

Educational Reform for Black and Brown Students: “A System Cannot Fail Those It Was Never Meant to Protect”

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The American Educational System has an equity problem. Black and brown students are still statistically not meeting the education standards as their non-black and brown counterparts. More and more students of color are targeted and fall between the cracks of the educational system. It has become imperative for schools, school districts, state governments, and the national government to begin to take a closer look at the American Educational system and reflect upon its inequalities. If the system is not considered equitable, what needs to be done to make it equitable? The responsibility for making a change in the national school system, is that of everyone. As W.E.B Du bois states “A System Cannot Fail those it was Never Meant to Protect.” The system has failed our black and brown children and it is time to address the issue. The intent of the research is to explore the inequalities of the American Educational system and determine the need for change.

Keywords: inequality, educational reform

Introduction

Historically, the American system was built upon inequalities and separation of the races. This is why W.E.B. Du Bois determined it as the “problem of the color line”; the invisible line that divides the races from the White Anglo Saxon America. America was built on African Slavery, Native American Genocide, and annexation of Mexico (Diangelo, 2018). Reflection upon this, alludes to the basic fact that the foundations of American Society and Culture is rooted in inequalities and injustices of people of color. People of color, scientists sought to prove, were naturally inferior to whites (Diangelo, 2018). With this being said, if historically people of color were never considered to be equal to their Anglo Saxon counterparts, why would systematic processes be defined as equal for all races? Race was not only created to justify a racially exploitative economic system, it was invented to lock people of color into the bottom of it (Oluo, 2018). If race was invented to lock people of color into the bottom, the system of education which would be rooted in the same theoretical framework, would be designed to intentionally refrain students of color from educational success. Closer examination of the American Educational

system is needed in order to bring about the change to ensure the educational success of all students.

American Educational System & Equity

Race as we know it in the US is closely integrated with our economic system (Oluo, 2018). The same could be stated for school systems and districts of the United States of America. The public school system of America sees black and brown students as violent, disruptive, unpredictable future criminals, hence, the school-to-prison pipeline that refers to the high level of suspensions and expulsions of brown and black students in the school systems of the United States. The “school -to-prison pipeline” is the term commonly used to describe the alarming number of black and brown children who are funneled directly and indirectly from our schools into our prison industrial complex, contributing to devastating levels of mass incarceration that lead to one in three black men and one in six Latino men going to prison in their lifetimes, in addition to increased levels of incarceration for women of color (Oluo, 2018). This would imply that the institution of American Education is fundamentally designed for brown and black students to be unsuccessful at obtaining an equal and fair educational experience. In other words, this would also mean that brown and black students will have to work extremely harder in the American Educational system in order to overcome the systematic odds that have already been implanted against their educational success.

Separate & Unequal Schools

American public schools have changed dramatically, becoming increasingly diverse and, more recently, segregated by ethnicity-race (as cited in Long et al., 2019). This would indicate that the more diverse the student population becomes, the more brown and black students in the American school systems are destined to join the “school-to-prison pipeline”. Our black and brown students are continuously fighting school systems that teach from racist and colonialist perspectives (Oluo, 2018). This sets expectations through curriculum content, common core standards, and hidden curriculum that does not incorporate the cultural capital of black and brown students. A study conducted by Kumar (2021) found that 93.1% of the ELA (English Language Arts) curriculum’s instructional text of grades 9-12, was written by white authors from the United States and Europe, this would suggest, given the nature of the diversity of the classroom, that only the perspectives and identities of people of European descent are valued and objectified.

The United Kingdom’s educational system has been experiencing the same monopoly and proliferation of dominant white European canons comprising existing curriculum that impacts adversely on Black, Asian, and minority ethnic learners’ engagement and sense of belonging (Arday, Belluigi, & Thomas, 2021). This would also indicate that brown and black students are facing the same racial disparities not only in the United States, but also across the globe. However, in the UK there has been a movement known as the Decolonising the Curriculum Movement (Arday et al., 2021), which aims to dismantle the existing orthodoxies by advocating a curriculum that reflects the multiple histories of black and indigenous populations globally but particularly within the United Kingdom (UK). A curriculum that is absent of reflective content of diverse and multicultural society continues to contradict and comprise the lofty egalitarian ideals often espoused by universities.

Preparing future teachers for racial justice in the classroom, becomes imperative for teacher education programs to incorporate. This became even more apparent with the world witnessing the racial scaffolding and response to the loud outcry to the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed black man killed at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer in 2020 (Iaac-Savage & Merriweather, 2021). Media coverage of this social injustice

was clearly witnessed by black and brown students. How the classroom and curriculum approaches social injustices that happen in society during current times varies from how prepared teachers are to address the situation that happens. The training of teachers to prepare them for addressing social justice in the classroom is slowly being addressed by teacher education programs at universities and colleges. According to Isaac-Savage and Merriweather (2021), there are 13 steps to increasing knowledge and awareness about race, and resistance, advocating for direct and indirect actions, and creating an infrastructure inclusive of funding and policy to support collective efforts of social and racial justice education. The following steps would assist colleges and universities to improve and incorporate social justice into their teacher education programs: (1) Build capacity for adult educators to acknowledge “their privilege and systems of advantage”, (2) Change policy to require courses in master and doctoral level adult education graduate programs on race and racism, (3) Develop degree programs, certificates programs, concentrations on adult education racial justice, (4) Develop a program on race and racism for ongoing continuing professional education, (5) Lobby funders and legislators to require ongoing professional education courses on race and racism as a contingency of receiving funding, (6) Develop a mechanism for adult educators who do not have funds to pay for such training to receive it for free, (7) University-community-based adult educators should work collaboratively to develop local training programs on race and racism, (8) Create a national center for adult education racial justice, (9) Create a space for the racial and racial justice advocates to do the work pedagogically, (10) Implement curricula-based change, (11) Create a space for dialogue which is uncompromising, (12) Include discourses representing racially minoritized voices, and counterstories of racial injustices, and (13) Engage in critique of the field at major conferences by addressing why adult education must be decolonized, including why privilege lives in and pervades pedagogical strategies and beliefs.

Microaggression and the Classroom

Microaggression is defined as a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group such as a racial minority (Merriam-webster.com, 2022). Contrary to belief, microaggressions happen in the classroom, because of the implicit biases of a teacher. White preservice teachers fail to understand how their actions are grounded in White cultural norms, they may inadvertently show favor to White students and form negative judgements about students of color, perceiving their abilities as lacking (as cited in LaCroix & Kuehl, 2019). With this in mind, educators and future educators have to be prepared through professional development and teacher education programs in order to be consciously aware of their potential for microaggression in the classroom.

Instructing Diverse Learners and the Curriculum Teacher education faculty recognize the need to prioritize preparing preservice teachers to work with an increasingly diverse K-12 student population (as cited in LaCroix & Kuehl, 2019), making it imperative for future educators to become multicultural advocates both in and out of the classroom. Preservice teachers should be mindful of their attitudes and biases about race and ethnicity as well as the sociopolitical issues and personal beliefs concerning society, the purpose of schools, and their responsibility towards students (as cited in LaCroix & Kuehl, 2019). It is easy to portray microaggressions if an individual is not fully aware of their own personal biases. Teachers that are not aware of their own personal biases can create a learning atmosphere that may not be conducive to learning. Creating an atmosphere filled with microaffirmations can aid in creating culturally relevant pedagogical approaches, which empower students socially, politically, and culturally as a form of knowledge enhancement (as cited in Samuels, Wilkerson, & Watkins, 2020). In general, students need adequate love and a welcoming learning environment in order to master

curriculum content.

The question that becomes apparent is “How to prepare service teachers to be aware of their personal biases?” Also, teachers that may already be in the classroom would also need to be trained to be aware of their own personal biases that are brought into the classroom daily. Teachers that are already in the classroom would need professional development in order to develop and understand how personal biases could influence instruction and the dynamics of transference of learning. While preservice teachers would need to rely on their university teacher education programs to ensure that courses encompass instruction of the impact of personal bias in the classroom, which would mean, course evaluation among course development would become necessary for teacher education programs to ensure preservices are prepared to instruct a multicultural and diverse classroom of black and brown students.

Conclusion

Looking closely at the American Educational System has definitely indicated that there are inequities among black and brown students and their white counterparts. The ELA K-12 curriculum has also shown itself to reflect content written by primarily white authors from the United States and Europe, portraying the devaluation of other cultures and their rich literature. It is time to take a closer look at the American Educational System and Preservice Teacher programs in order to reform, change, and develop more multicultural K-12 curriculum content and culturally and bias aware educators. If the change process does not begin soon, W.E.B Du Bois’s statement “A System Cannot Fail those it was Never Meant to Protect.” will still continue to hold true even in the 21st century.

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