Education Policy Analysis Archives

Race and Policy

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Abstract
Beliefs about race have played a central role in American history, literature, and education. Racial beliefs are embedded in the national identity in complex and disguised ways. These beliefs attribute presumed character traits to African Americans and other minorities, who are thought of as different in character and ability, especially the ability to govern themselves. These beliefs lead to education policies which separate, differentiate, and mandate different curricula and treatment for minorities, policies justified as being fair and democratic. These beliefs influence not only curriculum content, but how the schools are organized, financed, and administered at a deeper level than is commonly understood.

In his portrayal of the stark inequalities among American schools, Kozol (1991) reported a discussion of race and inequality with white teenagers in a wealthy New York suburb. These teenagers expressed three main beliefs. First, fiscal inequalities among schools don't really matter that much, although loss of funds from their own school to equalize resources with poor schools would be damaging. Second, any form of racial integration would be met by strong resistance in their community, especially by their parents, partly for fear education standards might decline. Third, achieving equity in funding would not make much difference since poor, minority children would fail

anyhow. They lack motivation, parental guidance, and a good environment. At this point in the discussion a frustrated boy exclaimed, "When people talk this way ... they're saying that black kids will never learn.... So what it means is—you are writing people off" (Kozol, 1991, p. 130). These beliefs are a product of racism in American society and a major reason it continues. How is it that these students come to hold such beliefs and what difference does it make for education?

For a long time, I have been puzzled by the connection between race and education policy. Despite attempts to ameliorate racism and raise the school performance of minorities, improvements have been modest. Why does racism persist? How do race and policy affect each other? I want to offer a tentative explanation of this connection. First, Americans hold deep-seated beliefs about democracy, equality, and fairness. These beliefs are sincere, I believe. Second, America is a deeply racist country in a particular way. Although many countries harbor racist beliefs, those in America are peculiar in some respects. Third, most "white" Americans don't fully comprehend that their country is racist, nor the extent of that racism, nor how that racism is embedded.

These beliefs result in seemingly contradictory policies. Given these beliefs, I would expect that policies with racial import will often be invisible or disguised as nonracial. That is, the intents and consequences of some policies will be taken to be something other than what they are, even to those who espouse them. This disguise enables the policies to seem fair and democratic, even when the policies have racial overtones. For example, the sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987) contends that Americans will not support policies that are believed to benefit minorities primarily. They will support social security since that is seen as benefiting all Americans, including minorities. But they will not support welfare programs, which are perceived as helping mainly minorities.

I have a corollary to Wilson's thesis. Americans will support policies that are harmful to minorities that they would not tolerate if those same policies were applied to majority populations. In education, for example, Americans are strongly in favor of retention—retaining students at the same grade level for another year—even though the research evidence overwhelmingly shows strong negative effects on the students retained. Retention programs are applied massively to minorities in large cities, but not to majority populations. Yet retention does not appear on the surface to have racial implications. Other education policies that appear to have little to do with race also severely disadvantage minorities, including how schools are financed, how schools are organized, how standardized tests are used, and how students are grouped. In other words, we have organized ourselves educationally in ways to disadvantage minorities, even while maintaining appearances of equality in such matters. No other developed countries have organized their educational systems in this fashion.

I would call our system one of institutional racism, racism not recognized by those participating in it because the way the institutions function seems normal to those growing up in them. Individuals need have no hostile racist thoughts, only adherence to the system as it exists. I would not say that the way we have organized ourselves educationally is determined solely by racial concerns, only that such concerns are one powerful causal factor. Other economic and social factors also have had strong effects. Now these are strong claims, outrageous claims, some will say. How can they be substantiated? No single attempt of this length could conceivably deal definitively with the problem of American racism. In what remains of this attempt, I would like to explore explanations as to how racism affects education policy: first, how race has been constructed and used in America historically; second, how race is embedded in American identity; and, third, how these beliefs play out in education policies.

Our National Identity

Reluctantly, I have come to believe racism is deeply embedded within the national identity itself, built into the American character by history and experience. Jacobson (1998) traced in detail how the concepts of "race" and "whiteness" have been socially constructed and employed in the US. In his history of the concept of "whiteness" he showed how immigrants were assimilated through redefinitions of what "whiteness" meant. What were seen as separate "races" of people gradually came to be socially constructed as "white ethnics," but not without struggle.

Early colonial Americans defined themselves as "white" and "free" in contrast to those who were not, especially slaves and Native Americans. As early settlers escaped the class systems of Europe, they redefined themselves along racial lines, yet another hierarchy of human worth. The first colonists were mostly English, and they held strong beliefs of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, beliefs that the English displayed throughout their world colonies.

The notion of different "races" with different characteristics embedded in nature presumed many such "races"—Celts, Teutons, Poles, Swedes, Hebrews, Turks, and so on. Race was assumed to be hereditary, fixed, and closely associated with character traits. Knowing people's race was a shorthand way of knowing about their character.

Race was also connected to one particularly important attribute: The Anglo-Saxons saw themselves as uniquely equipped to govern by reason of their natural superiority, whereas other races were less well endowed. The idea that the ability to govern endowed its possessors with rights over others had a home in the British upper classes, and this idea was generalized to foreign populations that the English contrasted with themselves, especially those colonized. Racism so conceived was "a theory of who is who, of who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what" (Jacobson, 1998, p. 6).

Belief in their natural, God-given ability to govern became a primary justification for appropriating land and resources that others could not manage properly, i.e., to take land and resources away from others so the resources could be used productively. For the British these others included colonial peoples all over the world. For Americans these others included African Americans, Native Americans, Mexicans, and Filipinos, all of whom possessed contested property at one time or another.

In the beginning, being white meant being Anglo-Saxon. All others were of different races. Founders of the nation (southern gentlemen planters) wrote restrictions on these others into law, including their rights to hold property, become citizens, enter the country, and even be owned by whites. Race was closely associated in the courts with property rights. The very idea of "providing for the common defense" in a country of slaves and frontier settlements was racially imbued.

The 1790 naturalization law was fiercely exclusionary, and the early statutes suggested that "whiteness" was the criterion for full citizenship. Soon, this belief was challenged by the arrival of assorted immigrants. The need for cheap labor for settlement and economic development opened up immigration to all kinds of "races." Large numbers of immigrants arrived, such as the Germans and Irish. These people were seen as different races ("Teutons" and "Celts") with their distinct physical features signifying different character traits. The Irish were seen as a physically dark race which was certainly not up to self- governance (as in colonized Ireland). Their assimilation was problematic. Over decades each new immigrant group struggled to be defined in the "white" mainstream, and for what that portended for social and economic advantage.

Eventually, most groups were redefined as "white ethnics" who were different in "culture" but not necessarily race. In other words, their ethnicity was derived from their culture and might be remedial, as opposed to their "race," which was not. Just as the research of earlier times buttressed theories of "race" so too did later research support theories of "ethnicity" when their time came. However, the assimilation of the "ethnics" (episodes portrayed as American success stories) deepened the chasm between those "white" and those not. If Jews, Syrians, and Turks were "white," where did this leave African Americans?

In fact, the reason all these immigrants were considered white ultimately was that they were contrasted to African Americans, who were never considered white. The immigrants gained whiteness by African Americans being excluded. And it was to the advantage of immigrants to adopt beliefs and positions which were overtly racist in order to contrast themselves to African Americans. Hence, the racist dichotomy enabled the ethnics to become "Americanized" at the cost and through the exclusion of others. What was conceived literally as many separate races early in American history was reduced to a white-black dichotomy in the 20th century, complicated by a large influx of Latinos.

Hence, in a sense the "white"—African American racial relationship is at the center of American national identity, though it is not recognized as such. Public policy swirls around it much of the time, even when its influence is not recognized explicitly. Typically, African Americans are portrayed as an unfortunate group which just happens to be marginal, a minority which has never quite made it for a number of reasons, (again) having to do with their character traits, e.g., lack of skills, lack of self-discipline, impoverished culture, low natural intelligence—and most certainly lack of ability to govern themselves.

In a sense African Americans were never marginal. They have been central to the formation of the American national identity in that they provided a primary touchstone against which "whites" defined themselves, though other "uncivilized" peoples such as Native Americans also played such a role. "Racism now appears not anomalous to the working of American democracy but fundamental to it" (Jacobson, 1998, p. 12).

The Formative Process

The nature of this complex relationship is difficult to untangle by those shaped by it, just as it is difficult for males to understand how they construct their own identities by defining females in certain ways. A glimpse into the complexities of national identity is provided by Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's examination of the national literature.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison noted that it is often the literary image that is not presented or which is presented obliquely that reveals distorted and repressed thoughts and feelings about race.

> Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological race ever was .... It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before.... I remain convinced that the metaphorical and metaphysical uses of race occupy definitive places in American literature, in the "national character"... (Morrison, 1992, p.

63-64).

How is it possible that Americans could harbor and repress racial images, disguising them even to themselves? The early colonists located themselves in a vast continent far from European civilization, besieged by what they saw as threatening Nature and savage forces. Escape from the past was one goal, freedom another.

In this environment unfree slaves served as surrogate selves for the colonists' literary meditations on human freedom, their terror of being European outcasts, their dread of failure, their fears of powerlessness, of nature without limits, of loneliness, and of internal aggression. "What arose out of collective needs to allay fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American" (Morrison, 1992, p. 38). Nothing highlighted freedom like slavery.

The explicit focus of much early American literature was the "architecture of the new white man" (Morrison, 1992, p. 15), the deliberate construction of the new American. This new image was created by finding differences with Europeans, as Emerson did, but also in contradistinction to those closer—slaves, Native Americans, and Latinos. The flight from the Old World to the New World was a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and responsibility, but in a peculiar way.

Morrison illustrates this developing national identity in the character of an early planter slave-owner (taken from Bernard Bailyn's (1986) *Voyagers to the West*, an investigation of settlers becoming Americans). William Dunbar was a young Scottish aristocrat educated by tutors and in math, astronomy, and belle-lettres at the University of Aberdeen. He became a London intellectual, an exemplar of Enlightenment thinking. But after moving to the New World he suppressed a slave conspiracy on his Mississippi plantation in 1776. He was astounded at his slaves' ingratitude after he had treated them so well, and he administered two runaways 500 lashes on five separate occasions. Morrison cites Bailyn's assessment of Dunbar's character transformation: "...feeling a sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others, he emerged a distinctive new man, a borderland gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half- savage world" (quoted in Morrison, p. 42). Morrison takes these traits as prototypical of the new white American male, traits valorized and inscribed as themes in our national literature.

The sense of autonomy was transformed into themes of American "individualism." Newness was transformed into American "innocence." Distinctiveness was transformed into "difference" and strategies for maintaining difference. Authority and absolute power over others were transformed into a conquering romantic heroism and masculine virility—and also into the moral problematics of exercising such power over others. According to Morrison, the major characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation, acute moral problematics, and themes of innocence coupled with figurations of death and hell are responses to an Africanist presence—guilt, violence, alienation, power, freedom. American coherence of identity was organized in part through a distancing Africanism.

Hence, race functioned as a metaphor for the construction of American identity. "Deep within the word 'American' is its association with race." (Morrison, 1992, p.47). "What was distinctive in the New was, first of all, its claim to freedom, and, second, the presence of the unfree in the heart of the democratic experiment...." (p. 48). The image of bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness became objectified as an Africanist persona. "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not

enslaved, but free; not repulsive but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history- less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (Morrison, 1992, p. 52). According to Morrison, racial themes are embodied throughout American literature, in spite of claims that American literature is raceless. In denying racism these matters were discussed in disguised ways. The consequence was a master narrative that spoke for Africans but not of them. One theme is the view of the Africanist character as enabler, somehow pulling free of claims of retribution, as in *Huckleberry Finn.* Another is how African American characters are used to limn out and enforce whiteness and how they are used strategically to define the goals and qualities of whites, e.g., "to control projections of anarchy with the disciplinary apparatus of punishment and largess." (p. 53).

> My suggestion that Africanism has come to have a metaphysical necessity should in no way be understood to imply that it has lost its ideological utility. There is still much ill-gotten gain to reap from rationalizing power grabs and clutches with inferences of inferiority and the ranking of differences. There is still much national solace in continuing dreams of democratic egalitarianism available by hiding class conflict, rage, and impotence in figurations of race. Freedom (to move, to earn, to learn, to be allied with a powerful center, to narrate the world) can be relished more deeply in a cheek-by-jowl existence with the bound and unfree, the economically oppressed, the marginalized, the silenced. (Morrison, 1992, p. 63-64)

Morrison notes that the presence of black people, along with gender and family, are inherent in the earliest lessons children are taught regarding their distinctness. And that "It is no accident and no mistake that immigrant populations (and much immigrant literature) understood their "Americaness" as an opposition to the resident black population" (p. 47).

Education Policy

If such beliefs and images are built into the national identity, what ramifications would we expect them to have for educational policy? Presumably policies would be based on maintaining separation, maintaining differences based on racist images of the Africanist persona's presumed character traits. Such policies would be consistent with race themes that reoccur in American history and literature.

The teenagers in the New York suburb believed that fiscal inequalities don't matter, that racial integration was hopeless since it would be resisted, and that equity would not help minority students since they are beyond help. *They* lack motivation, parental care, and a healthy environment. *They* are throwaways, as the boy declared. The historical image of African Americans is recognizable in the beliefs of these white teenagers.

If such majority beliefs guide policies, what would the policies be like? First, the policies would keep African Americans separate and distinct from "white" Americans. Second, they would be based on the presumed character traits of African Americans, traits that differentiate them from whites; presumably, traits which mark them as inferior. Their education would be different from whites in important ways because of these traits. Third, since they are not capable of self-governance they cannot be in control of their own education. Fourth, since African Americans have limited potential,

investment in their education should be modest: no need to over invest since what can emerge is limited. Fifth, such policies would attempt to appear fair, to conform to the American Creed (e.g., Mrydal, 1964).

In fact, these are the types of policies that have characterized the treatment of African Americans: exclusion, differentiated curricula and treatment based on presumed inferior character traits, control by others, and modest resource commitment, all justified as being fair. Similar policies have applied to other minorities as well—to Native Americans, Latinos, and others, though each group has its own unique history and experience. I will illustrate these themes with three examples (though the available examples are beyond cataloguing): the education of African Americans in the South after the Civl War, desegregation in Chicago in 1967, and retention ("failing" grades) in Chicago in 1998.

The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935

Anderson (1988) documented the history of black education in the South between 1860 and 1935. Contrary to popular belief, the ex-slaves were very keen on establishing an education for themselves and their children since they saw education as the way to attain freedom and escape poverty. Once freed, they immediately set up schools for themselves. However, the southern planters, still in control, resisted public education since it was a threat to their forced agricultural labor supply, which depended on child labor. Furthermore, educated African Americans were a threat to the myth of black inferiority since poor whites in the South had no public education themselves. By contrast, northern industrialists saw basic education as aiding worker efficiency—provided it was focused on vocational training, the only kind of work African Americans were capable of. While the ex-slaves wanted teachers, managers, and businessmen trained academically to be leaders, the whites wanted vocational training for them. Hence, southern and northern whites supported the Hampton Institute and Tuskegee model of training. Both the control and goals of African American education were imposed by whites. Hampton Institute trained teachers, but the curriculum was focused on hard manual labor and on instilling the proper political and moral attitudes so that these teachers could train students for their proper role in society—disciplined, low-skill manual laborers. The founder and principal, a northerner, saw African American voters as immoral and irresponsible; they should not participate in public life. Black masses were weak, and black leaders were "ignorant, immoral preachers or selfish politicians" (Anderson, 1988, p. 38). These ideas were embodied in teacher training throughout the South by philanthropist money and influence.

By the early 20th century working class whites finally had public elementary schools in the South—from which African Americans were excluded. During this period, African Americans built their own common schools with their own money and with contributions from local whites and philanthropists. Again, whites insisted that African American high schools be vocational schools to train workers for jobs that African Americans held, not for jobs held by whites. However, the Great Depression threw white workers into competition over previously black jobs, and support for even vocational high schools ceased. Anderson ends his book by noting the irony of scholarship which attributes low African American educational attainment to initial differences in cultural orientation towards education, and studies which blame black dialect, oral traditions, and cultural separatism for preventing school success. Since Emancipation the ex-slaves had done everything they could to educate their children, and they were impeded vigorously at every turn by whites determined to keep them in

their place.

This history embodies key policy themes of African American education over decades: exclusion and segregation, based on images of African Americans as not very capable intellectually, as being immoral, and as being not qualified for political governance. Control over education was exercised by whites and resulted in differentiated curricula which trained African Americans for lower positions in society.

Chicago Desegregation, 1967

Peterson's (1976) analysis of desegregation of the Chicago schools examines policies in a different time and place. In 1967, Chicago's schools were highly segregated. African American students were 52.3 percent of the public school population, but only 4.7 percent of African American students were in schools more than 50 percent white. Only 28 percent of white students were in schools more than 5 percent African American.

The busing plan developed by the Chicago superintendent of schools was modest: to bus 1,000 African American students to schools in two neighborhoods with white student populations of 10,000. This was part of a larger plan of magnet schools, educational parks, and financial incentives to promote racial balance. Initially, the busing plan was approved by the school board "in principle." But it was never implemented. African American leaders saw the plan as too modest. Whites in the affected neighborhoods were outraged by even this much integration, and they mobilized into an uncompromising resistance.

Although those supporting the plan were able to gain the endorsements of civil rights groups, newspapers, the teachers union, and the Catholic church, opposing whites were able to enlist the support of the powerful political machine itself, especially US Representative Pucinski, who represented ethnic neighborhoods. Demonstrations, picketing, and intense lobbying were part of the campaign against the busing of African American students. Peterson (1976) labels the decision process of the school board "ideological bargaining." Opponents took "principled" stands on issues which they were unwilling to compromise. They used public channels of communication to politicize the issues before the general public, so that outside parties became involved. The school board members themselves voted the beliefs with which they had started. Only one board member was moved to change sides, though his vote was critical in neutering the busing policy.

The principle on which the opposition to busing rested was that of "neighborhood schools." Those in the neighborhood should be able to send their children to nearby schools and control those schools. Others should stay out. Mayor Richard Daley left it to the school board to settle, but he indicated he favored neighborhood schools so that parents could "...see their children home for lunch, and discuss what happened in school with them" (quoted in Peterson, 1976, p. 160).

The overall guiding policy for the city was "racial balance," which meant that policies should keep the racial distribution in the city as it was. Otherwise, it was feared, whites would move to the suburbs, thus making the city increasingly minority. Neighborhood schools were seen as facilitating racial balance. But when plans were made to maintain this racial balance by introducing African American students into a few schools in modest numbers, the white population wanted none of it. Something similar happened in other cities. Again, the same features apply as for policies in the South: exclusion from the mainstream, vigorous opposition by whites, and control of African American education by whites. Whether students were subjected to a

differentiated curriculum is not discernible from Peterson's analysis, nor are we told the presumed traits of African Americans. Finally, this neighborhood policy was seen as fair since any people could have their own neighborhood schools in principle.

Chicago Retention, 1998

Thirty years later, Chicago schools were more than 80 percent minority. The racial balance policies had not kept whites in the city, nor white children in the public schools. Whites had fled the city or put their children in private schools. What also had occurred was a radical restructuring of the schools, a decentralization to the local school forced by the Illinois legislature, which had become frustrated by the inability of the Chicago schools to stay within their budget. Acting on the ideas of Designs for Change, an educational activist group, each school became governed by a local school council. This decentralization was an attempt to wrest control of the local schools away from the central bureaucracy, an idea that would appear to conform closely to the "neighborhood school" principle, the presumed basis for blunting desegregation years before.

However, what happened in the late 1990s was that Mayor Richard M. Daley, son of the former mayor (Richard J. Daley), took control back from the local school councils. New legislation gave the Mayor control over the schools. Daley recentralized the schools and appointed his aide as head. The major educational reform policy became "retention," making students repeat a grade if they did not attain a specific cut-off score on a standardized test. More than 12,000 elementary students were retained in grades 3, 6, and 8 in 1996 and 1997. Schools with the highest rates of failure were 69% African American, 27% Latino, 3% white and 94% low income. In the 1997-1998 school year, Chicago's Transition Centers (special high schools for the retained) enrolled 929 African Americans, 330 Latinos, and 34 whites.

Furthermore, a new curriculum consisting of more than 4,000 lesson plans based on the standardized achievement tests was implemented, and teachers were monitored to ensure that they taught these lessons. Such practices are far removed from the "neighborhood schools" principle. Again, the idea of minorities running their own schools did not seem viable to white authorities.

Retaining students has proved to be one of the worst educational practices. The research evidence against it is overwhelming. Retained students do not achieve more academically and are much more likely to drop out of school later (Shepard and Smith, 1989). Often they become stigmatized by their failure. In one study, flunking a grade increased the chances of an African American male dropping out of school by 38 percent and a white female by 17 percent, all other factors being equal (Grissom and Shepard, 1989). Those being retained are mostly minority males.

New York City had a similar retention program in the 1980s in which the school district held back twenty-five percent of students in fourth and seventh grades. The program resulted in no greater academic gain and in higher drop- out rates for those students retained, who were more than 80 percent minority. Nonetheless, in the late 1990s retention was the popular program of choice for minority students in large cities across the country. The Chicago program was praised as exemplary by President Clinton in his 1999 State of the Union address, and Clinton proposed similar retention policies all across the country enforced by federal sanctions.

Massive retention policies display features similar to other educational policies for minorities. First, students are excluded from the mainstream. Second, they are taught a differentiated curriculum. In the case of Chicago, the curriculum is based on the standardized test being administered to retain them. Unfortunately, teaching a particular

test often does not generalize to other forms of academic achievement (Linn, 1998). The differentiated curriculum is based on the presumed characteristics of those retained, i.e., their low achievement levels and it is justified by objective test scores. Third, the process is controlled by whites running the system.

While William Julius Wilson suggests that Americans will not support policies seen to benefit minorities primarily, Americans do seem to support policies which are detrimental to minorities. They would not support massive retention if it were applied to majority populations. The Chicago suburbs fail less than one percent of their students. If one looked at the explicit rationales for Chicago's neighborhood schools and Chicago's later retention program, one would be puzzled by apparent contradictions. Yet both sets of policies are fully consistent with the underlying beliefs about minorities and with the education policies applied to minorities.

The Current Educational System

Although American racism has improved discernibly over the past several decades and minorities have more rights than they used to, basic beliefs remain in place. In a national survey of racial attitudes, Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985) concluded:

> Relations between blacks and whites in this country have been based since the beginning on a conception of two socially distinct groups defined largely in terms of physical characteristics....There is no evidence that this virtually absolute differentiation of the American population has been reduced by any of the changes of the past four decades. Indeed, it may even have increased.... America is not much more color-blind today than it ever was.... (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985, p. 201).

Carmines and Stimson (1989) demonstrated how race became the major domestic partisan issue in American politics after 1964. It was not a partisan issue before because whites were agreed about the place of African Americans: African Americans were disenfranchised. However, economic change led to the development of a new African American leadership class and the Civil Rights movement. Beginning with the 1964 Johnson and Goldwater Presidential contest, race became a major issue separating Democrats and Republicans, albeit in disguised form. The issue was expressed in the form of whether the federal government should take steps to alleviate racial problems or whether this task was beyond its proper scope ("The government cannot solve all our social problems".)

It would be amazing if such deep-seated beliefs did not affect education policy. In fact, I believe that education policy has been profoundly shaped by these beliefs. Americans have defined their educational system in such a way as to ensure that African Americans (and often other minorities) are treated in an exclusionary way—which is to say that they are saddled with an education which is inferior, and this inferior education contributes to whites seeing them as having undesirable attributes and as being unable to govern themselves.

Here are some education policies that produce these outcomes, even though the policies may have been implemented from motives other than racial ones:

- School organization—Schools are organized into separate governing entities which effectively encapsulate and isolate African Americans and other minorities in large numbers. Large school districts are overwhelmingly minority, and these

districts are rarely controlled by the minorities. White politicians and policymakers effectively control the fate of minority children.

- School finance—Schools are financed through local sources in large part, which ensures resources are hugely unequally distributed among school districts, with minority schools faring particularly poorly financially. Kozol (1991) has illustrated these inequalities dramatically.
- Curricula—Schools with large numbers of minorities receive educational curricula unlike those in majority schools. These curricula are geared to "slow" students and are repetitive and boring, based on presumed lesser abilities of minority students (Levin, 1993).
- Ability grouping—Within local schools students are separated into differentied groups, and the low-ability groups contain disproportionate numbers of minorities (if there are any) who receive differentiated curricula (Oakes, 1985, Wheelock, 1992).
- Retention—Flunking students on a massive scale is done in districts with large numbers of minorities. Being retained does not increase learning but rather significantly increases the student's chances of dropping out of school eventually (Shepard and Smith, 1989).
- Testing—Achievement tests legitimate these activities to make differentiation appear fair. Students are selected for ability groups and retained in grade by test scores. If students are selected by objective assessments, how can the practices be unfair? The way tests are used contributes much towards legitimating racial policies, even as test publishers publicly deplore such uses (Haney, 1993).

Each of these educational practices can be explained and justified without reference to race. Local schools, local financing, standardized testing, ability grouping, retention, and differentiated curricula can appear to have little to do with race. They could stem from American beliefs in autonomy, freedom, and meritocracy. But a prolonged examination of how these policies function together—and who they are applied to—reveals that the policies effectively segregate, differentiate, and provide minorities with an inferior education. The operation of the system as a whole has racial consequences even if those administering it do not have that in mind.

No other developed countries incorporate all these practices in this fashion. Most countries have common curricula, much more equitable funding, and central distribution of resources. Few countries employ ability grouping at the primary levels, and no developed countries that I know employ massive retention based on single test score cutoffs.

The structure of our entire educational system has been strongly influenced by the beliefs that people hold about minorities, particularly about African Americans. No doubt there are other contributing causes for these policies as well. No policy ever results from a single cause. Nonetheless, American education as a whole functions as a racist system, whatever its virtues might be.

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