Social norms, racial narratives and the mission of public education

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Despite the surrounding universalistic discourses promoting equality and equal opportunity, schools provide social groups with different learning environments and types of knowledge, thereby reproducing a racialized division of labor and reinforcing the ideological, economic and social status quo. In doing so, they legitimate the values, worldview and perspectives of dominant sectors of society and contribute to the perpetuation of long-standing social patterns in the US. This article examines ways that this orientation is institutionalized through policies, norms and practices, paying particular attention to the area of higher education. To do so, it will explore the history and perceptions of public education in the United States, debates surrounding current efforts to create «multicultural» curricula, and the impact of patterns of segregation in neighborhoods and schools in the United States. It concludes with positive suggestions as to how to attack some of these problems at their roots, within the structural conditions of their production.

The perceptions and reality of US public education

The question of access to higher education must be posed against a backdrop of a long history of racial formation in the United States rendering European descendants as superior and more worthy than peoples from Africa, Asia and Central and South America. Despite the universalistic discourse of founding fathers such as Franklin or Jefferson, until quite late in US history education was reserved for the sons of propertied white men. In fact, in 1829 legislation passed in the United States made it a criminal offense to teach Blacks to read or write, regardless of their status as free or enslaved (Du Bois 1979: 644).

After the Civil War and during Reconstruction (1860s and 70s), the idea emerged that education (including college) should be made available to all people, not just elites, and should be provided at public expense (Du Bois 1979: 637-69). The move to expand educational access as a social good emanated from Black leaders, particularly in the US South, who associated knowledge with power and a means to achieve status and respect, as well as a benefit to society as a whole (Du Bois 1979: 641). With the opening of the first schools, Whites and Blacks frequently interacted and some progress was made in eliminating prejudice and educational inequalities. However, when Confederates returned to power (late 1870s) many public schools were closed as «Negroes were disliked and feared almost in exact proportion to their manifestation of intelligence and capacity» (Du Bois 1979: 644-645). Education was believed to en-

[1] See Christopher (2003) for an examination of these forces within the California system of higher education.

courage insolence; the idea of teaching all children to read and write was considered «revolutionary» and «poisonous» (Franklin 2003: 10). Education was for those with «leisure time», certainly not poor and working people (ibid.). Somewhat later, this rationale was similarly articulated in relationship to the idea of educating women, which was viewed as interfering with the «appropriate» duties of wives and mothers.

Public higher education: openings for the common man; Whites only need apply

A telling example is provided by the establishment of the Free Academy in 1847, now known as the City University of New York (CUNY). CUNY was the first free public institution of higher education (Gorelick 1981: 194), providing thousands of poor and working people a chance for a college education, though «African Americans were largely absent from a college that was emblematic of democratic opportunity» (Crain 2003: 46). More than a century later activists in the struggle for Open Admissions (after the *Brown versus Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, Civil Rights movement and as part of the Second Reconstruction), «demanded that rather than defining human need in corporate terms, colleges must serve the needs of working-class minority communities – including their need for fundamental social change» (Gorelick 1981: 194) and the doors of the university were opened to communities of color. The open admissions policy also generated heated opposition: «In 1971 US vice president Spiro Agnew said that CUNY would give away "100,000 devalued diplomas"» (Crain 2003: 47). Similar language resonated when a key educational advisor to Nixon proclaimed that US society was in «danger of producing an educated proletariat. That's dynamite!» (Franklin 2003: 10) The idea that ordinary folks would have access to knowledge and skills opened the possibility of their challenging the status quo. This was particularly true at a time when people who had previously been left out of the mainstream were making demands for inclusion, representation and equity. By the late 1970s, when the CUNY was becoming a majority students of color, both the state and city university systems imposed tuition (Crain 2003: 5). Some people assert this move was an attempt to erect another barrier to the expansion of educational opportunity to all.

Funding disparities

Patterns in overall graduation rates evidence underlying premises about access to higher education, as 76% of students from families of the highest economic quartile in the United States complete college by age 24 whereas only 4% of those from the lowest quartile do so (Loeb 1999: 88). Since Whites are overwhelmingly overrepresented in the highest quartile, and people of color in the lowest, this represents racially disproportionate access to education. But how can this pattern be more accurately explained?

The first factor lies in the funding of pre-university level education. Because public schools are financed at the local and not state or national levels, tremendous disparities exist in the allocations to primary and secondary schools in high versus low-income areas. These differentials impact resources, staffing, equipment, technological capacities and facilities that ultimately translate into patterns of educational achievement[1]. They also have huge significance in relationship to the preparation of students for college admission, retention and graduation. So often the question is posed about why disparities in educational outcomes persist. Even looking at just this one factor, reasons become quite clear.

A second factor lies in the financing of public institutions of higher learning. Of seven million students enrolled as undergraduates in the US in 2003, 70% attend public institutions (as do 60% of

all graduate students). These universities depend on public funds, generally classified under the rubric of «discretionary funds» and are therefore especially vulnerable to disproportionate budget cuts at times of fiscal constriction (Uchitelle 2003). As public funding has decreased drastically, beginning in the 1980s with Reaganomics, schools often turn to increasing tuition, reinforcing the challenges faced by students from low-income families in trying to pursue their education. At CUNY, the budget share covered by tuition increased from 18 to 47% between 1988 and 1998 and has continued to grow significantly since then, raising the question of whether public schools are really public. The impact of this is, of course, racially disproportionate, as tuition cost as a percentage of median family income is 25% for Whites and 42% for both Blacks and Latinos (Choe 1999: 13). The consequences of this structural disparity not only affects individual access to higher education, but also society as a whole, as it loses contributions that could be made by a more highly educated public, particularly one genuinely representative of the US population (Uchitelle 2003).

Additionally, not long after demands were made to expand educational opportunities in the 1960-70s, a national trend emerged expanding what is known as the «prison industrial complex», at the expense of higher education[2]. This corresponds to a move toward regressive taxation and away from support for social services; toward consolidation of the wealth of the elite and the increased impoverishment of poor, working- and middle-class people of all races. The impact has been felt disproportionately in the targeting of communities of color through racial profiling by police and the infusion of both drugs and guns into poor areas. Funding that had been going to education is now allocated to prison construction and operating costs.

Beliefs and attitudes about access and equity in higher education

To this day, public opinion about whether all people have a right to higher education is not unanimous. A recent study (Bush 2004) reveals that US-born Whites (72,8%) believe significantly less than foreign-born Blacks (92,1%) that public higher education is a right to which all should have access; similarly, males believe (78,4%) less so than females (84,6%). Implicit in the opposition to public higher education is the idea that the expansion of educational opportunities necessarily involves diminished standards, as these new admits are not deemed intellectually capable or academically prepared. This has been expressed in the assertion that students who take more than 4-5 years to graduate are either not serious about their education or not «college material». This position does not take into account family responsibilities, employment, and care-taking. These factors are often relevant for families with fewer resources (particularly in communities of color) and with fewer options and sources of support. Furthermore, as mentioned above, as schools in different areas are funded differently, students receive different quality educations.

The case of CUNY is again illustrative. In recent years the argument has been made that when the Open Admissions policy was initiated in CUNY in 1970, standards dropped; by increasing access, excellence was reduced. Some feel this attitude emerged because, in the 1960s, CUNY was overwhelmingly white, whereas now the majority is students of color. With racialized discourse about the culture of poverty and inferiority of intellect of communities of color, the presumption was that the education could not uphold «standards». However, as Nathan Glazer has pointed out: «the greatest beneficiaries of open enrollment were not Blacks and Puerto Ricans as it is portrayed, but white ethnics, particularly Catholics who had not been able to earn admission to senior colleges prior to 1970. [...] The

[2] Between 1988 and 1998, funding to New York State prisons increased by $761.3 million, while funding for education was decreased by $615 million. More African Americans have entered prison for drug offenses than have graduated from SUNY every year since 1989 and almost twice as many Latinos were incarcerated for drug offenses as have graduated from SUNY in 1997. The costs of housing per prison per year is $30,000, roughly that which would cover tuition for nine students at SUNY or CUNY (Black Issues in Higher Education 1998: 12).

real upheaval at CUNY, then, was not due to the beginning of open enrollment in 1970 but to the financial crisis that gripped New York in 1975» (Glazer 1998).

Attitudes toward different types of schools also often express implicitly racialized views. Community colleges are often looked down upon and have a higher concentration of students of color than senior colleges; city colleges often have a higher concentration than state colleges, which often have a higher percentage than elite private universities. In a recent study conducted by the author, students at a senior public college spoke of feeling disrespected because they attend a public university but also feeling superior to students at community colleges (Bush 2004). The awareness of how one is both more and less fortunate than others provides an opportunity to see widespread perceptions of social stratification and structural inequality. Leon (white male) explains, «Our butt-about jokes are about the local community college, but theirs [private school students'] are about our college. The community college doesn't even exist to them». Vera (white female) adds, «People always say "Oh you go to that school, what is that, a community college?" Then there's the community college, and you feel so much better» (Bush 2004).

«Legacies» and the logic of double standards

One of the most bitter ironies in the US discussion of «standards» can be seen in the phenomenon known as «legacies». Despite great public controversy about affirmative action in college admissions being unfair and pulling down educational standards, «for more than 40 years, an astounding one-fifth of Harvard's students have received admissions preference because their parents attended the school. Today, these overwhelmingly affluent, white children of alumni-"legacies" are 3 times more likely to be accepted to Harvard than high school kids who lack that handsome lineage. The average admitted legacy at Harvard between 1981 and 1988 was significantly less qualified than the average admitted non-legacy. [...] With the exception of the athletic rating, [admitted] non-legacies scored better than legacies in all areas of comparison. Exceptionally high admit rates, lowered academic standards, preferential treatment [...] hmmm. These sound like the cries heard in the growing fury over affirmative action for racial minorities in America's elite universities. Only no one is outraged about legacies» (Larew 1991: 10). This example demonstrates how the preferential treatment of Whites is thinly disguised in public discourse about higher education. Rarely (if ever) have we heard outcries about how legacies pull down standards at Harvard, Yale or Dartmouth, and yet the claim that Open Admission policies in public universities lower standards has been widespread.

The curriculum and the shaping of ideas

The «multiculturalism» project within the US over the last several decades has led to some shifts from a traditionally Eurocentric curriculum to one that is more inclusive and representative. Several research projects in the 1990s documented the presence and impact of multicultural curricula and diversity courses in higher education in the United States[3]. However, significant numbers of people in positions of power continue to hold the view that diversity is not relevant to intellectual pursuit; that Whites are familiar enough with the experiences of people of color, and need no additional knowledge; and that racism is a thing of the past. Contrary to these perceptions, many studies demonstrate that basic public knowledge about the current circumstances of different racial groups diverge significantly from reality, particularly for Whites who have less exposure and incentive to know the actual situation. The question of how and where misperceptions take shape

[3] These include for example: *Discipline Analysis Essays* and the CUNY Panels: Rethinking the Disciplines Series edited by D.O. Helly published by the National Center for Curriculum Transformation Resources on Women (NCCTRW) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities American Commitments Reports on *The Drama of Diversity and Democracy: Higher Education and American Commitments* and *American Pluralism and the College Curriculum: Higher Education in a Diverse Democracy*.

must be raised. What do schools teach? Is the multicultural project aimed at cultural understanding and inclusion or also at recognizing the racial and social organization of society?

In a national study conducted by the Washington Post, the Kaiser Foundation and Harvard University, 70% of Whites were found to hold at least one misperception related to income, education and healthcare access as between black and white populations in the United States. People who had a more accurate understanding of these circumstances were significantly more likely to support measures to address them.

Table 1.1. Whites' Perceptions of Racial Equality

Percentage of Whites who hold perception	that the average Black compares to the average White in relation to:	Reality
61%	Equal or better access	Blacks are nearly twice as likely to to have no healthcare insurance
49%	Similar levels of education	17% of Blacks have completed college versus 28% of Whites
42%	Similar earnings	Black median income $27,910 / 50% under $25,000 White median income $44,366 / 30% under $25,000

Source: Richard Morin, "Misperceptions Cloud Whites' View of Blacks," Washington Post Final Edition (11 July 2001), A1.

Many scholars rightfully target the educational system as a locus where racialized images, beliefs, and ideology are produced and reproduced despite denial by many that this occurs[4]. «Discounting and suppressing the knowledge of whiteness held by people of color was not just a by-product of white supremacy but an imperative of racial domination» (Roediger 1998: 6). The presumption and «hidden» nature of whiteness are rife throughout the historical record, eloquently exposed by people like Frederick Douglass in his famous critique of the centering of the white experience in «What to the Slave Is Your Fourth of July?» (1970: 349) «a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham»[5].

Origin and development narratives of the US nation

Another aspect of the curriculum that tends to be influenced by racialized assumptions is that which conveys the story of the origin and development of the US nation. Frequently myths of nationhood and citizenship presume history from the perspective of the dominant and the elite, particularly those with the power and resources to publish textbooks and to mandate curriculum. The concept of «the United States, a nation of immigrants», for example, disguises the unequal status of various groups: how they arrived, what they experienced when they arrived, or how their lands and peoples were «incorporated» as part of the US nation. A «nation of immigrants» presumes a European experience, where choice has been the primary factor in migration. This

[4] See for example: Giroux (1997), Delpit (1995, 1998), and McIntyre (1997).

[5] See http://douglassarchives.org/doug_a10.htm (accessed 8 August 2005).

was not the case for Africans, Mexicans or indigenous peoples, among others.

Similarly, the common equation of the label «American» with someone from the United States, rather than the continent, intrinsically racializes the images of who is and who is not included, thereby projecting a white portrait. Author Elizabeth Martinez points out that the concepts of «America» and «Las Americas» have been rendered irrelevant and nonexistent (along with more than 20 nations) as the United States has defined these terms solely in relation to itself (1996: 24). Toni Morrison explains that «deep within the word "American" is its association with race. To identify someone as a South African is to say very little; we need the adjective "white" or "black" or "colored" to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white» (1992: 47). Furthermore, the espoused identity of the US as benevolent savior, protector of freedom and democracy, expresses a nationalistic and ahistoric perspective from the vantage point of those in power. As one English commentator recently put it: «[The United States] has no collective identity except as the best, the greatest country, superior to all others and the acknowledged model for the world» (Hobsbawm 2003: B8).

Curricular inclusion: does it matter?

Beliefs about whether curricular inclusion matters reflect underlying mainstream thought about whether we have achieved equality and whether the traditional curriculum is biased. In the study referenced in this article (Bush 2004), a white male student expressed surprise that anyone would think that including the experiences and accomplishments of people of color in the curriculum would raise standards. «What does that have to do with academic quality?» he asks. But after consideration, he retracts his initial response. «Oh, now I understand. They probably feel that the history course or the art course is too Eurocentric. I can see that. I just never thought about it. I assumed that we are studying the right things. We assume that everyone should be, and is, being treated equally». Andrew's initial statement alludes to a common belief that racism no longer exists and that we do indeed live in a colorblind society. The presumption that what is presented is truth, that the status quo is untainted by ideology or historical record, is common.

Beverly Daniel Tatum, renowned psychologist, speaks of this: «Stereotypes, omissions, and distortions all contribute to the development of prejudice» (1997: 5-6). She discusses the significant consequences of Eurocentric curricula reflected in the remark of one of her white students, «It's not my fault that Blacks don't write books» (1997: 5). She wonders whether any of his teachers had actually told him that there were no Black writers, or whether, given the omission, he had drawn his own conclusion (1997: 5).

Young people also learn about society from the media, especially when there is little challenge to the messages conveyed about the social world in school curricula. The argument that equality between groups has been achieved and we should support a «colorblind» perspective is also justified by the notion that the problem of racism is that we keep talking about it. In this line of thinking, if we could just focus on being human and stop talking about race, we would overcome racism. This was explicitly articulated in an article that appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: «The opposite of being pro-diversity is not being anti-diversity. It's being diversity-indifferent, and that's me. My T-shirt would not say "Diversity Sucks". It would say, "Diversity – Who Cares?" Why am I sick of all the praise for diversity? Because it cloaks an agenda that is anti-merit, pro-preference, and anti-assimilationist» (Clegg 2000).

The lack of curricular coverage of the experiences, accomplishments, struggles and history of communities of color also contributes to a notion that race is mediated through interpersonal interactions rather than through a systemically patterned organization of society. Numerous ideological narratives justify racialized

outcomes in the US educational system and society at large, including the notion that people are in positions of power because they work harder and are ultimately superior; that white upper class students achieve higher scores on tests because they are smarter (Bush 2004: 183-4); that people are poor because they are lazy, not as smart or have a bad attitude; or that measures to uplift and improve the circumstances of subordinated groups must draw resources from those who are barely surviving themselves but have greater access to opportunities. Rarely are these assumptions challenged.

Segregation and intergroup contact in education

Despite a public emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity, urban neighborhoods and schools in the United States are generally represented by concentrations of a particular group. For example, «the New York State public school system is starkly segregated, with nearly 30% of its approximately four thousand schools having student bodies in which 80% or more of the children are African American, Latino, or otherwise non-white, while almost half of the state's other schools have student bodies that are 80% or more white» (Dunn 1999: 19). This segregation leaves students unequipped to understand the experiences of people other than their own, and laden with assumptions about racial and ethnic identities, having commonly attended high schools within their own communities. University campuses are often the first place where young people are really confronted with people from different communities. However, patterns of segregation persist, as one study reveals with findings that are paralleled nationally (Bush 2004: 90).

Students attribute the reasons why people don't go into each other's homes to long-standing patterns, historical segregation, and the violence that underlies racial bigotry, «People get killed just for being in another neighborhood. Other races feel they might get lynched just for being another race. It's the fear of the unknown» said Kevin (white male). While contact does not necessarily correlate with consciousness, empathy or understanding, most studies recognize that

Intergroup Contact

How Often Are You in the Home of Someone of Another Race?

Never	Once a Month	Once a Week	Daily
62.1%	19.1%	11.8%	7.1%

«You need people to interact with each other to realize that the "other" isn't that different» (David R Harris, cited in Pyne 2003).

Sometimes assumptions are challenged by the experience of working together in community service projects, classes, or student activities, but they often form an invisible lens that shapes interaction. Conversations often dissipate when differences of opinion emerge. Tensions run deep beneath the surface as frequently perceived realities diverge between Whites and people of color. Whites may try to understand these differences, but often blame nationalist leanings of people of color, culture, or even human nature for the tension.

Who «self-segregates»?

As indicated in a popular book title, *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, (Tatum 1997), mainstream discourse suggests that Whites are inclusive while minorities are exclusive. Significantly, a recent University of Michigan study found that while the perception is that Blacks, Latinos, and Asians self-segregate more than Whites, this is not the case. «Contrary to widespread reports of self-segregation among students of color on campuses, the research finds this pattern more typical of white students. Students of color interact more with dominant stu-

dents than the reverse» (Smith *et al.* 1997: vi). The University of Michigan study of six thousand students at 390 colleges found that only 21% of white students said they dined frequently with members of other ethnic or racial groups, in contrast to 78% of Mexican American, 55% of African American, and 69% of Asian American students (*Chronicle of Higher Education* 1994: A31). Furthermore, «[the] cross-racial experience by students of color makes it likely that they know more about white students than white students know about them» (Roediger 1998: 8). Given the prevalence of colorblind ideology, this reality is particularly insidious as the dominant assumption is that all groups are equally knowledgeable (or ignorant) about each other's experience.

Intergroup interaction and its impact

Many studies have shown that diversity and integration can have a particularly beneficial impact on Whites, whose experiences with people of color tend to be more isolated and limited (Humphreys 1998). At the same time, for people from subordinated groups, racial, national, or ethnic affiliations can affirm identities that may be rendered negative, marginal or invisible within dominant white culture.

Additionally, for Whites, the «naturalizing» of their experience (the presumption that everyone experiences life as they do) also makes social conditions appear to have mysteriously developed, as opposed to there being scientific and structural explanations for inequality. Segregation, prejudice, poverty, and privilege are often described in ways that imply inevitability – «Things just happen» or «This is the way it's always been and always will be». Compounding this, Whites are much more often in visible positions of power and authority, conveying messages about who should be in charge. While Whites comprise approximately 75% of the population, white men (33% of the population) are 100% of US presidents, 90% of the US Senate, 95% of the Fortune 500 CEOs, and 85% of partners in major law firms (Hahnel and Pai 2001) with overwhelming power and access to set policy and frame «reality». This overrepresentation contributes to misperceptions, especially as media present us with images of a common experience, the implicitly «white» experience. When diverse images are presented, they generally portray Blacks who are part of the dominant society[6] or interracial friendships in ways that camouflage or deny racial inequality and undermine our ability to analyze significant and dramatic structural and systemic patterns (DeMott 1998). Images of people «getting along» lead one to conclude that there must no longer be a «race problem». While these sometimes include less stereotyped portraits, they also defuse the idea that something needs to be done to change long-standing racial patterns and practices (DeMott 1998). Messages of sameness imply that race is a set of interpersonal relations, focusing attention on individuals and away from structures and patterns (Street 2001: 9). «"Celebrating differences" is a far cry from dismantling inequalities» (Platt 2002).

Various factors are calculated into the decision to develop relationships with people from different groups, and these may emanate not from an individual's personal opinions but also from an assessment of possible risks such as repercussions from one's family or community. The cycle of segregation is reproduced through lack of contact, experience and having to consciously work against dominant patterns to become acquainted with people from other groups. Numerous unwritten rules undergird interaction. Children learn the boundaries, as there are consequences for stepping out of line.

These patterns of interaction become particularly apparent in high school when competition for college admissions, jobs and internships reflect social constraints and possibilities for dating test attitudes about intergroup relations. Studies about shifts in friendship groups note that junior high school is a transition period toward increased segregation (Lewin 2001: A1). Economic and social pressures foster division between young people as teenagers

[6] DeMott notes examples such as *The Cosby Show, The Jeffersons, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, The Hughleys, White Men Can't Jump, Regarding Henry* (1998: 12-13).

compete for specialized programs, scholarships and jobs (on their own, without parental help); they start thinking about careers[7] and may begin to date. The focus of their relationships becomes much more directed toward how they will navigate as adults within a racialized society. This issue is important, as diversity education and programs in higher education must be extended throughout the academic experience to become a «cradle to grave» project[8] in order to be effective.

Conclusion

Racialized patterns are structured into the institutions of education in a variety of ways. They flow from policies that have been supported, legislated and implemented based on misperceptions of social realities and as a result not only of misinformation, regulated discourse, and hopelessness but also due to an educational curriculum conservative on questions of social, racial and economic justice. These factors are compounded by Whites' lack of exposure to the everyday realities of individuals and communities of color, media distortions that exaggerate their affluence, and neighborhood and school segregation (Street 2001: 9).

Amongst educators there is generally recognition of the value of diversity and the benefits of understanding different ways of living and perspectives. Unfortunately, however, the movement for multiculturalism has to a large extent been aimed at cultural inclusion rather than social transformation and justice. Education for transformation should involve curricula that include not only the history, struggles, concerns, and accomplishments of all people but also training in understanding the social, political, and economic forces of history. Education can and should play a more sophisticated role in fostering awareness about the dynamics of power, rather than feeding people's illusions about the future. Academic curriculum could engage in public discourse about the dynamics of global capitalism, corresponding racialized structures of power and subordination, and the impact that these systems have on ordinary people's lives. It is urgent to place the issue of identity within a political and economic framework from the perspective of the world's peoples rather than that of the rich and powerful.

Co-curricular programming, community-based research, collaborative projects, service-learning, mentored internships, reflections on what has been gained by experiential learning and/or study abroad help students connect scholarship and public issues, consider alternative frameworks for judgment and action, draw meaning from experience, critique theory in light of practice and evaluate practice in light of new knowledge. These practices require students to negotiate their differences with colleagues, which therefore have implications for cultivating thoughtful and reflective forms of citizenship in a diverse democracy (Schneider 2003: 3).

This call for placing the curricular emphasis on diversity and race within a socio-economic framework differs from most scholarship in the area in which the focus tends to be on politics, culture and identity. Inclusion of multiculturalism in the curriculum is often viewed as an issue of self-esteem, as individualistic empowerment for those people who have been historically left out, or as enriching Whites' understanding of history. While these are important functions, this view of multiculturalism and diversity training does not challenge structural or systemic power dynamics. The biggest threat to the status quo is a broad-based understanding of the economics of social and global inequality, which includes the racialized structuring of society. If educational curricula included information about how Wall Street functions, about the cyclical nature of capitalism, about deindustrialization, about profit on a global scale and the concrete implications of these processes for real people's lives, then what has been described as the «White Fairness Understanding Gap» might be narrowed (Street 2001)[9]. A related phenomenon is that the study of economics often falls

[7] For a discussion of the replication of employment patterns, see Cherry (2001).

[8] Joe Feagin, Professor and President of the American Sociological Association (ASA), used this phrase at the annual ASA meeting in 2000.

[9] From an illuminating discussion with Don Robotham, Professor of anthropology, CUNY Graduate School and University Center, 1 December 2000.

under the rubric of business rather than that of social science, creating a false and problematic separation. Stakes are high because as the system shifts in a downward trend, many Whites who previously felt secure find themselves in increasingly precarious circumstances[10]. Unless persuasive alternative discourse is available along with theoretically informed explanations for what they experience on an everyday basis, Whites will continue to be persuaded by racialized narratives that justify and legitimate their own positional superiority.

We need to educate more broadly about structural and economic patterns and causes of racial discrimination, and critique paradigms of racial inequality that focus solely on personal friendships and «getting along». Friendship is important but it is not going to change the institutions that create, orchestrate and reproduce the relationships, structures and patterns that organize society along racial lines. We owe it to each other and to those who have fought long and hard for access, excellence and social justice using educational systems as a particular site for struggle. It can be done. Knowledge plus action equals power.

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[10] Over forty-three million jobs were eliminated in the United States between 1979 and 1996. Between 1993 and 1995, one of every fourteen Americans lost her or his job (Thandeka 1999: 96). Charles Gallagher, in a discussion of research he conducted, says, «It becomes difficult for working-class college students to think about white privilege when they are accumulating college debt, forced to live with their parents, working 25 hours a week, and concerned that K-Mart or the Gap may become their future employer» (1995: 176).

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Abstract

Social norms, racial narratives and the mission of public education

Schools provide social groups with different types of knowledge, thereby reproducing the social division of labor and reinforcing the ideological, social and economic status quo. They are often structured in ways that parallel the organization of society at large and distribute and legitimate values that flow from dominant groups. By functioning in this way they reinforce social arrangements that privilege the most powerful. Simultaneously, however, schools can function to subvert social patterns. The very mission of public schooling represents inclusiveness and the education of all people. Furthermore, the cultivation of inquiry can foster dissent, deviance, and an authority-subverting culture of critical discourse (Gouldner 1979). This article highlights how schools serve in the perpetuation of racialized patterns of inequality. It also provides insight into ways to improve our effectiveness in educating youth about civic responsibility and the importance of socially conscious leadership, broadly understood to be the millennial goals for academia.

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