

# The Effects of Policy and School Structure on Minority Groups in the United States

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Although most American educators would not intentionally discriminate against students based on race or ethnicity, many do not think of how their teaching style may be influenced by white cultural norms and values, or *whiteness* (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Hartmann et al., 2009; Joseph et al., 2016; Pratto & Stewart, 2012). This problem is compounded by American curricula's propensity to test, track, and group students according to their ability in order to reach predetermined benchmarks that are created using a one-size-fits-all methodology (Kliebard, 2013; Schiro, 2013; Spring, 2014). Hence, the white, mainstream cultural narrative eclipses minorities' perspectives and voices throughout the education system (Mcknight & Chandler, 2012). In the current climate, "schooling cannot be seriously considered a neutral, value-free, merit-based institution in which racism and the norms of the Anglo dominant culture are absent," (Mcknight & Chandler, 2012, pp. 76-77) because of the educational policies that have created inequality in the American education system. Hence, institutional racism has deep, historic roots in the United States where *whiteness* is often poised as the standard by which subordinate groups are unequally assessed (Pratto & Stewart, 2012). Because of this, researchers believe that *whiteness* and *colorblindness* are widespread issues that need to be addressed through reflection and critical pedagogy in order to help white teachers reconcile their invisible and unconscious privilege while empowering racial minority students (Charbeneau, 2015; Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Corcoran & Silander, 2011).

## Background

White educators in the United States are often unconsciously hindered by their own privilege and their worldview is reaffirmed by the institutional racism prevalent in their organizations. Many researchers believe that this ambivalence is due to the concepts of *whiteness* and *colorblindness*, which are pervasive socio-cultural constructs of American culture (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Hartmann et al., 2009; Joseph et al., 2016; Pratto & Stewart, 2012). According to Hartmann et al. (2009), whiteness can be exemplified by the notion that "whites' racial identities tend to be less visible than those of individuals from other racial groups, and whites are less likely to see ways that they have been actively advantaged by being white" (p. 405). Colorblindness is closely related to the concept of whiteness in the sense that people advocate race does not actually affect the way others are

advantaged or treated. There is a ubiquitous colorblind view that “American society is fair, meritorious, and race neutral [sic], that hard work and effort are the keys to success, and that any individual can succeed if she or he tries hard enough” (Hartmann et al., 2009, p. 408). Because of these misconceptions, white teachers in the United States do not always reflect on their ingrained presumptions which can impact people of color (Anders, 2011).

### ***Policy Issues in American Education***

The current situation in the American public school system is not for the benefit of all students, and since the desegregation of schools in the 1960s, the quality of education has been corrupted by government policies which were supposedly designed to aid those they set out to protect: racial minorities (Arce et al., 2005; D’Amico, 2016; Fiel, 2013). One of the root causes of inequality in the American classroom has been the standardization of the education system. Standardization policies such as *A Nation at Risk* (NAR) enacted during the Reagan administration in 1983 and *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) which was put into play in 2001 by the Bush Administration, have both produced negative impressions of underachieving racial minority groups, ultimately causing the degradation of those students’ identities, self-confidence, and school achievements (Arce et al., 2005; D’Amico, 2016; Fiel, 2013).

Since the beginning of *A Nation at Risk* (NAR), minorities’ interactions with a diverse student body has slowly shrunk (Arce et al., 2005; D’Amico, 2016; Fiel, 2013) to the point where racial “minorities in the 2000s attended schools that looked disturbingly similar to schools in the 1960s” (Fiel, 2013, p. 828). That is to say, schools have actually started becoming “resegregated” again (Fiel, 2013). Unfortunately, as Fiel (2013) has shown through many different correlations, there is a remarkable difference between having fewer white students and the equality of the distribution of resources to schools in districts. Hence, although masked with moral intentions to boost the scores of all students, the policies of NAR destroyed the chances of minorities to receive an equal education. In a sense, it disenfranchised an entire generation of students while opening the doors for more anti-inclusive educational policies.

Coming into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one of the most devastating policies aimed to bolster standardized test scores was *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). “School districts serving the poorest students [were] forced to use prescribed curricula and supplemental programs that contribute[d] to the demise of academic creativity and meaningful learning” (Arce et al., 2005, p. 61). In this way, standardized testing took a toll on the effectiveness of educators’ abilities to teach efficiently (Anders, 2011; Au, 2013) as well as inhibiting racial minorities’ chances to achieve in a Eurocentric curriculum (Sleeter & Stillman, 2013). Paradoxically, there is little that shows standardized tests even helped education or curriculum design during that time, and if anything, the American curricula have been narrowed

since the induction of NCLB policies and it has had a long-lasting, negative impact on minorities (Arce et al., 2005; D'Amico, 2016; Fiel, 2013).

Although NCLB was abolished through legislation during the Obama Administration in 2015, the prescriptive nature of its policies has caused a shift in the way educators have approached the classroom as well as impeded the structure of American curricula (Spring, 2014). Under the new public school curriculum, it has become more difficult for educators to use student-centered teaching approaches because educators are obligated to constantly increase the requirements that students need to fulfill in order to pass a given course (Sleeter & Stillman, 2013). However, this obscure perception that the curriculum should be more challenging for students across the board, has also created challenges of a special nature for educators and administrators (Corcoran & Silander, 2011). For instance, the rate of the Black-white achievement gap is widening (Mangin, 2014), and this situation is becoming the norm for many different racial minority groups throughout the United States (Biscoe, 2009; Taylor, 2006). Although this issue is blatantly clear to many in academic administration, a majority of the policies that depict what content is taught and how it is tested are still tightly controlled by dominant (white) ideologies. Hence, even after the reign of NCLB, the nature of equal education has suffered severely through improper funding and teaching approaches.

### ***Issues of Tracking and Grouping***

Another great fallacy of the American public education system is the belief that intelligence is predetermined, directly observable, and can be used to classify students into their respective groups (Mayer, 2008). Public schools use tracking systems to document students' achievement in courses and on standardized tests throughout middle school and high school, which allows them to group students into easier or more difficult streams of the core subjects. In a perfect world, students would be tracked properly based on their academic ability alone. However, underlying bias is ever-present by decision-makers (Mayer, 2008) and designers of tracking software, which causes them to overlook students of different races and social classes (Fram et al., 2007).

Because racial minorities are heavily underrepresented in high-tracked courses where teachers are more experienced and resources are more readily available, many believe that there is a large impact on their achievements (Mangin, 2014; Pollock, 2004; Taylor, 2006). More often than not, racial minorities are placed in lower-level courses as they progress through the education process (Mayer, 2008; Tyler et al., 2016; Warikoo & Carter, 2009), so "the quality and nature of the educational experience varies, depending both on a particular student's own characteristics and on the characteristics of the peers with whom that student spends classroom and school time" (Fram et al., 2007, p. 311). This means that tracking and grouping furthers segregates American schools from within, while also demotivating racial minority groups throughout (Fram et al., 2007; Joseph et al.,

2016; Mayer, 2008; Tyler et al., 2016; Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

Historically speaking, findings from research have yet to prove that tracking and grouping have a positive effect (Fram et al., 2007; Mayer, 2008; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). “Empirical studies also discovered what appeared to be inconsistencies in the criteria schools used to place students in courses. This evidence suggests that there [are] problems with the process” (Mayer, 2008, p. 12). For instance, more affluent, white students are given opportunities to enter better courses to promote their economic mobility than their minority counterparts (Fram et al., 2007; Mayer, 2008; Warikoo & Carter, 2009). This causes teachers to unwittingly prescribe a certain bias towards a certain racial group where “the ‘regular’ or general comprehensive courses, consequently, become known as the classes for the ‘less smart’ kids. This may, in turn, lead to unintended consequences” (Warikoo & Carter, 2009, p. 375).

## Discussion

Using Pratto and Stewart’s (2012) theoretical framework of social dominance theory (in the context of power-distance between white teachers and racial minority students), we can see how “dominants . . . use subordinates as a reference point to make clear who they are by identifying who they are not” (p. 42). Through this lens, we can observe that white people perceive the world in a much different way than marginalized groups (Brodish et al., 2008). Hence, white identity is so normalized in American society that most of those who are advantaged, rarely acknowledge their own privilege (McIntosh, 1990; Pratto & Stewart, 2012; Tatum, 2013). “Psychologically, this makes it seem to dominant group members that no one intends group dominance to occur,” (Pratto & Stewart, 2012, p. 32) it is just the policy or the rules that dictate actions.

Through this rationale, white teachers in America are no less susceptible to the social constructs of whiteness and colorblindness than any other person. Whether they are aware of it or not, they harbor bias about certain racial groups and consequently use punitive measures toward those who do not conform to prescribed curricula (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Pratto & Stewart, 2012). As DeCuir-Gunby (2009) explains, more often than not, Black students feel that their teachers have lower expectations for them to succeed academically than their white counterparts. This is a major problem not only for the African American community but for all students of color who do not conform to the expected white norms of the classroom (Anders, 2011; Briscoe, 2009). “Unless students are very resilient, highly motivated, and have a strong support network, negative interactions with [educators] are likely to result in discouragement and a possible devaluing of school and academic success” (Cokley & Chapman, 2008, p. 353). Coincidentally, this practice of stigmatizing certain groups shows that the dominants (white teachers) are actually deemed to be normal and thus justified in their actions (Pratto & Stewart, 2012). Although many white administrators could exert a positive effect on racial minority

students, the majority do not because of their own whiteness and colorblindness (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009), or “they typically are met with individual and institutional resistance that prevents significant change” (Charbeneau, 2015, p. 656).

Most newly-hired, white educators in the United States may not be aware of the hidden curriculum (the unintentional transfer of norms and values in the classroom) as they might have not come across the concept during their studies at university or at teacher-trainer programs (Anders, 2011; Kliebard, 2013; Schiro, 2013; Spring, 2014). Because of this, they tend to treat all of their students the same no matter what ethnic background they are coming from. This means that white educators often have difficulties with “the distinction between equality (treating all students the same) and equity (giving students what they need to accrue the same outcomes as others in a particular context)” (Harper, 2009, p. 44). Hence, they may not think of how their teaching style may be impeded by their own whiteness and colorblindness.

## **Recommendations**

As white educators, we need to be culturally sensitive while teaching, because identity is very important for students to establish positive perceptions and personal self-worth (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Pratto & Stewart, 2012; Singh et al., 2010). “Stereotypes associated with minority status and thereby ethnic identity can impede a student’s academic goals justifying and promoting negative evaluations of one’s ability to achieve in school” (Cokley & Chapman, 2008, p. 351). However, simply denying the existence of race through a colorblind philosophy will not help solve the issue either. As Hartmann et al. (2009) make clear, by doing this, we are feeding into ideologies of whiteness where we assume everyone is the same; thus, trivializing identity and privilege through colorblind neutrality. If we think we are all one race (the human race), “individual opportunity and effort may simply be . . . [used] to justify or hide racist beliefs or to obscure advantage” (Hartmann et al., 2009, p. 409). This means that we must be diligent in seeing how race is built through systems of oppression within different societies where the dominant groups exploit the subordinate groups (intentionally or unknowingly) for their own socio-economic status.

Only through accepting and acknowledging whiteness can we make larger advances in the way we manage our classroom and help our own students. To this end, Charbeneau (2015) suggests “disclosing one’s own whiteness . . . [and] overtly addressing the existence of others’ realities and plural traditions or cultural styles” (p. 658). In this way, “unpacking our whiteness” (divulging our privilege) is the first step to becoming an ally (see McIntosh, 1990). The next step that needs to be taken is to attend to gaps in knowledge by getting familiarized with the needs of the racial minorities in our classrooms. As Charbeneau (2015) points out, educators “will be more successful in these approaches if they are aware of the intergroup issues present among diverse groups of students,

including how white dominance is enacted and ways it can be transformed” (p. 657). Hence, researchers suggest that only through personal reflection can teachers level the playing field for all students (Charbeneau, 2015; Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Corcoran & Silander, 2011).

There are many approaches that are effective for shedding light on privilege and institutional racism with most focusing on “structuring classroom exercises or reflecting on classroom dynamics in ways that [draw] students’ attention to patterns of white dominance” (Charbeneau, 2015, p. 666). Currently, multiculturalism and critical pedagogy are the most widely-used critical frameworks as they offer dominant students as well as ethnic minorities the ability to break down systems of oppression. Additionally, this approach helps teachers work towards building more race-conscious students for the benefit of all. In this way, students can become mini-anthropologists who reflect on privilege and discrimination by analyzing society through a different lens. This will allow racial minority students to achieve their full measure of academic and professional success, thus, empowering them and giving them a voice (Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

In America, whiteness is so prevalent in the curriculum that white educators rarely question the content they are teaching (Anders, 2011). “In fact, because dominant identity is so normative,” (Pratto & Stewart, 2012, p. 42) it has become the standard for achievement for everyone (Kliebard, 2013; Schiro, 2013; Spring, 2014). However, this narrow view creates more negative stereotypes, ultimately putting minority students at a disadvantage from the beginning as they are all held to the same expectations of the whitewashed curriculum. “Within the United States, [then,] . . . institutional versions of curriculum . . . exclude the voices of the ‘other’ by way of privileging and socially reproducing the patriarchal, white normative perception of the world” (Mcknight & Chandler, 2012, p. 75). Hence, schools are not truly serving all students equally in the long run and are creating more problems than solutions, because racial minorities and low-income students are suffering the most (Mayer, 2008). And although policies such as NAR and NCLB have been eliminated, remnants such as tracking and grouping have been left behind under the guise that “all students benefit from instruction that is tailored to their particular skill level” (Fram et al., 2007, p. 317).

By doing nothing to affect change, we are simply perpetuating the cycle of oppression in American schools. It is vital that we critique our own negative views of minorities and discuss systems of power with our students (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). By drawing attention to white hegemony and acknowledging our own position within the social construct, we can change the classroom dynamic and students may feel safer to address privilege from their own personal perspectives as well. Even though we may want to avoid themes that we think might cause awkward conversations in groups when speaking across cultures (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009), it is important for both us and our

students to critically reflect on uncomfortable content. We should try to integrate a critical approach into every course we teach to allow students to “understand how certain cultural practices get valued above others, and concurrently how power and privilege are inequitably distributed” (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011, p. 18). If both groups think about the power relationships and how we affect society, we may be willing to accept that we are not only part of the problem, but can also be part of the solution.

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