



School Norms and Reforms, Critical Race Theory, and the Fairytale of Equitable Education

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Abstract

In this paper, I utilize three tenets of Critical Race Theory in education—racism is normal, whiteness as property, and interest convergence—to illuminate the overt and covert ways racial inequity is preserved in the contemporary climate of public schooling and corporatized education reform efforts, as well as the particularly troubling situation wherein communities of color have repeatedly been promised educational improvement and enrichment, but have rarely received it. I then attempt to connect what is with what might be, using Derrick Bell's theory of racial realism as a tool for understanding the very potent reality of this situation and how students, parents, educators, communities, activists and scholars can and do confront this reality as a form of empowerment in itself, and as such, can enact change.

Keywords: *Critical Race Theory, white privilege, urban education, culturally relevant curriculum, corporate school reform, school climate, student diversity*

Introduction

The U.S. public preK–12 education system has in recent decades experienced monumental developments, particularly since the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education released its report “A Nation at Risk” in 1983, more recently through federal initiatives like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, and by efforts at uniformity like the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Reform efforts have been increasingly rooted in free-market models of individualism and high-stakes competition, but also represent the corporatization of schooling in general, exemplified in how education has become a fruitful investment for many business interests, from publishers and testing companies to entrepreneurs running for-profit charter organizations.¹ Equitable education has been professed as a top priority in these reforms, however, the problem instead appears to be worsening.² Despite highly questionable outcomes, even when

1. Henry Giroux, “Kids for Sale: Corporate Culture and the Challenge of Public Schooling,” in *Critical Social Issues in American Education: Democracy and Meaning in a Globalizing World*, eds. H. Svi Shapiro and David E. Purpel (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2005), 143–62; Kenneth J. Saltman, “Schooling in Disaster Capitalism: How the Political Right is using Disaster to Privatize Public Schooling,” in *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hope and Possibilities*, ed. Sheila L. Macrine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 27–54.

2. Wayne Au, *Unequal by Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Sigal Ben-Porath, “Deferring Virtue: The New Management of Students and the Civic Role of

gauged by the reformers' own standards of measurable achievement or economic and organizational efficiency, these kinds of reforms have not only continued to flourish, but have gained a kind of political power that seems difficult to dethrone.³ While many critical scholars have tended to attribute all this to classism in a capitalist, neoliberal milieu, others would posit that there is much more to the story considering that the lowest socioeconomic classes are perpetually communities of color. Key tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be employed here in order to expose how the chances that these policies would ever increase racial equity were not only improbable, but fantastical from the start.

In this paper, I will utilize three tenets of CRT in education—*racism is normal*, *whiteness as property*, and *interest convergence*—to illuminate the contemporary climate of public schooling, corporatized education reform efforts, and particularly, the situation previously described wherein communities of color have been promised educational improvement and enrichment, but have rarely received it. I will then attempt to connect what *is* with what *might be*, using Derrick Bell's theory of *racial realism* as a tool for understanding the very potent reality of this situation and how students, parents, educators, communities, activists and scholars can and do confront this reality as a form of empowerment in itself, and as such, can enact change.

This is Not a Post-Racial World

Indeed, the very absence of visible signs of discrimination creates an atmosphere of racial neutrality which encourages whites to believe that racism is a thing of the past.⁴

The key principles of CRT frame a perspective on white dominance and race relations that rejects the usual discourses of objectivity, neutrality, color-blindness, meritocracy, and equality under law.⁵ CRT scholars infer that white privilege requires this language for its maintenance and go as far as to renovate the term "white supremacy" to encompass the cultural, psychic and physical systems that not only ensure white privilege, but nearly effortlessly perpetuate it.⁶ In CRT, race and whiteness, albeit very authentically experienced, are socially constructed and highly fluctuating ways people are identified and accordingly treated. It is important to clarify here that CRT's aim is to attack this construction of race that privileges surface whiteness, not individual people

Schools," *Theory and Research in Education* May (2013); Jeannie Oakes and John Rogers, "Radical Change through Radical Means: Learning Power," *Journal of Educational Change* 8, no. 3 (2007), 193–206; David Stovall, "Against the Politics of Desperation: Educational Justice, Critical Race Theory, and Chicago School Reform," *Critical Studies in Education* 54, no. 1 (2013), 33–43.

3. Kenneth J. Saltman, *The Failure of Corporate School Reform* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

4. Derrick A. Bell, Jr., "Racial Realism," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 306.

5. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 103–22; Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Just What is Critical Race Theory and What's it Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?" *Qualitative Studies in Education* 11, no. 1 (1998), 7–24; Marvin Lynn and Laurence Parker, "Critical Race Studies in Education: Examining a Decade of Research on U.S. Schools," *The Urban Review* 38, no. 4 (2006), 257–90; Douglas McKnight and Prentice Chandler, "The Complicated Conversation of Class and Race in Social and Curricular Analysis: An Examination of Pierre Bourdieu's Interpretive Framework in Relation to Race," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, no. 1 (2012), 74–97.

6. David Gillborn, "Education Policy as an Act of White Supremacy: Whiteness, Critical Race Theory and Education Reform," *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 4 (2005), 485–505; Zeus Leonardo, "The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of 'White Privilege'," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36, no. 2 (2004), 137–52.

who might identify with a race. Similarly, CRT advocates for the disenfranchised who have not been seen as unique individuals due to these constructions of race.⁷

Perhaps the most basic belief among CRT theorists is that *racism is normal*. It is ordinary and pervasive in our daily lives, not aberrational—embedded in our cultural consciousness and institutions in such a way as to make its effects seem reasonable and innocuous.⁸ Racism is generally a “dysconscious” act—it is “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given.”⁹ Today’s racism is not only constituted by the occasional offenses of bigots and extremists, it is also embodied in everyday practices and behaviors that have situated and maintained white supremacy for hundreds of years so as to make it invisible and instinctive, even to the largely well-meaning general population who inadvertently (re)enforce it.

From Discipline to Curriculum, and All the White Matter in Between

Because education is foundational to culture, it is crucial that educators recognize how the things that happen in schools affect the outcomes and practices of other public institutions and the larger society. Education has substantial power to either challenge or to perpetuate societal injustices, the effects of which influence the schools again in a repeating cycle. In order to see the racially defined flaws of current educational norms and reform efforts, it is first necessary to demonstrate and accept that racism is still very real, common, and particularly endemic in education.

Despite a richly diverse population who hold some things in common but nonetheless have independent and varied knowledges, histories, customs, values, and gifts to share, only Western Euro-centric versions are equated with purity, correctness and superiority in our racialized society, and this is reified early on in schools.¹⁰ For example, “intelligence” theorists and IQ testing architects were also eugenicists who believed whites were genetically superior to other races; and they designed these tests—the predecessors of today’s achievement tests, college entrance exams, and

7. David Gillborn, "The Policy of Inequity: Using CRT to Unmask White Supremacy in Education Policy," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 129–39; Ian F. Haney López, "The Social Construction of Race," in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 191–203; Ladson-Billings, "Just What is Critical Race Theory."

8. CRT is a merging of a few overarching tenets blended with individual theories relative to specific races and contexts, the descriptions of which would take more space than I can dedicate here. For more comprehensive discussions of CRT, see: Kimberlé Crenshaw et al., ed., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995); Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson, eds., *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

9. Joyce E. King, "Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers," *Journal of Negro Education* 60, no. 2 (1991), 135.

10. Sonya Douglas Horsford and Tanetha J. Grosland, "Badges of Inferiority: The Racialization of Achievement in U.S. Education," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 153–66; Michelle Jay, "Critical Race Theory, Multicultural Education, and the Hidden Curriculum of Hegemony," *Multicultural Perspectives* 5, no. 4 (2003), 3–9; Reiland Rabaka, "W.E.B. DuBois's Contributions to Critical Race Studies in Education: Sociology of Education, Classical Critical Race Theory, and Proto-Critical Pedagogy," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 69–87.

other standardized tests used to rank and sort students, effectively *determining their futures*—according to white, dominant norms and using only white students to measure their validity.¹¹ These patterns still permeate today's tests, which "allow classroom practices and identities to be regulated from a distance."¹²

Such regulation translates into other discriminatory practices that should seem more transparent, especially in light of the recent publicized killings and other atrocities by white police officers against unarmed suspects of color. Procedures, language, and related prison metaphors dominate the daily lives of students in many urban schools, where "their bodies, minds, and spirits have already been chained in the prison that is the mainstream public education system."¹³ One example is profiling that disproportionately disciplines minority youth, embodied in supposedly neutral (and proven ineffective) zero tolerance policies that are in reality quite racially biased and open to interpretation by school officials (who are usually white). There are even policies in particular locales that directly link schools with the juvenile corrections system.¹⁴ The statistics that clearly support the *school-to-prison pipeline* theory, however, can surely never account for the multiple influences that affect minority students' behavior in schools. One of these influences is an observable disconnect between alleged educational ideals and students' actual lived experiences of alienation and cultural irrelevance.¹⁵ Yet, the predominant explanations attribute the phenomenon to personal responsibility, wherein the flaw lies completely with the individual student rather than the larger oppressive social and institutional systems.¹⁶ McGrew studied incarcerated youths' relationship to schooling in a less urban setting, and was still able to illustrate the increasing connection between schooling and the privatized and profitable prison industrial complex.¹⁷

It is telling that in a school system that has more resources than most, and a general commitment to discuss and accommodate diversity, that we find unusually high rates of special-education referral, disciplinary actions, suspensions, expulsions, dropouts, arrest and incarceration for students of color.¹⁸

Placing blame on students for failure to meet the standards set for them excuses the larger system from any accountability for failing those students. This same focus on individual responsibility is

11. Paul E. Green, "Separate and Still Unequal: Legal Challenges to School Tracking and Ability Grouping in America's Public Schools," in *Race is...Race Isn't: Critical Race Theory & Qualitative Studies in Education*, eds. Laurence Parker, Donna Deyhle and Sofia Villenas (Westview Press, 1999), 231–50; Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Through a Glass Darkly: The Persistence of Race in Education Research & Scholarship," *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 4 (2012), 115–20; Alan Stoskepf, "The Forgotten History of Eugenics," *Rethinking Schools* 13, no. 3 (1999).

12. Au, *Unequal by Design*, 79.

13. Ken McGrew, *Education's Prisoners: Schooling, the Political Economy, and the Prison Industrial Complex* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 20.

14. Kathleen Nolan and Jean Anyon, "Learning to do Time: Willis's Model of Cultural Reproduction in an Era of Postindustrialism, Globalization, and Mass Incarceration," in *Learning to Labor in New Times*, eds. Nadine Dolby and Greg Dimitriadis (New York and London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 114–128. Brenda Guadalupe Valles and Octavio Villalpando, "A Critical Race Policy Analysis of the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Chicanos," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 260–69.

15. Andrew N. McKnight, "They Never Really Tried to Reach Out to Us: Examining Identities and Confronting the Emotional Distance between Urban Youth and Urban Schools," *Critical Questions in Education* 6, no. 2 (2015), 86–102.

16. Douglas Horsford and Grosland, "Badges of Inferiority."

17. McGrew, *Education's Prisoners*.

18. *Ibid.*, 20.

repeated for explaining other racial disparities in the general population, rather than questioning the outside and imposed forces that may have contributed.¹⁹

White supremacy is more easily concealed in curricula that uncritically favors a single and standardized, watered-down, hegemonic, white narrative.²⁰ While the curriculum-narrowing effects of current reform policy are well-observed and contested,²¹ the ways in which this curriculum also portrays or excludes race in the conversation serves the further purpose of downplaying the importance of race in our history, and thus our present day.²²

A society founded on genocide, built on the labor of African slaves, developed by Latino serfs and Asian indentured servants, made fabulously wealthy through exploitation and masterful manipulation and mystification—a society like this is a society built on race.²³

To deny the importance of race in our curricular content is to deny reality. Yet, overwhelmingly, even in classes like history and social studies, teachers are conveying race in ways that are counterproductive under a blind devotion to neutrality,²⁴ and can even be hostile toward more accurate portrayals.²⁵

When it comes to official history, there is no paucity of representation of whites as its creator...However, when it concerns domination, whites suddenly disappear...Their previous omnipresence becomes a position of nowhere, a certain politics of undetectability.²⁶

It is of particular interest to this discussion that students are actually taught about racial injustices that occur elsewhere. Students learn about the Holocaust in Nazi Germany (where the victims were also, notably, fair-skinned), or darker-skinned foreigners who attack purportedly blameless Western nations or each other. They rarely hear critical stories about racial injustices within our own borders, such as the Tulsa Riots or the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, or violent Indian removal

19. Jamel K. Donnor, "Education as the Property of Whites: African Americans' Continued Quest for Good Schools," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 195–203; Leonardo, "The Color of Supremacy;" McKnight and Chandler, "The Complicated Conversation."

20. Prentice Chandler, "Blinded by the White: Social Studies and Raceless Pedagogies," *The Journal of Educational Thought* 43, no. 3 (2009), 259–88; Jay, "Critical Race Theory;" Frances V. Rains, "To Greet the Dawn with Open Eyes: American Indians, White Privilege and the Power of Residual Guilt in the Social Studies," in *Critical Race Theory Perspectives on the Social Studies: The Profession, Policies, and Curriculum*, ed. Gloria Ladson-Billings (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2003), 199–227.

21. Wayne Au, "Teaching Under the New Taylorism: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of the 21st Century Curriculum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 43, no. 1 (2011), 25–45; Alfie Kohn, "Debunking the Case for National Standards," *Education Digest* 75, no. 8 (2010), 4–7.; Joel Westheimer, "No Child Left Thinking: Democracy at-Risk in American Schools," *Democratic Dialogue*, no. 17 (2008), 2–9.

22. Prentice Chandler and Douglas McKnight, "The Failure of Social Education in the United States: A Critique of Teaching the National Story from 'White' Colourblind Eyes," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2009), 217; Rains, "To Greet the Dawn."

23. Chandler and McKnight, "The Failure of Social Education."

24. Chandler, "Blinded by the White."

25. Rains, "To Greet the Dawn."

26. Leonardo, "The Color of Supremacy."

and the effects of Manifest Destiny on Mexican and other native inhabitants of the West.²⁷ We do not admit to students that many of our most revered leaders were racial extremists we would essentially deem terrorists by today's standards.²⁸ Dominant ideologies attempt to condemn this brand of honesty by calling it "racist propaganda" that subverts devotion to glorified notions of color-blindness, oneness and patriotism, but because these are all defined according to dominant white standards and as ways of protecting white values, they effectively put "the interests, fears, and feelings of white people at the centre of policy."²⁹

Besides depriving students of a broader understanding of the world in which they must actually live, this further debilitates students of color, allocating their racial identities to the dustbin of human awareness, and requiring them to either consciously or unconsciously deny their histories, cultures and lived experiences of racism in order to get by in schools.³⁰ This "double consciousness," as named by W.E.B. DuBois, receives neither recognition nor compassion in a falsely color-blind curriculum. In his oft-quoted passage, DuBois grieves:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³¹

McKnight and Chandler use Pierre Bourdieu's constructs to illuminate how this constitutes "symbolic violence" against students of color, forcing them to bow to arbitrary notions of what is educationally worthwhile. Color-blind content is usually accompanied by pedagogic actions that preserve the status quo by simultaneously denying students the capacity to critically engage with these concepts.³² When ability tracking (based on narrow measurements of what is considered "ability") disproportionately relegates these students to a low-track curriculum that is based in order and discipline rather than analytical thinking and creativity, this amounts to school-sponsored silencing and disempowerment.³³ As modes of social reproduction that play favorites with race, entrenched, normalized racism and white supremacy have always been and continue to be insidious roadblocks to educational equity.

27. Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980, 2003).

28. McKnight and Chandler, "The Complicated Conversation;" Rains, "To Greet the Dawn;" Binaya Subedi, "The Racialization of South Asian Americans in a Post-9/11 Era," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 167–80.

29. Gillborn, "The Policy of Inequity," 133; *Precious Knowledge: Arizona's Battle over Ethnic Studies*, directed by Ari Luis Palos (2011; Tucson, AZ: Dos Vatos Productions, Inc.), DVD.

30. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate, IV, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," in *Critical Race Theory in Education: All God's Children Got a Song*, eds. Adrienne D. Dixson and Celia K. Rousseau (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11–30; McKnight and Chandler, "The Complicated Conversation."

31. W.E.B. DuBois, "The Souls of Black Folk," 1903 (The Electronic Classics Series, 2014), 9, <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/webdubois/dubois souls black folk 6x9.pdf>.

32. McKnight and Chandler, "The Complicated Conversation."

33. Julio Cammarota and Augustine Romero, "A Critically Compassionate Intellectualism for Latina/o Students: Raising Voices Above the Silencing in our Schools," *Multicultural Education* 14, no. 2 (2006), 16–23.

The “World Making Power” of Whiteness

McKnight and Chandler also use Bourdieu to interpret the relationships between race and class, specifically noting the construct of cultural “capital,” which “represents those *items or ways of thinking* in society valued by the dominant groups in society and officially sanctioned by those in positions of power”³⁴—and whiteness is the ultimate cultural capital. Donnor asserts that “through force, coercion, consent, custom, and jurisprudential edifice, white skin and whiteness have become exclusive forms of private property” making whiteness a “racialized system of meaning and domination composed of ideological adherents and material components.”³⁵ In Harris’s original theory of *whiteness as property*, all the social, economic, political and legal advantages, benefits, and assumptions that protect and perpetuate the power of whiteness are equated and entwined with the same types of rights to and derived from tangible property ownership.³⁶ Without reiterating them all here, Harris explains the multiple ways, both seen and implicit, that whiteness has afforded and continues to afford certain allowances, and the difficulty in unseating these norms.

Ladson-Billings and Tate draw our attention to Harris’s functions of whiteness as property that are relevant in discussions of education, the first of which are *rights of disposition*, meaning property can be transferred from one owner to another. When students of color are rewarded (or sometimes chastised) for conformity to white norms and standards, whiteness becomes an alienable property.³⁷ This can specifically be seen in what is often referred to as students “acting white,” or in depictions of Asian Americans as “model minorities,” because they adhere to an array of characteristics endorsed by white society and attributed to whiteness.³⁸ One example is the meritocratic mandate of individually overcoming limitations and pulling oneself up by one’s “boots,” which dismisses unsuccessful reforms and instead blames individual students, teachers and schools for their failures.³⁹ High academic ability and achievement, particularly measurable achievement such as high test scores, or meeting college entrance criteria, is another characteristic attributed to whiteness. Quietness, orderliness and courteousness are the types of behavior especially valued in educational settings, and even radically enforced in the “totalizing environments” of some privatized charter schools in minority communities.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the approved academic setting emphasizes rationality and rejects emotion, which aligns with claims of supposed objectivity that plague educational research and reform in general. Such an emphasis denies the reality that our humanity is enhanced by both capacities in different ways, and faults those who dare to exercise feeling alongside their thinking. Besides presupposing that these kinds of traits are the property of whites to begin with, and that “others” are not independently capable of possessing these traits, their opposites—which are often tied to minority attainment, behavior and culture—are then considered unsavory, inferior and undesirable by default.⁴¹

34. McKnight and Chandler, “The Complicated Conversation,” 85.

35. “Education as the Property of Whites,” 199.

36. Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberle’ Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 276–91.

37. Ladson-Billings and Tate, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education.”

38. Subedi, “The Racialization of South Asian Americans.”

39. Donnor, “Education as the Property of Whites;” Saltman, *The Failure of Corporate School Reform*.

40. Ben-Porath, “Deferring Virtue.”

41. Ladson-Billings, “Through a Glass Darkly;” Subedi, “The Racialization of South Asian Americans.”

Rights to use and enjoyment define whiteness as property in that taking advantage of the freedoms and privileges of whiteness renders these properties used and enjoyed by whites.⁴² In the case of schooling, whiteness as property tends to ensure whites rights of use and enjoyment of all-around better schools, materially and curricularly. Historically, physical property was only ownable by whites, guaranteeing a legacy of unfairly distributed assets that has yet to be remedied, and thus limited recourse for students of color today when schools are funded by property taxes and they largely reside in low-income neighborhoods with low property values. Traditionally, “white flight” from urban areas to more racially homogenized suburban communities has been the standard measure of whiteness as enjoyable property. White families have been more able, through their resources of whiteness, to escape struggling, racially mixed neighborhood schools in favor of those in better neighborhoods with better funding and support systems—although, as Delgado and Stefancic note, they don’t realize that such a move away from diversity actually tends to diminish educational quality.⁴³ On the flip side, Stovall outlines the housing and educational reform movement in Chicago Public Schools wherein marginalized communities were promised improved educational opportunities, but neighborhoods were gentrified and families were actually displaced, effectively “sanitiz[ing] the community” for whites and otherwise privileged classes to move in.⁴⁴ Such urban renewal is on the rise in many cities, where investors snatch up cheap, distressed buildings to renovate, entrepreneurs open businesses that cater to more affluent patrons, property values skyrocket, and low-income families can no longer afford to live there.

Reputation and status are also treated as property that can either be improved, as when climbing the ladder of success, or damaged, as in legal notions of libel and slander.⁴⁵ While some may rightfully protest that not all whites enjoy the same level of whiteness privileges, one thing all whites still possess is their status as white wherein even poor whites retain benefits of whiteness that come with membership in a society based in white supremacy, which their minority counterparts will never have. In schools particularly, nonwhite forms of learning are considered of lower status than white forms, such as the necessity for bilingual education having a lower reputation than a native English speaker learning a second language by choice. Similarly, “urban” is generally a positive term when describing white sophistication, but becomes negative when used to describe urban schools identified with students of color, or in how suburban schools lose status when urban students are bused in.⁴⁶ In the context of today’s reforms, the business of schooling has literally become a cutthroat competition for the kinds of achievement reputation and status that ensure schools, districts and states more resources under initiatives like NCLB and RTT. At the same time, these boost neighborhood desirability which in turn affects real estate values, which then in turn contribute back to the quality of those schools because higher property values mean higher taxes and more funding—all things that benefit whites more than minorities since it is largely they who already possess these benefits of whiteness, as previously described. Because minorities lack sufficient cultural and material capital and resources to begin with, their schools are already low

42. Harris, "Whiteness as Property."

43. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, "Discerning Critical Moments," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 23–33.

44. "Against the Politics of Desperation," 37.

45. Harris, "Whiteness as Property;" Ladson-Billings and Tate, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education."

46. Ladson-Billings and Tate, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education;" Zeus Leonardo and Margaret Hunter, "Imagining the Urban: The Politics of Race, Class, and Schooling," in *International Handbook of Urban Education*, eds. William T. Pink and George W. Noblit (Springer, 2007), 779–802.

in reputation and desirability, and consequently these low expectations perpetuate the low results and status that make them easy targets for white reformers.⁴⁷

The absolute right to exclude is the counterpart to possession of whiteness, for owning something means those who do not own it have no rights to its use (unless, of course, they are granted rights, as is the case with fluctuating versions of who is considered white in the first place). Harris contends that whiteness is guarded like membership to an exclusive club, wherein whiteness is what gains one admittance, and everything else is just “not white” and is excluded, further upholding white as not only a category of people, but the superior one. Denying schooling to nonwhites, and later only allowing segregated schooling, obviously excluded students of color from obtaining the same educations enjoyed by whites; today, resegregation by ability tracking,⁴⁸ and insistence on options like school choice and voucher programs reinforce whiteness as a right to exclude.⁴⁹ Currently, affirmative action, one of the few instances where people of color have been granted status privileges similar to whiteness as property, has come under attack with accusations of reverse racism and imposing on American ideals of individualism and capitalistic choice.

Serving as political and racial codewords, individualism and choice advance a restricted conception of equal opportunity that obfuscates entrenched ideological practices, ontological meanings, and structural arrangements that advance the self-interests and racial privileges of Whites over the educational needs of non-Whites.⁵⁰

This reasoning is supported, for example, in anti-integration Supreme Court cases like *Parents Involved in Community Schools (PICS) v. Seattle School District No. 1* in 2007, where white parents won the right to exclude by reversing race-based affirmative action measures that had barely had any actual effect on school enrollment choices in the first place.⁵¹ This concretizes how systems of White supremacy will only give so much to people of color, and only when they are under pressure to do so or stand to gain something that also benefits Whites, before those advances are incrementally undermined.⁵²

A Nation at Risk Can Be a Lucrative Investment

Interest convergence is the concept proposed by Bell to explain why, after one hundred years of black protest regarding school segregation, the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 suddenly conceded in *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁵³ According to Bell, it was a matter of what whites stood to gain by such a decision more than tending to the civil rights of black Americans. The U.S. was

47. Kristen L. Buras, "Let's be for Real: Critical Race Theory, Racial Realism, and Education Policy Analysis (Toward a New Paradigm)," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 216–31; Saltman, *The Failure of Corporate School Reform*; Stovall, "Against the Politics of Desperation."

48. Jeannie Oakes, "Keeping Track, Part 1: The Policy and Practice of Curriculum Inequality," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 68, no. 1 (1986), 12–17.

49. Ladson-Billings and Tate, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education."

50. Donnor, "Education as the Property of Whites," 196.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Derrick A. Bell, Jr., "*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest Convergence Dilemma," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberle' Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 20–29.

53. *Ibid.*

in the middle of a Cold War and trying to gain third-world allies who frowned upon the inequality afforded minorities here; black WWII veterans had returned disenchanted and in protest of a nation that would allow them to fight for equality but would not grant it to them; and de-segregation would serve to help southern states increase their industrial prosperity.⁵⁴ To be sure, Bell does not discount that there were plenty of well-meaning whites who supported *Brown* on purely moral grounds, only that these other reasons were essential to the courts being able to appease both them and the whites who did not. He goes on to explain how the courts have since both failed to accomplish the goals of *Brown* in actual school practice given that the majority of black students still attend essentially segregated and inferior schools, but also have increasingly undercut the earlier decision by upholding white privilege in ways that circumvent the de-segregation mandate, such as the *PICS v. Seattle* case above.

The main tenet drawn from Bell's idea of interest convergence is that "racial equality and equity for people of color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, benefits, and ideologies of White people."⁵⁵ In this vein, school reform in the current era could be called interest convergence in several ways, while at the same time confirming the observation by Bell and others that promises are typically not fulfilled for students of color. Political reformers and entrepreneurs have capitalized on a rhetoric of disaster following examinations and comparisons of U.S. educational needs and achievement with other developed countries in the "A Nation at Risk" report. Despite a history of educational injustices for students of color, such as the whole background leading up to *Brown*, reformers here expressed a swift concern for the failure of our education system to meet the needs of underprivileged students. They proceeded to organize this latest restructuring with heavy emphasis on broad curricular standardization, competition, high-stakes testing and accountability, vouchers and other school choice programs, and the privatization of educational public goods, all of which create opportunities for businesses, politicians, and philanthropists to exploit educational misfortune for their own advantage.

We have entered the age of the corporatization and businessification of education. As capital insinuates itself over the vast terrain of the globe, it is not surprising that the United States is leading the charge toward privatizing of public education. Nor is it surprising that standardized testing is being pushed, that test publishers are scrambling to boost their revenues, and that educational publishers in the testing business are experiencing economic windfalls... Today the creation and scoring of K-12 tests is a multimillion dollar industry.⁵⁶

These kinds of measures, as opposed to other ways they might have overhauled the system, particularly benefit certain interests through this kind of financial gain and changing power structures, while providing the appearance of goodwill.

As a blatant example of interest convergence, and similar to what happened in Chicago,⁵⁷ in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, schools in the mostly-black recovery zones had their entire district turned over to a private educational management organization (EMO) that created its charter schools excluding input from the former community member-comprised school board.

54. Ibid.

55. H. Richard Milner, IV, Alvin Pearman, III, and Ebony O. McGee, "Critical Race Theory, Interest Convergence, and Teacher Education," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 342.

56. Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 43.

57. Stovall, "Against the Politics of Desperation."

They disregarded unionization and replaced veteran black teachers with under-educated and inexperienced, typically white teachers, and doctored test score legislation to assure the old schools would qualify for takeover and the new schools would appear to be making progress.⁵⁸ In these reforms, “the desire to discipline communities of color through market-based policy regime controlled by white entrepreneurs is more than apparent.”⁵⁹

Current policies not only fail to endow suffering schools with badly needed extra resources to overcome past discrepancies, but do not even provide them equal resources, and simultaneously punish these schools when they fail to “achieve.” Because achievement is measured almost entirely by performance on standardized tests—tests whose very existence is based in white supremacist representations of intelligence and models of efficiency—white students, for whom these tests represent more relevant, native knowledge and ways of knowing, possess another advantage.

Conveniently, while school reforms are claimed to equalize and improve schooling for everyone, they have instead had a particularly negative impact on students of low socioeconomic status who consistently tend to be students of color, while simultaneously maintaining white privilege for students in better schools who have the cultural and material capital to navigate this new system. Whiteness as property has translated into practice under current education reform to mean that white students will always be ensured access to schools that are safer and have nicer facilities due to white flight, choice programs, and so on, as detailed earlier. They usually have better-qualified teachers, since poor schools get the newest teaching graduates, and charters purposely hire teachers without education degrees through alternative licensing programs, and furthermore, admit outright that they want teachers who will not teach very long because it cuts costs.⁶⁰ Suffering schools also lack the same curricular content enjoyed in more privileged schools, partly due to resources, but also because the more a school is satisfying testing mandates, the more they can focus on non-testable subjects and material. On the contrary, failing schools must overemphasize test subjects, or “teach to the test,” to the exclusion of enrichment opportunities or content outside the purview of testing.⁶¹

In essence, when policies aimed at providing “color-blind,” equitable outcomes for all students fail to enact compensatory remedies for a long history of racial inequity and injustice, and instead focus all attention on supposedly objective standards-based policies that reward a warped form of achievement and further punish failure, it is clear that uplifting the downtrodden was never really the goal. Like past token responses to racial inequity, reformers have used the current crisis as a means to endorse policies that have the appearance of justice while in practice maintain the racial status quo.

Exposing the Racial and Fighting through Realism

Because of the entrenchment of racism in U.S. society, critical race scholars understand that social justice with regard to the dismantling of race and racism is an unobtainable goal; yet it is worth the lifetime of struggle to fight for equity.⁶²

58. Buras, “Let’s be for Real,” Saltman, *The Failure of Corporate School Reform*.

59. Buras, “Let’s be for Real,” 229.

60. Ibid.; Douglas Horsford and Grosland, “Badges of Inferiority,” Saltman, *The Failure of Corporate School Reform*.

61. Au, *Unequal by Design*; Saltman, *The Failure of Corporate School Reform*.

62. Thandeka K. Chapman, “Origins of and Connections to Social Justice in Critical Race Theory in Education,” in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne D. Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 104.

The aim of what Bell calls “racial realism” would be to challenge the notion of racial “equality,” instead focusing on the “real” situation that this will likely never truly exist for minorities, and turning energy toward working within this realization to accurately understand and respond to their permanent subordinate status.⁶³ While not trying to discourage action toward equality, Bell hopes that this framework will enable race theorists and activists to confront pervasive oppression by removing distorted ideals in favor of realistic actions. As the examples in this article show, too many past actions and current efforts toward change unfortunately end up perpetuating the status quo via their shortsighted idealism. Racial realists recognize that racism will never go away, but must instead be seen for what it is so that confronting it becomes its own form of empowerment—we cannot eliminate racism, but we can still expose it and fight it.

Regarding racial injustice in schools, Butler’s theory of performativity can help: “Identities are something we ‘do,’ not that we are, and we can act these out, perform them, often unwittingly, in different ways in different situations.”⁶⁴ “A student is so, or acts as so, because she has been designated so,” and “an understanding of the subject as produced by discourse means that hegemonic meanings can be unsettled, as these discourses can potentially be interrupted.”⁶⁵ The different ways we as students, parents, educators, leaders, scholars and other activists may be able to unsettle the racial discourse in education might include:

- Realistic classroom dialogue that allows criticality, alternative narratives and viewpoints—not only the “approved” or watered-down versions—and that presents content that is relevant to students of color, and in meaningful ways.
- Realistic teaching faculty—recruiting more teachers of color to teach students of color.
- Realistic forms of authentic assessment that emphasize growth over bleached-out forms of “achievement.”
- Realistic democracy, particularly regarding school practice and policy, which recognizes the barriers to participation and provides room for alternative voices and their modes of expression.
- Realistic forms of research that emphasize experience over objectivity. Storytelling, narrative, authentic experiences, participatory research, relational and care ethics, a social justice focus.
- Realistic policies and laws that recognize racial disparities and historical bases in inequity, and take proper compensatory measures—without backing down under pressure from those giving up privilege to make it happen.

While these ideas may seem familiar as some that have been approached incrementally in the past and failed to materialize, this undertaking must occur under a new realism that recognizes that change must be drastic, hasty, and authoritative, and thus our approach cannot be subtle. Like Rabaka, “what I am calling for here is nothing short of a critical multiculturalist, revolutionary humanist, and radical democratic socialist transgression and transcendence of Eurocentric-ideological-imperial education, socialization, and globalization.”⁶⁶ Broad actions are merely the result of countless smaller actions, and as many CRT practitioners have already shown us, working in

63. Bell, “Racial Realism.”

64. Charlotte Chadderton, “Towards a Research Framework for Race in Education: Critical Race Theory and Judith Butler,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 26, no. 1 (2013): 49.

65. *Ibid.*, 51.

66. Rabaka, “W.E.B. DuBois’s Contributions,” 79.

solidarity with communities can prove that a “politics of desperation”⁶⁷ just might be the driving force for real change.

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67. Stovall, "Against the Politics of Desperation."

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