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# Democracy & Education

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## Band-Aids Don't Fix Bullet Holes

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### Abstract

Hayes, Juarez, and Escoffery-Runnels (2014) analyzed the educational philosophies and pedagogical practices of two educators to understand how personal and professional experiences individually and collectively influenced their approach to teaching. Using oral histories, they presented an argument of why culturally relevant and social justice-oriented teaching has historically been an effective tool in educating students of color, and why it is necessary for teacher preparation in today's so-called post-racial climate. We suggest that the education system is merely a microcosm of society, and consequently, we must consider structures larger than individual best practices when discussing culturally relevant teaching. Bridges to benefits are networks of White privilege that flow between institutions, such as education, the economy, and the law, and that involve capitalizing on the misery of Blacks while simultaneously protecting White supremacy. We use the "bridges to benefits" concept to propose that scholars not focus solely on education but rather focus on how social institutions in general are created and designed such that they continually oppress and suppress Black and Brown Americans. We draw special attention to America's criminal justice system, labor, and housing market.

### This article is in response to

Hayes, C., Juarez, B., & Escoffery-Runnels, V. (2014). We were there too: Learning from Black male teachers in Mississippi about successful teaching of black students. *Democracy & Education*, 22(1), Article 3 Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss1/3>

**H**AYES, JUAREZ, AND Escoffery-Runnels (2014) explored the viewpoints of two retired Black male educators by drawing on the participants' narratives concerning successfully teaching Black children and the influences of race and racism in structuring their work in the classrooms. Through a series of personal accounts, the authors argued that education is an important method to provide students of color with the help they need to successfully survive racism and succeed within the dominant white culture in the United States. The authors examined the personal experiences of these Black male educators to give assurance and feelings of empowerment to the Black community.

What may be missing from most analyses, including the one presented by Hayes et al., however, is the acknowledgment of the nexus between racial realism and education, which suggests that educational systems are designed in a way to preserve the status quo, keeping Blacks oppressed and suppressed. Our response articulates some understandings of how to navigate and succeed in a society where change only occurs when it is to the benefit of those in power. Throughout this response, we examine both the necessity of culturally relevant teaching and what is needed to make such an effort successful. Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogy grounded in educators demonstrating cultural competence (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As the title alludes, we suggest that

education only manifests a small portion of an overarching problem. Much like a Band-Aid can only cover minor cuts, the educational reform bandage does little to cover the gaping wounds of race lived on a daily basis.

In many communities of color, education has been in a state of crisis for decades (Blumenstyk, 2014; Sleeter, 2001; Thompson, 2011). Students are learning less with insufficient opportunities for advancement (Smith, 2002; Wilson, 1996) and are dropping out of school at a significant rate (Downey & Pribesh, 2012; Sleeter, 2001; Thompson, 2011). Any number of crises have been articulated as race relates to education, such as that we are a nation at risk (Apple, 1992; Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2005), that we are a nation of children left behind (Fasching-Varner, Mitchell, Martin, & Bennett-Haron, 2014), and most recently that we are engaged in a school-to-prison pipeline (Cole & Heilig, 2011; Fasching-Varner, Mitchell, Martin, & Bennett-Haron, 2014; Porter, 2015; Schept, Wall, & Brisman, 2015). The fundamental contradiction of public education, post *Brown v. Board*, has been that these crises, at their roots, have racism as a common link. In other words, the so-called post-1954 educational crises center on the disparate educational outcomes for students and communities of color, particularly outcomes as defined by test scores as so-called achievement.

Through their presentation of these two educators, Hayes et al. (2014) suggested that education might be an “antiracism tool to be applied by students toward ending racial discrimination and other inequities” (p. 6). “Education” can be an important and necessary tool to engage children and youth in learning to read both the words and the world around them. Yet a complexity of addressing the racial base of educational crises is that many in U.S. society would have us buy into an ideology that we are living in a post-racial state (Martin, Fasching-Varner, Quinn, & Jackson, 2014; Martin, 2015). Culturally relevant approaches have the potential to help us contextualize learning and even engage students in more meaningful ways. Still, at best, these culturally relevant approaches function like Band-Aids, attempting to cover the gaping bullet hole of racism and classism tied to race that has fundamentally shaped the U.S. landscape for education. After hundreds of years of infection and irritation, it is difficult to believe that any single solution could, in fact, heal a wound of this nature.

People of color are discriminated against and subjected to institutionalized racism in almost every facet of society (Brunsmas, Brown, & Placier, 2013; Clark, Fasching-Varner, & Brimhall-Vargas, 2012; Fasching-Varner, 2012; Fasching-Varner & Mitchell, 2013a, 2013b; Martin et al., 2014; Smith, 2002; Taylor, 2007; Wilson, 1996). Schools, as social institutions, are micro-replications of the very discriminatory structures that permeate day-to-day life in the United States. Many students of color, being prepared by primarily White female educators (Fasching-Varner, 2012; Fasching-Varner, Mitchell, Martin, & Bennett-Haron, 2014), are not engaged to understand, let alone dismantle, the series of systemic obstacles that they will face throughout their lifetimes. While mentoring, developing critical thinking skills, and working toward changing attitudes are essential, and may be achieved by culturally relevant approaches, realizing the continued and likely permanent presence of racial discrimination and other inequities may be equally as

important (Bell, 1980, 1992). The educators presented by Hayes et al. (2014) were clearly successful in their work, but the disparities between Black and White students (by and large) persist (Downey & Pribesh, 2012; Hayes et al., 2014; Tonry, 2012). As a small bandage, these efforts may be of no use to contain the blood shed from the bullet wound of racial discrimination.

While the two educators presented by Hayes et al. (2014) were engaged in work to dismantle the system of oppression and disparity, they were unable to overcome the vastness of the system. While they recognized that historically Blacks have had to fight for access to education, their argument would be enhanced with an understanding and explanation of the interest convergence nature of privilege (Bell, 1980), which suggests that change occurs only when the dominant group has a vested economic interest in the change; the dominant group will always control what change looks like, who is served by change, and how the economics of change promote their own self-interest. The fight by communities of color to achieve freedom, equality, and self-respect is as old as this country (Bell 1992; Fasching-Varner, Hartlep, Martin, Hayes, Mitchell, & Allen-Mitchell, 2015). There must always be a subordinate group for the dominant group, or those with power, to benefit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Consequently, the dominant group, middle-class and wealthy Whites, continually oppresses marginalized groups (communities of color and groups of lower socioeconomic status) (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014; Delgado, 2000). The racial realism with which communities of color must begin is the understanding of racism as endemic, the inferior role to which people of color have been relegated by majority groups, and the liberation that comes with that acknowledgement and the ability to more aggressively pursue change. From our perspective, culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical connectedness, but these elements do not guarantee liberation. No one thing has made a significant difference in changing the system of oppression. This realism concept suggests that people of color and their allies must acknowledge the fight for equity has never been, and never will be, a priority in a society that benefits from cycles of privilege and marginalization as a means to aggressively push back against the very structures of oppression and marginalization (Bell, 1992; Curry, 2008; Martin et al., 2014).

We adopt racism reality theory to argue that a philosophy of dominance and the persistent effects of oppression affect every aspect of the lives of children of color, not just education. This stance necessitates a wider set of perspectives (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014). In extending our response to Hayes et al. (2014), we argue that the possibilities of having teaching practices applied on a large scale is idealistic but, even if achievable, will do little good until the gaping bullet hole that is our education system is acknowledged and pressure is put on the wound to stop the massive bleeding that is the result of the systematic oppression of communities of color.

### **There Is No Crisis**

The intent of this response is not to criticize the work of Hayes et al. (2014); we recognize and value that practitioners engage in culturally relevant teaching. Instead, this response challenges

scholars to consider the larger structures involved when discussing culturally relevant teaching. Since culturally relevant teaching was introduced in 1995, there has been no real change in actual outcomes for students because it alone does not fix the bigger issue: racism. For instance, from 1973 until 2006, the number of students of color who were suspended and expelled from school jumped from two to more than three times as likely to be put out of school in comparison with their White peers (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Witt, 2007). Education and the schooling of Blacks and other historically disenfranchised communities are indeed important; however, the wound is big, and education is simply not enough for students of color to successfully combat forces pulling them toward the school-to-prison pipeline and educational failure. The overall “system” and its subcomponents, such as education, serve to protect White supremacy. Under a system controlled by a White supremacist patriarchal society, the economic impact that “the system” has on Blacks is important to understand, as there is no crisis in place for a “system” filled with racism, classism, and unfair outcomes. That is to say, “each institution is functioning per their design and the demands of the society” (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014, p. 420). The economic benefits in place that flow between these institutions have great rewards for those in the power (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014). We wish to extend the ideas presented by Hayes et al. (2014) by focusing not only on education but also on how social institutions in general are created and designed to continually oppress and suppress Black and Brown Americans. We draw special attention to America’s criminal justice system, labor market, and housing market; while we invest endless resources into so-called reform efforts, little change occurs, but rather education and predominately White societal reformists become richer. The concept of “bridges to benefit” (Martin et al., 2014) is helpful to support this discussion. The “bridges to benefits” notion is based on networks of White privilege, which flow between institutions, such as education, the economy, and the law, and which involve capitalizing on the misery of Blacks while simultaneously protecting White supremacy. In fact, we argue that corrections, education, and other public sector areas have become misery industries (Martin et al., 2014).

Additionally, we use Horton’s (2002) definition of *racism*—“a multi-level and multi-dimensional system of dominant group oppression that scapegoats the race and/or ethnicity of one or more subordinate groups” (p. 26)—to explain and help understand the interest convergence nature of the privileged. Within the context of the convergence interest concept we acknowledge the myth that America is living in a post-racial society, and unlike those taking traditional approaches to understanding race, we place race and racism at the center of our analysis. Race is foundational to understanding America’s enduring racial divide, particularly as it relates to education (Martin et al., 2014).

### **Bridges to Benefits in Social Settings**

America’s criminal justice, housing, labor, and educational markets are institutional structures that are reflective of the networks of White privilege, which flows among institutions while exploiting Blacks and protecting White supremacy (Martin et al., 2014). To

capture how the education system functions in a similar manner, we examined each of these entities.

### **Penal System**

Alexander (2012) examined the effect that the War on Drugs had on mass incarceration, specifically the incarceration of Black males. Alexander compared the function of the current prison system to similar race-specific policies enacted during the Jim Crow era. One of the most profound topics within the work is the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2012; Fasching-Varner, 2014; Martin et al., 2014). Though we proceed in an age of color-blindness, life chances are diminished as children of color are not only the most likely to experience the loss of a parent to the penal system but to experience the reduced resources and financial stability that correlate with parental incarceration (Blumstein, 1982; Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2013; Clear, 2009). Children who are the most at risk are suspended and expelled at rates three times higher than their White counterparts, causing them to be more likely to be pushed into the criminal justice system (Fajana, 2007; Foucault, 1977; Heitzeg, 2009; Kim et al., 2010; Meiners, 2010; Robinson, 2001). The statistical evidence presented in Alexander’s and similar works reveals a tremendous amount of evidence to counter the rhetoric of America being a post-racial society (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014; Alexander, 2012; Martin et al., 2014).

### **Housing**

Serving time for a committed crime is not the end of many prisoners’ sentences. If one is deemed a criminal and charged with a felony offense, that person is also denied public housing assistance (Alexander, 2012). Aside from this fact, residential segregation remains a salient feature in American society today (Logan, Stults, & Farley, 2004). There is significant evidence that reveals the pervasiveness of discrimination toward people of color within rental and housing markets (Turner & Ross, 2005). Extensive audits conducted by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, for example, revealed bias across many dimensions, Blacks experiencing adverse treatment in one in five housing searches (Turner, Ross, Gaister, & Yinger, 2002). Discrimination was measured by factors such as the amount of information offered on a property, the number of opportunities given to view units, the assistance with financing, and the steering away from wealthy communities to those with predominantly minority residents (Charles, 2003). The insufficient amount of resources given to schools within these districts is also tied to residential segregation and these barriers (Gamoran, 2001; Greenwald & Laine, 1996).

### **Labor Market**

Although Blacks have made remarkable progress in the labor force since the age of slavery and manual labor, many disparities still exist between Blacks and their White counterparts (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Pager & Quillian, 2005). Black male high school graduates are 70% more likely to experience involuntary unemployment than Whites, and when they are employed, they are most often concentrated in job sectors with lower levels of stability

and fewer opportunities for advancement (Smith, 2002; Wilson, 1996). A concentration of potential group disadvantage is evident in trade, public service, manufacturing, and professional service work representation within communities of color (Restifo, Roscigno, & Qian, 2013). The unemployment rate is one of the most common gauges of various groups in the labor market; independent of the economic climate, Black rates tend to be consistently double that of Whites (Weller & Fields, 2011). Given the educational opportunities and experiences that many of these students likely have encountered, the disparities that exist in the labor market are not unlikely (Apple, 1996; Baroque, 1981; Bell, 1992; Carbonaro, 2005; Diamond, 2012; Downey & Pribesh, 2012; Freire, 2000).

### **Education**

Culturally relevant teaching was proposed in 1995 by Ladson-Billings as a three-tiered approach to focus on academic achievement, cultural competence, and development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness. Despite knowledge of these practices that could be effective at engaging children, there has been little documented systematic success at addressing the achievement gap between White and non-White students or at addressing systemic issues of race and class that plague education; overt racism and color-blindness continue to play major roles in American institutionalized society and have influenced the quality of education (Brookover, 1985; Downey & Pribesh, 2012). And yet America continues to experience the national selling of public schools to companies (Hayes et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Martin, 2015). When education is treated like a commodity rather than the differentiated product that it could be, imagining a dismantling or even altering of the education system is difficult (Lorde, 1984). By and large culturally relevant practices are not embraced in the educational system as a whole (Apple, 1996; Diamond, 2012; Downey & Pribesh, 2012; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Martin, 2015; Sleeter, 2001). In articulating their approaches, Hayes et al. (2014) failed to acknowledge that racism will continue to create disparities in opportunities that have been redesigned in unrecognizable practices in America's criminal justice system, labor market, and housing institutions (Bell, 1992; Fasching-Varner et al., 2014).

Contemporarily, the young Black children who attend failing, under-resourced schools are limited in their potential for marketplace competition and as a result often travel an alternative pipeline that leads to prison (Tonry, 2012). This pipeline begins with a pedagogy that fails Black and Brown students, which leads to a particular set of student disengagements, which leads to behaviors society views as criminal, and ends with incarceration (Alexander, 2012; Martin et al., 2014). In the current system of mass education, it is not only the men and women who attempt to combat damage done in this system, but the direction, structure, and limitation of knowledge in the schoolbooks that influence the students within the system (Apple, 1996; Brookover, 1985).

It is important to consider school conditions and teaching practices (Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, 2000); the role that race plays a role in the education system (Downey & Pribesh, 2012); and

the larger scheme of things, such as America's criminal justice system, labor, and housing market, which affect individual students as well as the whole education system. Despite many educators' attempts to combat damaging effects that accompany deficit ideologies, one must understand that Band-Aids don't fix bullet holes; the bullet hole is so big that it cannot be addressed with education alone. There is a link between policies and classroom instruction, wherein teachers must mediate the impact of policies and ultimately affect the amount of direct penetration of these policies in the classroom (Diamond, 2012). In other words, when exploring pedagogy and education as an instrument of oppression, one understands that this transformation may begin at the individual grassroots level but must move to a systemic level to have the intended impact (Freire, 2000).

The overrepresentation of Blacks in correctional facilities and failing schools and the lack of opportunities afforded to them in the housing and labor markets are examples of how networks of White privilege operate. These networks operate in ways that disproportionately impact populations considered by the dominant groups of society to be without value and, thus, prevent that segment of the population from accessing the wealth of the dominant group. The networks of White privilege create an industry of infrastructure, employment, and market to keep those "undesirables" away from affluence and access. In reality, these institutions do not merely help uphold the balance of wealth and power, but rather they truly function to create larger differences between the "haves" and the "have nots." Not only do the imprisoned remain poor and uneducated, but also their families and future generations remain poor and uneducated, helping those with power stay in power (Alexander, 2012; Fasching-Varner et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014). In order to acknowledge racism, sexism, and classism, we must understand how and why these various social systems operate. This is essential for teacher preparation in today's so-called post-racial society.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The intent of this piece is not to speak negatively to those who do positive CRT work; rather it is intended to help others think about the schooling and education of Blacks on a much larger scale. Indeed, Hayes et al. (2014) provided a useful method of approaching schooling and education for kids of color; however, it is simply not enough. This response offers some suggestions for moving forward to readdress what students of color need to successfully survive racism and to succeed within the dominant White culture that exists in U.S. society.

First, we suggest that if systemic change is to occur, we must understand that Band-Aids don't fix bullet holes. Racism functions on so many levels that systemic change will not happen overnight; in fact, it may not happen in a decade, a generation, or even a century (Martin et al., 2014). The reality is that a disproportionate number of Black families still live in poverty, a disproportionate number of Black students still attend under-resourced schools, and a significant amount of Blacks are still unemployed (Martin et al., 2014). Evidently, we are not living in a time where race no longer matters. As educators, we must teach our students of color how to

free themselves from the misconception that change is likely to occur without discontinuing their efforts to change it—the contradiction of realism.

Second, we suggest that it is critical that scholars continue to mentor, educate, and teach students of color how to think critically within a society where race does matter. Racism in the United States has no permanency; instead, racism shifts, changes, and shapes into often unrecognizable systems that fit perfectly into the fabric of the American consciousness (Alexander, 2012). Teaching students of color about the nature of their social position will allow them to be aware of the constant change and constant hostility that people of color are faced with in virtually every social institution (Martin et al., 2014). Teaching students of color to acknowledge racial realism will allow them to understand and respond to the cyclical characteristics of their inferior position. Additionally, this will allow students to think and plan within an environment of realism rather than idealism.

Black educators must continue this discourse and continue social action to help teach students of color to identify and evaluate the issues that exist in the world around them and that influence their daily activities and life chances. For us as educators, it is critical to understand that the overall system is functioning in the way that it has always intended (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014) and that the struggle in itself has important implications that give us hope for the future (Bell, 1992). With the “bridges to benefits” model of Martin et al. (2014), educators can teach students of color how to succeed in a consistently hostile racial environment; otherwise, we may continue to “bequeath to the next generation a world more unjust than the one which we inherited, and we owe them—and ourselves—much, so much, more. It is time to dismantle the white racial frame and burn the ‘bridges to benefits’” (Martin et al., 2014, p.76).

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