

“Pay Attention to the Culture of Schooling”

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I have been asked to reflect briefly on the question of what do we mean by equity in education in the twenty-first century. As sociologist of education, I would like to take this opportunity to tell you what I have seen on the “ground” as I have interacted with hundreds of students across high schools in the United States for the last few years. My thoughts pertain mainly to the social and cultural functions of schooling. Policy makers conventionally work to effect positive outcomes on the technical aspects of education—i.e., the human capital aspect, what students learn and obtain in skills—but I want to offer some arguments that get less attention in policy circles, although their existence certainly have serious impact on educational outcomes. Yet, I can’t say definitely that these processes or forces actually “cause” anything because I am first and foremost an ethnographic interviewer—searching for the meanings that students impose on the schooling experience. And while little is written in the media or policy circles, these meanings matter. In fact, they might matter more than we know.

Have we sufficiently rectified the economic and educational disparities that are so highly correlated with skin color, ethnicity, and social class status in U.S. society to say that neither of these social factors no longer matters? I think not. By all indicators, we still have a long way to go before we can claim either a post-racial or a post-class nation. While we know that the issue of inequality is multifold in its origin, I believe that the Obama administration, in conjunction with the state and national legislative branches, must develop educational policies that demonstrate a mindfulness of the massive educational “debt,” to borrow from Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006), that people of color inherited from systems of colonization, genocide, and slavery. Certainly, that debt is not repaid because America has elected its first black president. The “opportunity gap” that exists across racial and correlating class lines is more expansive than that—much wider. That debt compounds over the decades as inequality continues to rise, enabling the rich to get richer and the poor to become poorer, in both relative and absolute terms.

This legacy of debt is reflected in both material and educational terms. The college diploma is in the early twenty-first century what the high school diploma became in the mid-

twentieth century. In an increasingly technologically-savvy, knowledge-based economy, the United States requires graduates with specialized skills—especially ones that will aid as the forces of globalization persist. Such an economy will require a knowledge base of strong math, science, and literacy skills. And if the test scores and college-going rates of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are any indication, then we can safely assume that racial, ethnic, and class issues persist in American education.

Blacks and Latinos—who, according to demographic forecasts, will comprise a majority-minority by the middle of the twenty-first century—may not have the skills to lead this country if our schools do not adequately prepare them for higher educational attainment. Many black and brown children do not attend high schools that adequately prepare them for further educational opportunities. The U.S. national graduation rate stands at 68.8 percent for the class of 2007, the most recent year for which data are available. This represents a slight drop, four-tenths of a percentage point, from 69.2 percent for the previous high school class (Swanson 2010).

There's only a 50-50 chance for high school completion for members of historically disadvantaged U.S. minority groups (Swanson 2004). The dropout rate for Latinos is more than double the national average. One in five African American students will fail a grade in elementary or secondary school, while the average for students overall is one in ten. In the largest metropolitan areas of the U.S., the dropout rates in public schools are fifty percent or higher. Only a third or less of African American, Latino, and Native American students are enrolled in college preparatory classes, compared to half or more of Asian and white students. The average white thirteen-year-old reads at a higher level and fares better in math than the average black or Latino seventeen-year-old (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007).

Further, far too many of our African American and Latino youth are headed to the University of the Penitentiary as the school-to-prison pipeline continues to expand. African American youth constitute 45 percent of juvenile arrests, although they comprise only 16 percent of the overall youth population (NAACP Legal Defense Fund 2006). Their criminalization begins early in school: K-12 black students are twice as likely as their white peers to be suspended and three times as likely to be expelled from school (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2006). This crisis is particularly acute among males.²

It is clear that the levels of elementary and secondary school preparation in many urban districts must improve significantly before the number of African American, Latino, and Native American applicants to college increases. Many of our colleges and universities find themselves competing heavily over the limited “supply” of college-ready black and Latino high school

graduates; this problem is compounded by the fact that many students who are accepted do not have the finances to attend. Yet, now an economic downturn and diminishing higher education budgets threaten college affordability.

Currently there is a strong cry in the education reform community for accountability. The federal No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB), which increased the U.S. government's role in public education—an institution that has been left to control of each of the fifty states historically—mandates that schools must bring 100 percent of all of its students to the level of proficiency on the tests created by each state by 2014. The No Child Left behind Act of 2001 has substantially increased the testing requirements for states and set demanding accountability standards for schools, districts, and states with measurable adequate yearly progress (AYP) objectives for all students and subgroups of students defined by socioeconomic background, race-ethnicity, English language proficiency, and disability. Some Civil Rights advocates have hailed the merits of NCLB because it compels districts to disaggregate test-score findings by race, ethnicity, and class (using free and reduced lunch indicators), and thus is believed to illuminate the stark and disparate educational resource contexts between low-income, minority and middle-class, mainly White students.

The fifty states' content standards, the rigor of their tests, and the stringency of their performance standards vary greatly. Each state has had to come up with a system of accountability that includes rewards and sanctions to schools, educators, and students that are tied to whether they meet the state's goals outlined in its AYP plan. As an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, NCLB requires, for example, that states have content standards in reading and mathematics, that tests are linked to those standards and administered annually to those in Grades 3 through 8 and at least once to those between the grades 10-12, and that all students are tested in science at least once at each level from elementary to middle to high school. This is the basis of high-stakes testing and accountability that exists in the United States.

Unfortunately, the good intentions of reformers have taken us in a dangerous direction, one in which we measure the success of the overwhelming majority of U.S. teachers and students by how well students do on one-shot, fill-in-the-bubble tests. The popularity of testing as a measure of success has taken hold so fast that we are losing sight of solid evidence showing that there are other, more effective ways to assess students and teachers. Very few states use extended response items or some performance assessment—which is linked to higher-order thinking skills—as their requisite high-states test (Darling-Hammond 2010).

This test-and-punish trend is playing out right now with high drama in Los Angeles, where teachers are fighting back as many were named as ineffective in the *Los Angeles Times* because their students' test results this past year were lower than the year before on the California's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) test. Defining academic success as such will likely cost thousands of teachers either their jobs—many who are effectively engaging students in learning.

On the flip side, the San Francisco Chronicle's story on one of the district's educational darlings, June Jordan School for Equity, shows a school with students who are not placing high on achievement tests, but who are succeeding in other important ways academically. June Jordan students' test scores place the school in the category of "worse performing." And yet, more than three-quarters of June Jordan's graduating seniors attend college—well above the state average of 50 percent. The case of a school like June Jordan raises a particularly interesting question: can we produce highly successful children even if they score fairly on tests? Of course, it is highly imperative that when they graduate from high school, students possess strong literacy and numeracy skills. They also need strong critical thinking skills and the propensity to think creatively and innovatively.

As an academic researcher, I have spent hundreds of hours over the last five years in high schools across the country. In these schools, I have witnessed how the effect of high-stakes testing is eroding the relationships between teachers and school officials, teachers and parents, and even teachers and students. What happens in day-to-day exchanges between educators and students and even students and students in terms of actual treatment and care of an(other) group or persons is absent from national conversations about educational improvement and reform. I tend to believe that there is some validity in the comments of an African American student whom I encountered at one high school one morning in the auditorium with students who were on in-school suspension (ISS) for various transgressions such as talking back to teachers or being repeatedly late for school.

"They don't really care about us when it comes to school", said Darlene, a 15-year-old African American female attending a relatively high-performing Southern high school. "They just need us to perform well on these tests so that the school can look good, and they [the educators] can keep their jobs," she continued.

Indeed, all we seem to care about in the United States these days are test-score results and international standings with other countries on particular educational outcomes, without going deeply behind the scenes to investigate the processes and mechanisms that will make youth committed to their education in a particular school. Darlene and several of her school mates informed me that they sometimes throw in the towel on these tests, especially when

they feel disconnected from the material and when they view the test's worth as something only to make educators "look good."

These students' comments and the current debates about how we improve the educational landscape of American public schooling should compel us to think seriously about the direction that educational policy is taking. To get high test scores, many districts have teachers spend copious amounts of time on testing strategies; taking away time to cultivate a love for learning, to teach actual content and learning skills that students will need for college and life.

Even worse, students who don't test well often become "collateral damage" in some "good" schools, where the objective of maintaining high rankings is such a priority that the schools transfer low performers by "dumping" or sending kids to other, lower performing schools. When educators start to dump kids, then they certainly prove Darlene correct—that it is not the child that officials care about but rather what that child can do to make them appear to have performed their jobs successfully.

Obviously, we must do something to staunch the serious inequities that exist between and within schools. The impetus for our current testing fixation is the academic achievement gap between students of different race and class backgrounds. Yet how we define academic success today may very well threaten the well-being of millions of school-aged children who do not possess family, neighborhood, and material resources that we know improve test scores. Students who excel on these tests are often exposed to vastly different social realities beyond the classroom than those who do not. We expect poor kids to perform as well as middle-class and affluent ones, without the same supports, such as current text books, high quality teachers, safe schools, one-on-one tutors, and expensive test-prep programs.

Emphasizing testing over teaching has put the cart before the horse, however. We should apply regular and consistent low-stakes testing that enables teachers to understand how well their students are learning and require a portfolio of work that has students using a range of critical thinking skills. Otherwise if success and quality are only indicated by a simple score, then policy makers risk succumbing to a very narrow notion of achievement.

What should we do to ensure that they *learn*, that we cultivate a culture of a deep appreciation of knowledge and learning among all of our youth, and not just promote (whether intentional or not) a "rational-choice" learning culture where youth perceive schooling as the means to an ends, a credential, for work mobility? Many of our teachers are now compelled to teach to tests and are using a "banking" approach; a term popularized by the progressive educational theorist and practitioner Paolo Freire. (That notion of "banking" re-emerges in the current, highly discussed film "Waiting for Superman," when the narrator walks us through an animation where teachers are literally opening the heads of children and pouring (liquid)

knowledge into them.) Kids sit silently in the classroom “workshop” fidgeting and uninspired by the workshops and call-and-response exercises assigned to them.

Frankly, many of our nation’s youth are quite *bored*, yes, bored with how they are being taught today. Recently, I viewed a talk enhanced by animation, entitled “Changing Education Paradigms” by Sir Ken Robinson, a renowned education expert and creativity expert (Retrieved at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcdGpl4U>). Robinson cites research that reveals how much we are alienating millions of students to the point of disengaging them because they do not see the purposes of school any longer. Furthermore, in this particular social and cultural moment, many students are bored to death by what they experience in the classroom—especially in comparison to the mental stimulation they get from technological advancements outside of the classroom. I agree with Sir Robinson wholeheartedly. If I were to do a content analysis of the thousands of page transcripts that I have obtained through observations and interviews with high schools students in the South and Northeast, the most consistently used term is boredom. And I have to say from first-hand experience that it is true. For six months in 2007, I sat in classrooms in relatively decent performing high schools, and with the exception of the pedagogic practice in many of the upper echelon classes, the advanced placement and honors classes, I, too, found myself trying to keep sleepiness at bay.

Why It Is Imperative that We Pay Attention to the Culture of Schooling

While policymakers look for the quick fixes in terms of achievement in this country - especially the dissolution of a racial achievement gap - we need to deal with the social and cultural functions of schooling. Schools serve multiple purposes. They comprise a major social institution in our lives and are meant to develop citizenship, too. How does a student come to respect his different neighbors if fear and apprehension about his neighbor’s social and cultural groups remain so palpable?

In 2007 my research assistants and I conducted a study in two southern and two northeastern high schools, all of which achieved high levels of proficiency and excellence on the mandated report cards required by the No Child Left Behind legislation. For half a year we visited these “good” schools almost daily. Though all the schools were considered multiracial, two were majority-white and two majority-black and/or Latino; and the majority-white schools were also wealthier. We found that the academic experiences of black and Latino students in the majority-minority schools differed greatly, on average, from that of their counterparts in the majority-white schools. In both of the majority-white schools we encountered only one or two African American and Latino students enrolled in the upper-echelon honors and advanced classes. Strikingly, when I asked teachers at the southern majority-white school, South County

Prep, if they could locate high-achieving African American students among the more than three hundred enrolled in the school, they could only mention two girls.

Our survey study of 469 students found that the self-esteem of the black students in this particular school was the lowest of all of the black students across the four schools. Along with their black peers at the northeastern majority-white school, these students were also least likely to report that they sought friends across different social and cultural lines. Meanwhile, their peers of similar socioeconomic backgrounds at the majority-black schools showed significantly high levels of what I term “cultural flexibility” and higher self-esteem (Carter 2010). Ethnographically, we observed that black students in the affluent white schools were segregated both in terms of academics and extracurricular activities, despite attending “desegregated” schools. That is, their presence in college preparatory courses (known to expand students’ knowledge bases in significantly different ways than regular comprehensive high school courses) and their involvement in cultural activities such as band, orchestra, theater, and Model United Nations were much lower than that of their black peers in majority-black schools. In brief, we found that black (and Latino) students in the majority-white schools had little to no engagement in specific educational classes or activities that could potentially broaden their cultural horizons. Their schools’ social organization, coupled with a particular cultural climate, conveyed both implicit and explicit messages about different racial and ethnic groups’ academic and extracurricular turfs (Carter, 2005; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).

“Equity entails, above all else and as in friendship, a habit of attention by which citizens are attuned to the balances and imbalances in what citizens are giving up for each other,” writes Danielle Allen (2004, p. 134). Allen outlines a conceptual diagram of the building of overlapping networks of “political friendships,” in which people negotiate loss and reciprocity without feeling that they are losing their political agency and will when institutions, embodied in judicial and educational systems, step in to equilibrate resources and opportunity.

The realization of equity that Allen describes is difficult to achieve in U.S. society, however. Understanding deeply what it takes to recalibrate the system of mobility fairly for all citizens is not easy in a society where liberal national values espouse individualism, competition, and a disavowal of how historic, exclusionary practices and policies placed specific individuals (members of particular racial groups) in the economic and academic predicaments in which they currently find themselves. To paraphrase a rhetorical question proffered by Allen: “Can we devise an education that, rather than teaching citizens not to cross social

boundaries or to talk to strangers or out-group members, that, instead, teaches them how to interact with them self-confidently and equitably?” (p. 165). I think so.

In addition to a cadre of well-trained teachers bolstered by access to ample learning tools and aids, equity requires a heightened consciousness among educators to “do diversity” with depth: by increasing their own knowledge base to help vanquish the injurious communicative divides among and between students and teachers who differ by race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status, among other social identities; by working to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn within the school; by maintaining a culture of high expectations for all students; by developing critically conscious and historically accurate pedagogy and curricula; and by preventing new forms of segregation within schools with due vigilance. Regrettably, although some of our nations’ schools have achieved *desegregation*, few have ever attained *social integration*.

Ideologically, thinkers may disagree about the purposes of education. I, for one, continue to believe that education, as a social institution, is a conduit for the transformation of society into an even greater society, for the promotion of vital democratic ideals and practices, for the maintenance of social harmony and balance, and for the building of civic community and capacity, in addition to maintaining its economic health. Today, core values embedded in social and educational policies formulated in the United States indicate that indeed these are some of the goals of education. Focused attention on these areas in discourse, policy, and practice, no doubt, would lead us to the fulfillment of *equal opportunity, equity, and the integration of a nation’s peoples*.

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