's educational policies, from NCLB to RESPECT, are not the only answer to school reform. As we have demonstrated, these policies perpetuate a culturally biased educational system that targets children and teachers of color, especially African American males. If systems transformation from racism to equity and inclusion is a goal of legal advocates, scholars, and educators (and this question has yet to be definitively answered), there must be a willingness to overhaul the way we "do" education. Maintaining the same linear approaches, where expensive corporate solutions are neatly packaged and contain dozens of unintended consequences, will only continue the racial status quo. In what follows, we offer several opportunities for structural inclusion of perspectives of educators of color into the decision-making fabric of US educational policy.

Much advocacy and scholarly work has been done to shift the purpose of education in the US toward a socially just, real-world education that empowers voice in students as a way of preparing youth for active participation in democracy (Barber, 1992; Freire, 1970/1993). Systemic transformation toward an inclusive, intentionally empowering purpose of education

remains – and should remain – a lofty goal. But while educational advocates attempt to redefine the purpose of education in a democracy, hands-on efforts must also work to center the voices of excluded students and communities, which will in turn increase the presence of alternative voices. Such locally centered efforts also require less reliance upon outside experts to solve educational problems created by this very reliance upon outside experts. The ways to best educate students of color vary dramatically and depend entirely on how communities define “best” and “educate.” Outside experts can help support local conceptions of the purpose of schooling, but leadership of local schools should be centered locally, with local concerns guiding educational policy as well as determining educational policy-makers.

At the micro-systems level, teachers who are familiar with, taught in, and lived within communities of color that serve children and youth in poverty must be part of the individual school and community transformation process. This requires expansion of local efforts to prepare local residents for local schools in ways that accurately represent America’s diverse communities. An all-white teaching staff of a school that is almost entirely of color is simply unprepared culturally to center the community voice. Relatedly, student voice must be centered as a condition of engaging students in school. Developing student voice as a way of structuring schools also empowers students to be more active participants in shaping the way local schools are organized. This is not to say that segregated communities should not have integrated teaching staffs but instead that a balance can expand student learning styles and approaches and support cultural nuances, linguistic foundations, and local community concerns rather than penalize individual students for not embracing the norms of whiteness.

Additionally, as the US increasingly focuses on “research-based best practices” and integrating educational approaches that have been demonstrated to “work,” critical conversation

must be allowed to interrogate methodology and purpose. What is framed as best practice is often geared entirely toward demonstrating standardized test score increases, but many communities of color are not advocating for such increases. What works to increase standardized test scores is not what many urban communities clamor for. Safe schools, relevant curriculum, culturally responsive teaching, and local responsiveness are much more common. Basing public policy upon research that relies and adheres to white norms and standards limits decolonizing methodologies and ignores the large bodies of research that are devalued by traditional academic worldviews. Policy approaches that expand rather than narrow conceptions of what works, based upon expanded definitions of multiple purposes of education, would go a long way toward shifting from a one-size-fits-all approach to a multi-faceted democratic educational approach that acknowledges and addresses America's diverse students and communities.

Conclusion

To paraphrase Alexander (2012), as educators, we need reforms that allow all educators to see each other fully, learn from each other, including black and brown boys and educators of color, and do what we can to teach each other toward a more culturally responsive educational system. James Baldwin (1962, p. 9) further argued that “people find it very difficult to act on what they know.” We conclude by augmenting Baldwin's argument; educators of color find it difficult to act on what they know because they face racialized backlash for doing what they know in classrooms designed to silence their students. And ultimately, we argue that communities of color have long since known what they need and have been forcibly kept from implementing community-centric education since the US was founded. Reforms within the same structure will only continue to replicate the structures of racism. Only systemic transformation,

away from racism, toward a racially inclusive democracy, where local voices have significant decision-making powers to impact what matters to local adults, will shift us from our racism.

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