

Cultural Schizophrenia: An Examination of Societal Practices and Their Academic Consequences

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Abstract

Socio-economic exclusion, unequal schooling, and social reproduction are code words describing facets of racism that subsist in education. As a doctoral student in higher education, I have come to realize that the astonishing depth of the achievement gap that exists in many schools across this nation may be for reasons other than academic ability. In fact, many ill-conceived ideological practices of dominant society have become manifested in the educational psyche of minority students in America. This paper examines the psychological phenomenon that exists in both dominant mainstream and oppressed minority groups that is the life force for this type of educational racism to exist in the schools of the United States of America and how literacy instruction is impacted by these two mind states.

Out of the darkness...

I was born and raised in a predominantly African-American neighborhood. Like many of my peers, my parents worked at one of the “Big Three” automobile factories. Growing up, my parents would always instruct us that gaining a good education was the only way we were going to make something out of ourselves. I did not heed this advice in elementary or middle school. I found school boring and could not relate it to life in my neighborhood. Because of my apathetic attitude toward school, I was retained in the seventh grade. This was a wake-up call for me to take school seriously. Not because I saw the importance of gaining a good education, but because I did not want to disappoint my parents any further.

In high school I had my academic awakening when I received the highest marks in all my content area subjects and won several scholastic awards. Unfortunately again, I did not do this because I understood the importance of a good education. I did this to go to college because I did not want to stay at my after-school job selling shoes. It would be in my Master-level courses that I realized the importance of education

...Into the Light

As a science teacher working on my Master of Education degree, I realized while teaching in a predominantly African-American school district that all the information others and myself received in urban schools was from a Euro-Anglo perspective. Even if the information was based on fallacy (e.g. Columbus discovering America; the savage African myth; Independence Day; Lincoln emancipating the slaves; Whites as the creators of science, math, and language; and so forth...) it was still taught and expect to

be retained by the students. This realization led me to many long discussions with my professors about the lack of diversity in classroom lessons in urban America. Every meeting ended with my being advised to make sure that for the time being, I teach this information to the students of my class to ensure they receive a “balanced” education and until one day I can create and administer educational policies that promote multiculturalism in all classrooms.

Today, as an African-American Ph.D. student, I realize that I am taught and well versed only in educational theories and practices from a Eurocentric perspective. Yet, a White Ph.D. student can go through their entire academic career and learn very little to absolutely nothing from another cultures’ perspective and they are considered “knowledgeable and well-educated.”

Then came my catharsis. The reason why school was so boring to me was because my culture’s contributions were absent. The only time my culture showed up in my lessons was as slaves and heathens. And to add insult to injury, the culture that enslaved my ethnic group and propagated these myths were viewed as the standard of high intellect. Now, what African-American student would be excited learning this type of curricular for twelve years or more? It seems that this type of schooling had a silent purpose of making some people in this country feel inferior while creating a sense of exaggerated pride in the other which Giroux (1992), aptly called social reproduction. In social reproduction, schools are used to produce passive workers (minorities) for the market economy instead of future leaders, thinkers, and entrepreneurs (mainstream majority) (Giroux, 1992). In other words, to maintain the high status of Whites and the self-defeating apathetic attitudes of people of color, White students overtly and covertly receive a steady diet of positive, empowering information reinforcing and sustaining special privileges while minorities are given the same information to admire. In other words, socio-economic exclusion, unequal schooling, and social reproduction are code words describing facets of racism. Because there is an enormous multitude of literature on racism and how it is practiced in the United States of America and abroad, I will only explore the psychological phenomenon that exists in both dominant mainstream and oppressed minority groups that is the life force for this type of racism to subsist and how literacy instruction is affected by these two mind states.

Racism: Defined and Explained

Racism as an institutionalized system (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997) is a system fed by the socio-economic, political, and cultural practices of two types of participants: the oppressed people and the people who oppress them (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1992; Sarason, 2004). In other words, a dominant group of people in society is self-garnered with certain rights and privileges that are not enjoyed by the minority sector. According to Derman-Sparks & Phillips (1997), in the United States of America the White race is considered the victors to the hierarchy of societal privilege. As a result, the other citizens of the country: African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Asian-Pacific Americans, and Native Americans are relegated to the lower tiers of the oppressed.

This is the category that I found myself to be included in alongside my ethnic counterparts. It is here that people of color are subjected to institutionalized exclusion from rights set forth by the American Constitution. This exclusion is based on one or more of the following: the color of a person's skin; the gender of that person; the ethnic culture a person belongs to; and the socio-economic tier a person resides in among other societal differences.

The Capitalist Premise Behind Racism

If racism is the mother who gave birth to the inequitable elements that comprises American citizenry, then capitalism is the grandmother who bore racism. Racist practices are as old as humanity itself. The seizing of a people's land by another to gain access to their riches and resources can be seen in history (Browder, 1992; Diop, Salemon, & De Jager, 1991; Poe, 1999). Racism from this infancy stage would grow to prominence during its adolescent stage in the 17th century. It is here that the introduction of human slavery of Africans served as the catalyst for the most successful capitalist system the world would ever know (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997). The dominant mainstream society exploited the bodies and talents of its ethnic classes by importing the Africans to the Americas and the Caribbean for labor; exterminating the Native Americans who showed the American "settlers" how to live off the land; using Asian labor to build railroads and mine for gold; and presently using the Mexican people for a means of generating riches from their "cheap labor" (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997). In essence, the dominant mainstream society became richer while setting up policies and practices to keep the ethnic people of color in a subservient condition (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1992). Though this capitalist frame of mind would serve to physically project the economic prowess of its practitioners and the socio-economic despair of its oppressed, there would lie ahead a psychological genesis in the attitudes, psyche, and actions of all involved that would further propagate a malicious thread that would for centuries hold together the fabric of American society.

To insure the future status of its progeny, mainstream society created schools to produce its future mainstream as leaders and the "movers and shakers" as well as the future minority-laced staff to work for them which according to Giroux (1992) is the ideology behind social reproduction. Social reproduction as a systematic practice is manifested when contemplating the scholastic nature of urban schools across America. The problems I and other Detroit students of color experienced in schools are the same as the students of color from urban school districts in Cleveland, Texas, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, to name a few (Hilliard, 1998; Smith, 2002; Wynne, 2002). This is more than a coincidence and easily explained through the process of social reproduction that guarantees the success of a certain part of our society in a capitalistic system while processing the low self-esteem and academic hopelessness in other factions of society.

The Notion of White Privilege

Because of the self-appointed status of White society being the standard of “true American values,” some began to acquire a certain mentality that validated their position in American life, a mentality termed White privilege (McIntosh, 1988). As a result of White privilege, most people of Euro-Anglo descent are afforded rights and privileges that are not enjoyed by people of color. The mystery of White privilege lies in the fact that many of the members of mainstream society are not aware of this phenomenon (Helms, 1993). To further illustrate this point, McIntosh (1988), stated her shock when realization came upon her based on the advantages of her “whiteness.”

As a White person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage (Pg. 1).

Although McIntosh came to grips with understanding and acknowledging her racial group’s advantages based on their heritage, others in her group are not so reluctant to concede acknowledgement of this self-actualization. According to Helms (1993), mainstream White America is not aware of itself as the benefactors of racism. Instead they deny, distort, and repress the overwhelming realities they are presented with cohabitating in a region with other cultural groups. Helms (1993) states, “I argue that Whites must become consciously aware of the ways in which racism works to their advantage and make a deliberate effort to abandon it in favor of positive non-racist definitions of Whiteness (page 241).”

Though Helm’s point is important, some White people are reluctant to acknowledge the unequal practices people of color are subjected to. This would mean they must educate themselves on the major contributions made by people of color to this country. I saw this reluctance firsthand as a middle school science teacher when I asked my administrators and educational superiors why do we still teach science as a Greek and European-inspired discipline when we have scientific and scholarly evidence that Africans introduced the study of science to the world (Browder, 1992; Finch, 1990; James, 1992; Khamit-Kush, 1999)? In response to my inquiry, I was given weak excuses like, “Well, we know the truth.” “You know they (mainstream society) won’t allow that,” and my personal favorite, “Boy, are you a trouble-maker?”

White privilege is dynamic in its presence in the psyche of Whites. Because of this, Whites view cultural scholarship as important when it encompasses the perspectives of White America (Elabor-Idemudia, 2001; Giroux, 1992; Hilliard, 1998; McIntosh, 1988; Sarason, 2004). In other words, the more comfortable they are with their whiteness, the more they gauge people of color’s scholarship contributions by their own cultural standards. This ideology plays a huge part in the type of scholarship American students receive in the educational institutions across the country. Helms (1993), lists six

components of White identity development to explain how the White privilege mentality is nurtured in the mindsets of whites and how it can be alleviated for the introduction of a true multicultural society.

1. Contact- is mainstream society's ignorance to the social, economic, and political plight of other races in this country.
2. Disintegration- refers to mainstream's consciousness of the despair of other races.
3. Reintegration- is the conscious or unconscious glorification of the White cultural while belittling every culture that is not part of the White race.
4. Pseudo-Independence- the premise that other cultures would do well to adopt the standards and ideals of White culture.
5. Immersion-Emersion- this calls for the realization of Whites to reeducate themselves of the inequality of their own whiteness and educate others in their race.
6. Autonomy- this ensures that Whites do away with all racist behaviors and assumptions.

Impact On Literacy

White privilege and the accepted identity that controls it is the underlying theme of literacy instruction and assessment development (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997). To the advantage of mainstream children, it is expected that they will succeed in learning to read, speak, and write. This rings true for any people who receive an education based on their own cultural perspective. This means that white children are taught to read using literature based on their cultural experiences (Hilliard III, 2002), and they master the art of "appropriately speaking" because usually their home language is the school language (Dowdy, 2002). How would a person know if it was day if they never witnessed night? This is what has happened to literacy education. It only teaches "day" and never acknowledges "night." It only teaches "dry" and never teaches "wet". Language arts and reading is the teaching of skills for the student to acquire in order to become literate. Because the skills that white children receive are encrypted with bias premises and notions while celebrating their cultural thought, they could grow into adults who view the rest of the world around them as primitive to their own culture and intelligence (Hilliard, 1998). This causes them to assess other cultures by their own language and educational approaches to literacy without venturing out of their own comfort zone (Hilliard III, 2002).

The White privilege phenomenon has far more consequences than only those acknowledged in Whites. In this phenomenon, Whites have the choice to either choose to correct this horrendous practice of enjoying the perks of racist superiority or chose to ignore it and their lives would not be affected in the least. On the other hand, people of color are mentally, economically, socially, and politically affected by either conscious road they decide to venture down.

Cultural Schizophrenia: Double Consciousness Revised

W.E.B. DuBois coined a phrase to sum up the mentality of African-American people who are forced to conform to mainstream's standards. This condition is known as double consciousness (Library of Freedom, 1994). In this mentality, the person of color is forced to become two individuals who reside in the same psyche. One person, in the individual, upholds and believes in the foundation of this country: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He is proud to be an American and will fight for its independence. The other person, in the same individual's psyche, realizes that he is not afforded the same rights and privileges as others and is forced into a position of inferiority-induced servitude. This, unfortunately, is the race duality I experience in America. People of color have to either consciously or unconsciously exist in this country only dreaming of the reality of their White counterparts while coping with the racism practiced on them. They excel in gaining knowledge and linguistic mastery presented by European thoughts and perspectives, while downplaying and sometimes mentally deleting their own ethnic attributes (Cross, 1994; Dowdy, 2002; Hilliard III, 2002; Smith, 2002). Baldwin (1985) illustrated how this double consciousness is detrimental to the person of color. In his delivery to educators in 1963, Baldwin spoke of how the Negro in the educational institutions of America is on the verge of becoming schizophrenic (Baldwin, 1985). Below, Baldwin demonstrates the self-actualized disorder shared by many African-Americans of his day, as well as my present-day.

He is part of a country in which anyone can become president, and so forth. But on the other hand, he is also assured by his country and his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization- that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured. (Pp. 326)

King (1991) calls this condition of accepted discrimination *dysconsciousness*. As a result of dysconsciousness, the person suffering from this condition accepts the inequity as well as the social, political, and cultural injustices they are confronted with as a normal way of life (King, 1991).

Literacy Connection to Cultural-Educative Psyche

Unlike their White counterparts, African-American students' cultural and community problems are illuminated in how they are taught to read and write (Giroux, 1992). This practice is biased in nature since the reasons for many of the cultural differences in the minority communities are not detrimental to their capacity to learn. It is instead a case of minorities learning how to downplay their language and experience in order to amalgamate themselves into a monoculture educational system that views their ethnic contributions to language, reading, writing, and speaking as archaic or primitive (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1992; Hilliard III, 2002; Kohl, 2002).

This realization occurs early in a child of color's psyche when they enter the educational institutions of America. It is here that many learn the way in which they express themselves linguistically is in error (Dowdy, 2002). In schools across the United

States ethnic minority students, along with mainstream students, are taught to use standard English. The problem with this notion is English is not a standard language. It is the accumulation of many languages spoken in the world (Hilliard III, 2002). If a African-American child pronounces the word *the* as *da'*, he/she is corrected constantly as being told that the pronunciation is incorrect. But, if a White child from another English speaking country pronounce the same word as *ze'* he/she is not corrected because his/her language is seen as a slight variation of standard English. Dialect is inherent in all speakers, yet some children are made to feel linguistically inadequate in the parameters of their cultural boundaries (Delpit, 2002; Giroux, 1992; Wynne, 2002) while becoming bilingual by learning the “standard English” of school instructors. One of the main goals of literacy is to assess a child’s comprehension via their speaking in order to gauge that child’s comprehension (Cramer, 2004). It is therefore the teacher’s job to understand all dialectical differences in phonetic expressions of the many dimensions of standard English to assess comprehension and not just for the progeny of mainstream society.

It is also in these schools that minority children are taught to read books that do not correlate with their experiences at home or in their communities. For example, in a situation where a Black student from an urban city was being assessed for his comprehension of textual materials depicting aristocratic life, the child might not have the schema to relate to the printed content. The teacher, if not familiar with that child’s cultural experiences, might deem the child as having learning disabilities, thus failing to use that child’s cultural experience to gauge the child’s literary comprehension. However, an upper-middle class White child would have prior experience of aristocratic life and easily comprehend the textual information. But, if the passage was about life in an urban city and the White child had no schema for the information, would he be deemed as having a learning disability? Probably not, because the means of assessing children’s comprehension of textual materials is geared to the shared prior knowledge of mainstream society (Hilliard, 1998). It is therefore imperative that literacy-assessing mechanisms be created in forms that are relevant to the students being assessed in order to truly determine the intellectual capacity of children in the United States of America.

The Positive Effects of an Equal Academic Experience

Society places contrastingly different expectations and assumptions on mainstream and African American students (Kohl, 2002; Sarason, 2004; Walters, 1998). Some teachers also share in this scholastic liturgy. A possible reason for this is the fact that classrooms are becoming more diverse and the teaching staff is becoming increasingly white (Kunjufu, 2004). Because of this current situation, language, as well as culture serves as barriers between the two entities.

To circumvent the problem of teachers not understanding the cultural language of a child and labeling their diction language deficient, teachers need to understand and build upon students’ home culture and language. Positive effects of such a practice can be manifested when teachers accept and build on students’ home language as a foundational mechanism of understanding how various minority children learn (Banks, 1991; Delpit, 2002). The ethnic language a student introduces to the classroom should not be looked at

as an obstacle in learning, but as a difference conceived in language (Dowdy, 2002). Cultural dialect constitutes a well-developed linguistic system that is accompanied with rules for variations from standard English (Ruddell, Ruddell, & Singer, 1994). Teachers could, in turn, use a culturally familiar communication style in order to create a sense of classroom membership for their minority students (Smith, 2002).

Another critical area that must be examined is teacher education. This area is essential because some White teachers, some Black teachers, and some from other ethnic groups primarily because of educational and societal imprinting harbor ideologies that African American students are mentally dysfunctional and culturally exhibits a lack of motivation (Giroux, 1992; Hilliard, 1998; Sarason, 2004). To illustrate this point further, a study was conducted in which investigators examined teachers' perceptions of African American males' achievement and discovered that teachers were suggesting their students be placed into special education classes based on how their students walked down the hall (Neal, McCray, & Webb-Johnson, 2001). Teachers must realize that the school experience plays a central role in how a student feels about school. Therefore, teachers who instruct African American students from low socioeconomic areas must instill opportunities that manifest levels of high achievement in their classroom.

Conclusion

We all see the world from slightly different perspectives. It is from these perspectives that we learn about events and people that are then shaped into the values that we embark upon our children. The values and teachings that one culture upholds may be different from another and should be respected. It is not a justifiable reason to ignore one's perspective: culturally, socially, or otherwise on the basis that it varies from another's perspective. America is a personification of the interactions and amalgamations of cultures' histories, ideologies, practices, and customs all over the world. Our classrooms across the nation are the result of this 'cultural salad' in which every culture retains it's own flavor yet adds to the taste of the overall dish. Educational practices should seek to adopt this outlook pertaining to the equal education of all its constituencies. It is a moral imperative that we as educators narrow the economic, social and national divisions erected from an educational achievement gap where minorities, specifically African American students are regulated to deficient side. Inspired by the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, I believe we can no longer afford to "Wait" for an equitable education that is intrinsically woven into the human nature.

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