

# Racism and the Economy

focus on **Education**

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“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”  
~James Baldwin

## **Introduction**

“You will never amount to shit because you are too busy goofing around! This statement, followed by the strong racial epithet of calling me a nigger while I was in sixth grade seeded my desire to awaken and begin my lifelong journey of advocating for issues of racial and social equity. Even though this occurred many years ago, the power of such statements can last forever. I have long forgiven my teacher for his remarks, but it serves as an example of how predominantly white systems can constrict the life-blood of individuals of color within it. I was a young person of color, growing up in a multi-racial family (e.g., black father and a white mother) spending my formative years in the inner-city then moving to a predominantly white environment during adolescence. Additionally, with the absence of cultural barometers back then, who would challenge statements such as these or protect the innocent minds of young students of color so as not to have their dreams deferred?” (Thomas, 2018).

It is stated that “education...is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery” (Cremin, 1957, p. 65). Though there is mass agreement regarding the timelines and establishment of education in America, we may differ on its purpose. Is public education truly designed to bring about a common educated populace, whereby all receive knowledge to better humankind? Or, is it the greatest socio-cultural experiment, masking its true intent to align to capitalist ideals, creating a binary model of education where a select few attain the knowledge necessary for advancement to ruling while others are relegated to maintain a lower class of followership/servitude?

How do we disrupt public education enough to better the outcomes for students, specifically those who have great promise within their reach, but conditions are not designed for them to do so? I argue that solutions lie within three primary areas. First, we must address the adult organizational culture that is riddled with bias that creates the conditions in which students interact on a daily basis; second, is rigorous instruction for ALL students; and third, leadership from the top is critical for vision and holding people able, which is accountability with support. This all must be done in deep collaboration/engagement with our community, specifically our parents and students. As a principal, I used to tell my community, “These are your schools and

we are blessed to support students for about six or seven hours a day. When they go home, you are the first and foremost teacher!” Without strong home school alignment, the efforts of educators is fruitless. Obviously, these three areas I mentioned are not exhaustive, nor mutually exclusive, but for the abbreviated nature of this white paper, I will focus on the adult organizational culture.

### **Inception of schools**

The earliest cast for America stems from English settlers purposed to have ‘discovered’ a new world, with little to no acknowledgement of Indigenous Peoples on this land. With them, the English brought their culture, religion and philosophies, all of which framed pre-colonial America. The English could ensure a certain level of cultural domination and ideological management by indoctrinating people through their conquests and creating a national culture grounded in Protestant, white American values that seeded school systems (Spring, 2018; Takaki, 1993). We can ask ourselves how much has changed in public education over the centuries, specifically as it pertains to the binary outcomes just mentioned? And who comprises those who are *conferred* by education to be leaders and those *confirmed* as merely followers? The distinction of language in this question is key and historical and present-day educational statistics depict an unfortunate answer.

Public schools are the one system that nearly all of us experience for thirteen years; it is a place for significant socialization, development and learning. It is said that schools are microcosms of society, yet as America grows increasingly diverse, we do not see this reflected in the responsiveness of education where all students are thriving (Cobb, 2017; Howard, 2010; Jackson, 2011). Over the years, as new immigrants arrived in America, the Statute of Liberty greeted them with the tablet inscription, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door” (Marcovitz, 2003). Being known for the land of opportunity was attractive, yet passing through America’s golden doors also meant walking through American school doors, and upon their close, the newly arrived were taught through an ideological lens far different from where they came.

### **Statistical significance**

The 1966 Coleman Report was published as one of America’s earliest preeminent body of educational research. Designed to be an analysis of educational outcomes disaggregated by factors such as race, gender and class, the report found that not every student was thriving (Dickinson, 2016). For example, African American students were several years behind their white peers when it came to academic achievement. The achievement discrepancies within this report gave birth to the term ‘achievement gap’. Though we see evidence of incremental progress to reduce the disparities between students of color and their white peers, such gaps still exist, equating to about 1.5 to 2 years difference between student groups as evidenced by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data (Hansen, et. al., 2018; Reardon, et. al., 2019). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2009) demonstrates that both reading and math scores for 17-year-olds remain essentially stagnant since 1971 (Hanushek, 2020). We are seeing abundant amounts of reports forecasting that the achievement disparities we all care so deeply about, will be even greater as a result of COVID-19 (Kuhfeld, et. al., 2020). “Many of the

children who struggle the hardest to learn effectively and thrive in school under normal circumstances are now finding it difficult, even impossible in some cases, to receive effective instruction, and they are experiencing interruptions in their learning that will need to be made up for” (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). At this rate of change, it will take hundreds of years to eradicate the disparities, far too long to match the urgency of now.

Unfortunately, research also shows lower income students continually experience less academic achievement compared to their economically more advantaged peers (Reardon, 2020; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). This trend mirrors the ever-increasing income disparities in America (Kochhar, 2020). Educational achievement disparities are not only germane to the moral responsibility of educators to reach all students, but these discrepant learner outcomes have consequential economic impacts to our country. A 2008 McKinsey & Company report notes that learning disparities had a greater effect on our economy than the recessions of both the 70s and the 80s. Further, had we addressed achievement disparities by 1998, the United States’ GDP would have been nearly 2.3 trillion dollars greater (Auguste, et. al., 2020). Currently, America is battling a global health pandemic, which is having a dire impact on our economy (Jones, 2020). “There is a perfect storm brewing in the global economy. Most recessions are caused by a demand shock...a supply shock...or a financial shock...Covid-19 promises to deliver all of the above in a single package” (Triggs & Kharas, 2020). If a moral argument or an economic argument is not enough to awaken people to a reality that must be addressed, what more will it take to deeply transform American educational systems?

### **Language entrapment**

The exploration of language and psychological factors associated with students’ achievement must be critically examined if we want to better understand how to eradicate the far too often predictable learning outcomes our students experience. The term ‘achievement gap’ refers to the end-user (e.g., our students) and indirectly posits students as the problem, exonerating the adults and societal factors responsible for the structural conditions by which students interact. The term permeates our schools as the gospel truth and falls upon the ears of our students and staff readily. This creates a gold standard of achievement often grounded in whiteness that repeatedly marginalizes students of color, those requiring the supports of special education or those acquiring English language (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Pate, 2020).

Over time, this symbolic/linguistic interaction forces entire school staff environments to succumb to a hegemonic practice and are seemingly paralyzed in their thoughts and actions that anything could be different (Blum, 1969; Brookfield, 2005; Dweck, 2016; Wynne, et. al., 2012; Kumashiro, 2012; McDermott, et. al., 2006; Pate, 2020). These socio-cultural boundaries “are reinforced when cultural gatekeepers [adults] use specific metrics or sociocultural indicators to denote an ‘intelligent’ versus an ‘unintelligent’ student, a ‘respectful’ versus a ‘disrespectful’ pupil, a ‘worthy’ versus an ‘unworthy’ learner” (Carter, 2012, p. 11). It becomes the master, stereotypical narrative in our schools and these stereotypes, “become a script that influences [student] behavior and inhibits [students’] ability to be engaged learners” (Pate, 2020, p. 3; Steele, 2011).

### **Practice solutions**

Newton's first law states an object in motion stays in motion at the same speed and same trajectory until countered by a greater force (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). This is to say that schools are perfectly designed to get the results they are getting unless countered with a force far greater than their inception. So why is it that such a force is not present when we know the vast inequitable outcomes in educational statistics have significant social, political, economic, and dare I say, moral impacts?

As an educational leader with over twenty-five years of experience, my journey is deeply personal. As a young student of color entering schools at the turn of the 70s, I should have been with the generation to experience positive outcomes from the civil rights movement with *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) charting a path for integrated schools married with the liberated mindset of the time, but this was not the reality for much of my K12 experience. As the opening reflexive paragraph of this paper noted, the narratives I encountered stole my innocence like a thief in the night. As I began my educational career, I knew my plight was to become that continued force pushing against public education's trajectory and serve as one who could break the cycle or as the late John Lewis said, "Get in good trouble, necessary trouble" to bring better outcomes for students (Schorr & Schorr, 1989).

As an educational leader, I deliberately walk into a schools as a parent; I want schools designed to be places where I would unequivocally send my own kids. For example, I visually assess the building and grounds, take notice of the neighborhood, and upon entry, wait for how I am greeted. I am curious about staff attentiveness and engagement; are they smiling and what are the conversations I am hearing with those adults and students in the main office? These and many other micro-observations are simultaneously occurring within minutes of my entry while I am making meaning of them and generating assessments about the mood of people and of the overall school. This is the basis of community and family engagement. I am very mindful to how people experience our schools, because that is what is shared throughout the community. Like Maya Angelou once stated, people may forget what you say and do, but they will always remember how you make them feel.

I am no different than the average parent and no different than the millions of students and families who enter our schools each day. I am certain that the same observations may be occurring about my presence. Before I open my mouth or present an opportunity for someone to know me, visually I am observed and assessments are made about me. Granted, in my role I am usually in a full suit and tie, have a title with organizational influence and letters behind my name signifying advanced education, but what if all of that was gone? What if my Black body was all that was seen, or I was the student receiving reduced lunch, or the one who received special education support, or the student who would fake being sick in fear of the racialized school environment? Maybe surprisingly to some and not others...this *was* me.

As a student, all I wanted from my teachers was to be seen, heard, valued and loved first (Vogelaar, et. al., 2019). Was this too much to ask of the adults? As educators, we have the daunting responsibility to meet the varied needs of students each day. Many educators with whom I interact share with me a 'calling' or perhaps a life changing interaction with a teacher while they were a student that propels them into the profession, but at what point do they lose touch with this? At what point did they, themselves, lose innocence so as to not be able to see

this in their students? This is often the crux of the micro-aggressive adult culture in our schools that our students can detect immediately, particularly students of color, who unfortunately have most likely been doing this their whole lives (Pate, 2020).

This micro-aggressive culture, left unaddressed, will become the subconscious macro-culture very quickly (Cobb, 2017; Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; Sue, 2010). Through my years of practice, I worked with many staff in several districts implementing a variety of strategies to rectify such cultures before they became permanently damaging. My role as a social worker in a large urban system utilized a clinical, Afrocentric approach to prevent the overidentification of African American students referred to special education. I led diversity, equity and inclusion for a large suburban district, where I created a staffing framework for culturally responsive practices. As both an elementary and secondary principal, I utilized student achievement data to guide courageous conversations with staff and students to collectively increase performance of African American students and those receiving English language and/or special education support. Lastly, my work in another large urban system with an office dedicated to the support of Black male student achievement demonstrated success, where, through a propensity study, we were able to discern the efficacy of culturally specific teaching and support practices yielding higher achievement, attendance and GPA for students enrolled in the program as well as a professional development framework for staff where as a result, 70% of the participants reported changing their practices in the classroom and nearly 85% reported an increase in their ability to form strong relationships with Black male students.

### **A focus on innocence**

All of my work utilizes an ecological framework and I recognize the interconnectedness of systems, specifically, how school districts must collaborate with community resources to affect the change we want to see in the classrooms. There is much beyond the scope of PK-12 education that must be addressed if we want to see the learning outcomes we desire for students and it will require multiple industries to convene to develop a systematic response to eradicate the inequitable learning outcomes we see today.

In my role, I have the privilege to work with many community partners who are committed to building the capacity of school and district staff. One of mention is a partnership I established with Innocent Classroom several years ago. This work, created and led by Alexs Pate, focuses where research proves it needs to be, on the collective efficacy of adults (Hattie, 2017). Alexs Pate (2020) asserts that every student is born innocent and virtuous, but through an adult lens that is inevitably biased, this is not always seen. Approaches like the Innocent Classroom help staff recognize and value students' virtuosities; staff learn to engage and nurture students through their virtues rather than letting their personal biases guide their interactions; and finally, staff learn how to protect the innocence of their students and become their allies.

Note that I reference Innocent Classroom as an approach, not a program; it is a way of being, not something to do. The Innocent Classroom builds capacity of staff, while less desirable program models may foster a dependent relationship or have proprietary materials continually drawing sparse resources from districts. I worked with other consulting groups to address racial inequities throughout my career that have a very aggressive approach, and though I believe there is a place

for that style of work, the Innocent Classroom gets to outcomes that are not judgmental; rather, developmental. They create the space for educators to look past their deeply held biases and respond to their students positively.

There is some evidence that shows approaches like this can make a difference. According to educator surveys after completion of Innocent Classroom training, “nearly 90% of respondents report an increase in academic mindset when utilizing strategies for student engagement, greater than usual academic growth for their students, stronger relationships with their students, the ability to positively redirect negative student behavior and they experienced a 40% reduction in weekly disciplinary referrals” (Pate, 2020, p. 17). The Innocent Classroom goes beyond promising; they are proving their approach works.

Educators seemingly never have enough time in a day and frequently share with me just how full their plates are to add one more thing. I can appreciate the weight they feel and would not want to unnecessarily contribute. I argue Innocent Classroom is not about adding to the plate. In fact, if done with fidelity, Innocent Classroom could lighten the plate. There is a front-end investment of time that mitigates the long-term costs of negative behaviors and referrals that robs educators of precious instructional minutes. This may be a time where we have to eat our own words, if you will, as we find ourselves telling students, “If you’re not willing to put in the work upfront, you can’t expect to get results.”

## **Conclusion**

I am deeply appreciative of educators who demonstrate the creativity and innovation that pushes their own learning and growth, so as to be commensurate with what students experience, especially during this global pandemic. The role of teachers used to be fairly concrete, but today, the statement in their job description that may read ‘other duties as assigned’ is all consuming. Aside from their primary duty of being the instructional leader in a classroom, COVID-19 is shining a light on being a deep listener, counselor, social worker, etc. The skillset surrounding instructional leadership is critically important. If we have not learned anything else due to this pandemic, we must empathize with what many of our students experienced pre-pandemic and that moving forward, the excuses often made on students’ behalf of why they cannot achieve are off the table...now, we should know better.

For any strategies to eradicate the achievement disparities many historically, marginalized students experience, it takes leadership from the top. As Superintendent of the third largest and most diverse district in Colorado Springs, I fully understand and accept the moral obligation I have as a public leader in my community. I cannot sit idly and leverage ‘hope’ as my primary strategy; we can NEVER leave learning to chance! Upon entry to Colorado Springs School District 11, I was explicit about my non-negotiables as Superintendent, which are my commitment to equity, rigorous instruction for all, strong community and family engagement, and transparency.

When I arrived a little over two years ago, we immediately disaggregated student achievement data so that staff understood the reality and responsibility before us. During my first public State of the Schools address with many leaders from our business, political, philanthropic, faith and

military sectors, this same reality was shared. We needed to enlist their support and make a case of how PK-12 education was inextricably bound to the overall health of our city and they played a critical part to our success. We recognized the need for a roadmap to success and had nearly 2000 individuals participate in the development of our district's strategic plan, the most significant level of engagement in recent history for the district. Our Board of Education also passed an equity policy, which is the first of its kind in southern Colorado, explicitly committing to serving every student and family as they come to us. This body of work includes a multi-year partnership with the [American Institute for Research](#) conducting a district-wide equity audit to identify focus areas for continuous improvement. Our presence throughout the community yielded strong support and we began to see positive changes in enrollment and student achievement prior to the urgency of responding to COVID-19.

There is no question that the pandemic yielded significant negative consequences for our community. Not unlike many districts across the country, Colorado Springs School District 11 has a significant journey ahead, and we are rebuilding a new relationship with our community as a result of our learning through a global pandemic. With a continued commitment to strong community and family engagement, we launched a campaign entitled 'Beyond the Mask', which are moderated sessions with our Board of Education and Senior Cabinet staff focusing on key issues as we emerge from the stronghold of COVID-19. With hundreds tuning in live each month and thousands watching afterward, we continue to see the positive effects of engaging our community to becoming a more reflective and responsive district. It is said that crisis does not build character; rather, it exposes the character already present. I am impressed with the organizational character of our district and community and proud to work alongside a staff who is dedicated to providing the best for students each day. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "The time is always right to do that which is right!" The mantle of responsibility is on our shoulders and the time is now.

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