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# A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Obama Administration's Education Speeches

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the  
Obama Administration's Education Speeches

by

Adriane Kayoko Peralta

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,  
Loyola Marymount University,  
in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education

2012

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Obama Administration's Education Speeches

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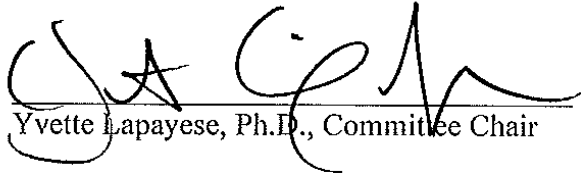
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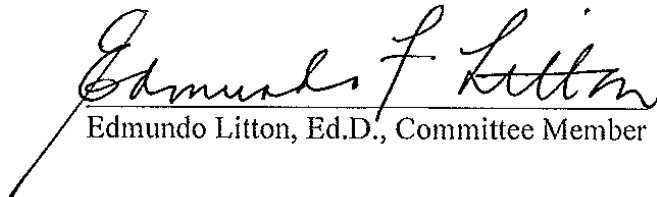
This dissertation written by Adriane Kayoko Peralta, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

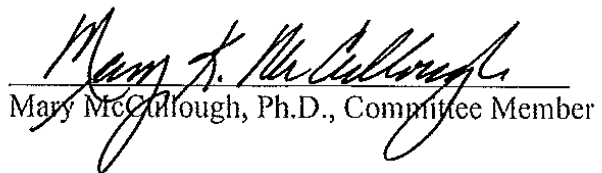
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Yvette Lapayese, thank you for being so much more than a professor to me. You have been my mentor, sister, and friend. Thank you for truly understanding my work. I am very lucky to have you in my life.

To my dissertation committee member, Dr. Mary McCullough, thank you for believing in this project from day one and for encouraging my writing.

To my dissertation committee member, Dr. Edmundo Litton, thank you for your insights and for pushing the conversation forward.

To my dad, Greg Peralta, for teaching me the value of being a life-long learner and for reading everything that I ever wrote.

To my mom, Janis Peralta, thank you for teaching me compassion and how to be a strong woman with grace.

To my brother, Sayre Peralta, thank you for always expecting greatness from me and for never letting me settle for mediocre.

## **DEDICATION**

To my Grandma Wanda, this dissertation is dedicated to you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Obama Administration's Education Speeches

By

Adriane Kayoko Peralta

This qualitative study examined 45 education speeches presented by President Obama and leaders of the U.S. Department of Education from January 2009 through December 2010. These speeches were interpreted with the use of critical discourse analysis and reviewed through the lens of interest convergence theory. The first aim of the researcher was to uncover the underlying ideologies represented in the Obama Administration's education speeches. The second objective was to understand how those ideologies impacted the Administration's proposed reform ideas. Specifically, the researcher was interested in how the underpinning ideologies and proposed solutions affected the education of poor students of color. The researcher found four primary ideologies in the education speeches. First, every speech was coupled with an economic agenda. Second, the speakers displayed great concern over America's ability to remain a global economic leader. Third, there was an emphasis on the role of education in promoting equal

opportunity and a belief in the American Dream. Finally, the speakers showed a deficit-oriented perception of students of color. The researcher discovered that economic ideologies inspired the Obama Administration's proposed solutions. As such, the author argues that the Obama Administration utilized interest convergence by focusing on the economic self-interests of white policymakers. This study concludes with the author's recommendations for change in the education of poor students of color. The author calls for strategic alliances throughout group identities in order to achieve educational equity.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

#### Introduction

Over 40 years ago, Michael Harrington (1962) wrote a best-selling book exposing the realities of poverty in America. He titled the book *The Other America*, to suggest that America's poor lived in a hidden society within America's mainstream society. Harrington devoted an entire chapter to the black community, entitled, "If You're Black, Stay Back." In this chapter, Harrington discussed the systematic ways in which black people were unable to escape poverty. Harrington predicted a grim future for the persistence of racism in America. He wrote:

If all the discriminatory laws in the United States were immediately repealed, race would still remain as one of the most pressing moral and political problems in the nation. Negroes and other minorities are not simply victims of a series of iniquitous statutes. The American economy, the American society, the American unconscious are all racist. (p. 71)

Unfortunately Harrington's prediction was accurate, especially when looking at our nation's education system. This study investigated the systematic oppression of poor students of color in today's public education system. It explored the ways in which students of color from low socioeconomic homes are denied opportunity in America's schools, and what our nation's first black president is doing about it.



President Barack Obama is a symbol for change and racial progress in America. Many argue that the election of a black president was long overdue. Nevertheless, there is no denying the fact that the election of President Obama was a major achievement for all communities of color. Race scholar, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) described the election of President Obama as “an impossible dream come true” for blacks and other people of color (p. 209). However, great responsibility comes with such a great accomplishment. In Peggy McIntosh’s (1998) discussion of white privilege, she points out that one of the privileges of being white is never having to speak on behalf of your race. President Obama does not have this luxury. Not only does President Obama have the unfair burden of representing people of color in America, but he also has the obligation to make things better for communities of color.

### **Statement of the Problem**

One of the most pressing issues in public education today is undoubtedly the persistent underachievement and oppression of students of color. On nearly every marker of student achievement (standardized test scores, grades, graduation rates, college completion, and career tracking), students of color consistently underperform when compared to their white counterparts (Taylor, 2006). Recent studies have found that by the 12th grade, black students’ performance in reading and mathematics is equal to that of white eighth graders (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). In addition, on the SAT (an exam that is used for predicting how well students will do in college) for the past ten years, white

students on average performed 200 points higher (on a scale of 200-1600) than their black counterparts (NCES, 2010). Additionally, in the 2007-2008 school year, only 63.5% of Hispanic students and 61.5% of black students in public high schools graduated versus 81% of white students (Stillwell, 2010). Schools today are not racially neutral when considering these performance outcomes. The racial achievement gap has been well documented, discussed, and researched among the education academy. However, a significant gap still remains.

Even so, the academic underperformance of students of color is also related to economic class and racial isolation. Unfortunately, a disproportionately high number of students of color live in racially isolated urban areas and attend racially segregated schools in impoverished neighborhoods (Kozol, 2005; Noguera, 2004).

Jonathan Kozol (2005) explained:

Racial isolation and the concentration of poverty of children in public schools go hand in hand . . . [According to the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University] Only 15 percent of the intensely segregated white schools in the nation have student populations in which more than half are poor enough to be receiving free meals or reduced priced meals. “By contrast, a staggering 86 percent of intensely segregated black and Latino schools” have student enrollments in which more than half are poor by the same standards. (p. 20)

One could argue that the underachievement of students of color is caused not only by racism, but also by poverty and urban racial isolation.

Nationwide in the 2007-2008 school year, high-poverty high schools only graduated 68% of their students. Meanwhile, low-poverty high schools (schools with less than 25% of the student population eligible for free or reduced lunch) had a graduation rate of 91% (Aud et al., 2010). Even worse in 2007-2008, only 28% of high school graduates from high-poverty schools attended a four-year college after graduation, while 52% of students from low-poverty schools went on to four-year colleges (Aud et al., 2010). This data is evidence of an inequitable education system that unjustly favors wealthy and white students.

This systematic oppression of poor students of color is not arbitrary or accidental, but rather a deliberate result of racism and capitalism. Racist and capitalist ideology has permeated nearly every American institution, including public education. Education is a powerful mechanism that continues the cycle of racism and capitalism. This dissertation examined the role that the Obama Administration has played in this succession.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover the underlying ideologies that have been present in the Obama Administration's education reforms by conducting a critical discourse analysis of the Obama Administration's speeches on education. My intention was to explore what these ideologies mean for poor students of color and examine their impact on public education. Moreover, this research aimed to explain how these underpinning ideologies informed the Obama Administration's education reform ideas. This study is particularly significant for

populations of color in America and their allies fighting for equitable public education across the country.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is a contribution to the field of education because of its contemporary context. We are living in a historic time for American politics and this study documents and interprets President Obama's approach toward education reform. Currently, limited research specific to President Obama's education plan is available because at the time of this research he had only been in office for half a term. In the future, the Obama Administration's education reform efforts will be heavily researched, and this study will be one among the work of many education scholars.

Additionally, this study adds to a growing body of research that combines critical race and economic perspectives in education. Currently, most critical research is devoted to either race or class, whereas research that uses both critical viewpoints to understand phenomena in education is lacking (Darder & Torres, 2004; Leonardo, 2004). Race and class are inextricably connected (especially in the context of education) and therefore, a combined critical perspective in understanding the Obama Administration's education speeches is necessary. More specifically, I used interest convergence theory as my theoretical framework, which has economic foundations. Interest convergence theory has been largely underemphasized in the application of critical race theory to education research. It

was my intention to highlight the economic origins of critical race theory and display its usefulness to the study of poor students of color.

Finally, this study is innately a social justice project because it is critical of the status quo. The current state of our education system is broken. Poor students of color have not been successful at the same rates as their wealthy and white counterparts. One of our government's greatest responsibilities is to uphold and promote democracy in America. Unfortunately, our current education system is not living up to those standards. Richard Rothstein (2004) wrote:

Americans believe in the ideal of equal opportunity and also believe that the best way to ensure that opportunity is to enable all children, regardless of their parents' stations, to leave school with skills that position them to compete fairly and productively in the nation's democratic governance and occupational structure. The fact that children's skills can so clearly be predicted by their race and family economic status is a direct challenge to our democratic ideals. (p. 1)

This study examines our federal government's role in making education more equitable and democratic for poor students of color. Additionally at the end of this dissertation, I provide recommendations on how the Obama Administration can improve public education for poor students of color at the federal level.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Beginning from the mid-1990s, many education scholars have turned to critical race theory (CRT) to assist in explaining and understanding the academic

underperformance and treatment of students of color in public schools (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Lopez, 2003; Love, 2004; Su, 2007; Taylor, 2006; Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Yosso, 2005). CRT focuses on the power structures that promote white supremacy and social dominance. CRT is a superb theoretical framework in which to interpret the Obama Administration's speeches and shows that the public education systematically oppresses students of color.

My theoretical framework incorporates both critical ideologies of race and class because the study is positioned towards poor communities of color. Undoubtedly, racial isolation and poverty in America are inextricably intertwined (Kozol, 1991, 2005; Noguera, 2004), which requires this study to address the effects of class. Some scholars contend that CRT is inefficient in researching poor students of color because of its lack of reference to class issues (Darder & Torres, 2004). However, I argue that the legal founders of CRT did in fact discuss economic class in two of their central tenets: intersectionality and interest convergence theory. For this reason, CRT is the optimal lens with which to interpret speeches by the Obama Administration.

### **Research Questions**

- Using a critical discourse analysis, which ideologies underpin the Obama Administration's education speeches in relation to poor students of color?
- How do these ideologies inform the Obama Administration's proposed solutions to the education of poor students of color?

## **Research Design and Methodology**

Using CRT as my theoretical framework, I analyzed and interpreted the Obama Administration's education speeches from President Obama's first two years in office. The data for this study included education speeches from President Obama, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and other leaders of the U.S. Department of Education. The speeches selected for the dataset were based on their relevance to poor students of color. In addition, I examined education reform documents published by the White House and U.S. Department of Education on their websites. The dataset was then examined using a critical discourse analysis with the assistance of NVivo. Through the analysis of the data set, I was able to answer the proposed research questions stated above.

## **Organization of the Study**

Chapter Two reviews the literature on critical race theory and its economic foundations. I used critical race theory as my interpretive lens with which to analyze the data. Additionally, Chapter Two also reviews the literature from critical scholars involved with some of President Obama's initial education reform ideas and discusses the current political context of education. Chapter Three discusses the methodology and research design of the study. More specifically, critical discourse analysis is explained and the data analysis process is described. Chapter Four reveals the findings of the first research question and makes an argument for interest convergence. Chapter Five discloses the results of the second research question and continues the argument for interest convergence. Finally, Chapter Five

also contains my recommendations for a more equitable education system for poor students of color.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **Introduction**

For generations, America's public education system has systematically oppressed poor students of color. This phenomenon has been well documented and discussed by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences for many years. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the primary federal body for collecting and analyzing data related to education, has published countless articles that record these institutional inequalities. These reports are primarily used to inform education policymakers and advisors, and are thus used to inform this dissertation.

On nearly every marker of academic outcomes and experiences, white students continue to outperform their black and Latino counterparts. Unfortunately, the educational outcomes are even worse for students living in poverty. It is important to consider both factors (race and class) due to the disproportionate number of students of color living in low-income homes. In 2000, a staggering 49% of Southeast Asian Americans lived in poverty (Yu, 2006). In 2007, 33.9% of black children and 30.6% of Latino children lived in poverty compared to only 10.6% of white children (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2008). This obvious disparity affected approximately 4.2 million black children and 5

million Latino children every day (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2008). Additionally, black and Latino students are more likely to attend high-poverty schools (schools where 75% or more of the student population qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch). At high-poverty secondary schools in cities, Latino students accounted for 47% of enrollment, followed by black students at 40%, and whites students at a mere 7% (Aud et al., 2010). The relationship between race and class in our education system must be acknowledged and better understood in order to improve conditions and outcomes for poor students of color.

### **Race and Class in Education**

In America, it is no secret that a racial achievement gap exists in our public school system. Recent studies by the U.S. Department of Education found that by the 12th grade, black students' performance in reading and mathematics was equal to that of white 8<sup>th</sup> graders (NCES, 2008). In addition, on the SAT (an exam that is used for predicting how well students will do in college) for the past ten years, white students on average performed 200 points higher (on a scale of 200-1600) than their black counterparts (NCES, 2010). The achievement discrepancies are even worse for black males. In 2009, only 9% of eighth grade black males scored proficient or above on a national reading assessment; compared to 33% of their white peers (Schott, 2010). Additionally, a mere 12% of black boys in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade scored proficient or higher on a national math assessment; compared to 44% of white boys (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010). In 2008, only 47% of black males graduated from high school versus 78% of white males (Schott, 2010).

Even worse in 2008, just 5% of college students were black men (Lewis et al., 2010). Schools today are not racially neutral when considering these performance outcomes. Professor Akom (2008) wrote, "... despite ... national discourse on equal opportunity and social mobility for all, racial identity is a crucial factor impacting who has access to key institutional resources and privileges, including ... the schools we attend [and] how we are treated in schools we attend ..." (p. 222-223).

Part of this national discourse on equal opportunity for upward mobility gives us false hope that anyone born poor can die wealthy, if they compete and work hard in school. Asian Americans play a unique role as the model minority, which further complicates this narrative of the American dream. The model minority stereotype incorrectly combines all Asian Americans as one homogeneous racial group that has experienced relative economic and educational success in America. Their success is typically attributed to cultural characteristics of hard work, discipline, obedience, and assimilation to American norms. Yu (2006) explained the purpose of the model minority myth:

[Powerful Whites] have attempted to make the model minority concept, along with the more widely accepted meritocracy theory, one of the cultural consensuses that serve their hegemonic control. They overemphasize the seemingly commonsensical belief in hard work and education, and pick one particular racial group—Asians in this case, as the role model for its practice . . . The model minority stereotype is used to deflect people's attention away

from social and structural problems, such as racism and class division, and to perpetuate a highly unequal social system. (p. 329)

By singling out one relatively successful group of color, elite whites attempt to discredit claims of institutionalized racism and discrimination.

However, the model minority myth neglects to consider the vast diversity among Asian Americans, including differences in ethnicity, social class, educational outcomes, immigrant experiences, and cultural norms (Teranishi, 2004). For example, in 2000, 25.9% of adult white Americans and 42.7% of all adult Asian Americans held a bachelor's degree or higher. Nevertheless, just 9.1% of Cambodian Americans, 7.4% of Hmong Americans, and 7.6% of Lao Americans did the same (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Interestingly, the percentages for Cambodian, Hmong and Lao Americans were all lower than the percentages for black and Latino populations (14.2% and 10.3% respectively). Additionally, the percentage of adult white Americans with less than a high school education was 16.6%, compared to 52% of Cambodian Americans, 59% of Hmong Americans, and 49% of Lao Americans (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Again the percentages for Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao Americans were lower than their black and Latino counterparts (28.7% and 48.3% respectively). The diversity of educational outcomes for Asian American subgroups closely reflected the differences of economic class among Asian American ethnicities (Ngo & Lee, 2007). East Asian Americans in general are wealthier and do better in school compared to their Southeast Asian American and Asian Pacific

American counterparts (Ngo & Lee, 2007). This would lead one to assume that economic class has at least some impact on students' education success or failure.

Unfortunately, the realities and effects of class in schools are seldom discussed. Bell hooks (1994) explained:

Class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class difference than in educational settings. Significantly, class differences are particularly ignored in classrooms. From grade school on, we are all encouraged to cross the threshold of the classroom believing we are entering a democratic space—a free zone where the desire to study and learn makes us all equal. (p. 177)

However, not all students are equal when they participate in public education.

Nationwide in the 2007-2008 school year, high-poverty high schools only graduated 68% of their students. Meanwhile, low-poverty high schools (schools with less than 25% of the student population eligible for free or reduced lunch) had a graduation rate of 91% (Aud et al., 2010). Even worse in 2007-2008, only 28% of high school graduates from high-poverty schools attended a four-year college after graduation, while 52% of students from low-poverty schools went on to four-year colleges (Aud et al., 2010). Additionally in the 2007-2008 school year, only 63.5% of Latino students and 61.5% of black students in public high schools graduated versus 81% of white students (Stillwell, 2010). Education scholar, Pedro Noguera (2003) wrote, "Rather than serving as the 'great equalizer' . . . schools in the United States more often have been sites where patterns of privilege and inequality are maintained and

reproduced” (p. 42). Race scholars argue that today’s racism is enforced through structures that maintain the status quo, including our education system (Bonilla-Siva, 2001).

According to Rubin et al. (2006), the reproduction of racial and social class-based inequalities in schools may be attributed to the economic, social, and cultural capital of the students, along with inequitable school structures (the operations and procedures of a school, teacher assignment, course selection and placement, and resource allocation). One study by Linda Darling-Hammond (2004) found that poor students and students of color were more likely to have less qualified teachers than their white and wealthy counterparts. Additionally, Jonathan Kozol (1991, 2005) found school facilities and the amount of per-pupil spending in America tend to be far worse for poor students and students of color.

Another school structure is course completion. More specifically, one study done by the U.S. Department of Education found that students who completed advanced math and science classes in high school were more likely to receive a bachelor and professional degrees (Dalton, Ingels, Downing, & Bozick, 2007). Unfortunately, the same study also found that poor students and students of color did not complete advanced math and science classes at the same rate as wealthy students and white students. For example in 2004, only 4.9% of black students and 7% of Latino students completed calculus, whereas 16.2% of white students completed calculus. Moreover, 6.4% of poor students and 26.6% of wealthy students completed calculus nation wide. Often, poor students of color do not have

the cultural or social capital necessary to enroll in advance courses (if advanced courses are even offered at their schools). Rubin et al. (2006) pointed out that socioeconomic class has a lot to do with course selection in high school because knowledge about which courses to take is limited for poor students of color. Noguera (2008) concluded, "Closing the racial achievement gap and pursuing greater equity in schools will undoubtedly be a long term, uphill struggle that is fraught with difficulty because historically the education of Whites and non-Whites remain profoundly unequal" (p. 101).

### **Critical Race Theory**

In the mid-1970s, progressive legal scholars, mainly academics of color, conceived critical race theory (CRT) out of work that examined ways in which the law upheld white supremacy. CRT challenged the law's role in the construction of race and social dominance by unmasking previously ignored institutionalized racism in the law. In addition, the goals of critical race theorists were to not only understand the relationship of law and race, but also to change the power dynamics and liberate people of color from white dominance (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). The CRT movement combined ideologies from critical legal studies, radical feminism, and the Civil Rights Movement to assist in understanding the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). What emerged were seven central tenets of Critical Race Theory.

## **Racism is Endemic**

The first central theme of CRT is that racism is normal and a reality to everyday life, and critical race theorists' aims are to expose white privilege across all social spectrums (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lopez, 2003). Today's most detrimental racism no longer consists of overt acts of racism done by a specific person towards a person of color. Rather, today's racism is even more dangerous than ever before because it is unconscious. Obvious acts of racism by individuals are viewed by society to be ridiculous and nonsensical. Gerardo R. Lopez (2003) reveals the dangers of today's racism when he wrote:

... people overwhelmingly focus on explicit acts, believing that racism is perpetuated by "bad people" ... Although this type of blatant racism certainly does occur, such a belief incorrectly assumes that it is only found at this surface level and does not penetrate our institutions, organizations, or ways of thinking. This limited perspective, therefore, only protects White privilege by highlighting racism's blatant and conspicuous aspects, while ignoring or downplaying its hidden and structural facets. (p. 82)

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001) called this new racism "microaggressions," the little racist acts that go unnoticed but occur daily for people of color. Microaggressions are hard to prove because they are often unintentional acts of discrimination that happen so often, they are accepted. Critical race scholars contend that racism is so permanent in the American mind that our racism has become subconscious (Bell, 1992).



Peggy McIntosh (1998) also supported Lopez's assessment of the current state of racism. As a white scholar, McIntosh reflected, "I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group" (p. 188). McIntosh went on to list 50 unearned privileges that she holds simply by being white. Most of what is on her list are not talked about or made visible by mainstream society. One of the most difficult aspects of today's racism is that the oppressors have no face. There are no specific individuals to hold accountable, but instead a bureaucracy is responsible for the majority of racism in America. Racism is so ingrained in our nation's institutions that they are almost unrecognizable (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

### **Race is a Social Construct**

The second principle of CRT is that race is a social construction based on social thought, not inherent biological differences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Society created races in order to categorize and validate oppression. Genetically speaking, there are no similarities in personality, intelligence, or moral behavior among races. Optimistic critical race scholars argue that if the concept of race was constructed, then it could be destroyed as well. Noguera (2008) wrote, "... if racial categories are social and not, primarily, biological in nature, then it should be possible to fundamentally alter the predictability of racial patterns related to academic ability and performance ..." (p. 95).

## **Challenge to Race Neutrality or Colorblindness**

The third central theme of CRT is the disbelief toward dominant ideology of race neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, equal opportunity, and meritocracy (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theorists not only believe that these notions of equality are false, but also that they are detrimental because they uphold white supremacy by not acknowledging oppression and microaggressions (Lopez, 2003). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explained:

Critical race theorists hold that color blindness will allow us to redress only extreme egregious racial harms, ones that everyone would notice and condemn. But if racism is embedded in our thought processes and social structures as deeply as many critics believe, then the “ordinary business” of society . . . will keep minorities in subordinate positions. Only aggressive, color-conscious efforts to change the way things are will do much to ameliorate misery. (p. 22)

In addition, CRT contends that these dominant claims of race neutrality and meritocracy are used as a decoy to hide and maintain racism and white privilege (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). If equal opportunity and racial objectivity exists, then the underperformance and limited success of people of color can be ignored by society. An equal opportunity meritocracy holds the individual accountable for their success or failure, and not society’s structures and institutions. Lopez (2003) concluded, “The belief that colorblindness will eliminate racism is not

only shortsighted but reinforces the notion that racism is a personal—as opposed to systemic—issue” (p. 69).

### **Counter Narrative**

The fourth tenet of CRT revolves around the narratives of people of color. Often, the stories of people of color are dismissed as over exaggerated or simply untrue. Critical race theorists value the counter narratives of people of color and view them to be necessary in realizing everyday racism (Delgado, 1995). CRT scholars believe that reality has two differing perspectives: the dominant or hegemonic reality that is often accepted as normal, and the reality of the oppressed that is all too often ignored (Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lopez, 2003). It is the hope of critical race theorists that counter storytelling will dismantle the belief of a meritocracy or a racially neutral society (Delgado, 1995; Lopez, 2003; Love, 2004).

### **Intersectionality**

The fifth tenet of CRT is the notion that people can experience oppression from several different aspects of their identity at the same time or separately. For example, a black lesbian woman can feel distinct forms of race, sexual orientation, and/or gender discrimination based on all or one of her identities. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) is often cited as the founding scholar of intersectionality with her seminal work on the intersections of race and gender. More specifically, she contended that the problem with identity politics was that it failed to address differences within groups. Women of color uniquely face both racism and sexism

(often times simultaneously), which grounds their political motives. Crenshaw argued that the political interests of women of color are discounted in both discussions of feminist and antiracist practices. She (1995) wrote:

I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses either of feminism or of antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both. (p. 358)

Crenshaw insisted on an awareness of intersectionality in the construction and actions of group politics.

Nevertheless, the consideration of intersectionality causes difficulties in fighting for group interests because it allows for people to view the world distinctly from certain identities at different times (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This becomes complicated in fighting for racial advancement because political interests may not always be met when a person belongs to two or more oppressed groups. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explained, "Many races are divided along socioeconomic, political, religious, sexual orientation, and national origin lines, each of which generates intersectional individuals. Even within groups that are homogeneous, one finds attitudinal difference" (p. 54-55). Intersectionality is a reality that critical race theorists admit make racial progression politically difficult. Delgado and Stefancic

(2001) recognized, “Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (p. 9).

**The intersection of race and class.** Up until this point, the majority of intersectionality discourse within critical race theory has focused on the intersection of race and gender. When class is discussed, it is often in conjunction with both race and gender as equally oppressive identities. Darder and Torres (2004) pointed out this flaw when they wrote:

... much of the literature on critical race theory lacks a substantive analysis of class and a critique of capitalism. And when class issues are mentioned, the emphasis is usually on an undifferentiated plurality that intersects with multiple oppressions. Unfortunately, this “new pluralism” fails to grapple with the relentless totalizing dimension of capitalism and its overwhelming tendency to homogenize rather than to diversity human experience. (p. 105)

Critical race theorists must do a better job in further developing the intersection of race and class. Intersectionality must include the devastating impact of class and capitalism on people of color, and thoroughly understand capitalism’s relationship to racism. Darder and Torres (2004) concluded:

There is no question but that racism as an ideology is integral to the process of capital accumulation. The failure to confront this dimension in an analysis of contemporary society as a racialized phenomenon or to continue to treat class as merely one of a multiplicity of (equally valid) perspectives, which

may or may not 'intersect' with the process of racialization, is a serious shortcoming. (p. 106)

Moreover, a significant need exists for a more sophisticated discourse within critical race theory that addresses intersectionality in terms of race and class. This intersection must distinguish between class and racial oppression, along with recognizing that racism is motivated by economics. In order to understand racism, critical race scholars must consider its relationship to class.

Nevertheless, a few critical scholars are leading the way in forming a more defined analysis of the intersections of race and class. Professor Zeus Leonardo (2004) recognized the lack of succinct discourse surrounding the pairing of critical race theory and economic class, especially in the field of education. He also understood the desperate need for a combined ideology in researching the field of education. Leonardo (2004) commented:

... there is a positive correlation between the class status of a student's family and that student's success in school. It is also an equally well-acknowledged fact that the working class and the working-poor groups are comprised of a disproportionate number of people of color. In US schools, Latino and African-American students face the interlocking effects of racial, economic, and education structures. (p. 483)

Education scholars must take into account the combined effects of race and class oppression when analyzing the experiences of poor students of color in schools.

In combining critical race theory and class in education studies, Leonardo (2004) took a Marxist approach, while Akom (2008) used cultural and social reproduction theory. Both scholars argued that the political economy is not a neutral or colorblind process, and that race must be considered when analyzing education. Leonardo argued that Marxist theory falls short in its strict objectivism. Leonardo (2004) wrote, "The field of orthodox Marxist studies is dominated by the elucidation of the objective conditions of capital at the expense of the subjective, or ideological, dimensions of racism within capitalism" (p. 483). More specifically, Leonardo (2004) continued, "Marxism lacks the conceptual apparatus to explain who exactly will fill the 'empty spaces' of the economy" (p. 485). Although Marxist theory understands the inequalities that arise from capitalism, it does not identify whom or what groups will suffer the most under capitalism. Akom (2008) added, ". . . race relations itself has much to teach us about the representation (and thus production and reproduction) of urban poverty, about which bodies and which discourses are privileged, and about which minds and which communities are marginalized, or conveniently overlooked" (p. 208). Race theory assists critical economic theories by identifying the groups of people that will occupy certain social and economic classes.

In summary, both critical race theory and critical economic theories are strengthened when combined. Leonardo (2004) asserted:

Race scholars informed by a non-reductionist reading of Marx provide some of the best insights for analyzing the material basis of race, racism, and

ethnocentrism. By marrying Marxist objectivism with race critique, insurgent educators provide a language of critique that locates, rather than obscures, the beneficiaries of inequality in all its forms. (p. 490)

Having a greater understanding of the beneficiaries and victims of inequality in schools is significant to change. By identifying who wins and loses from capitalism, researchers can better target their solutions for combating disparities in education.

### **Interest Convergence Theory**

The sixth tenet that critical race theorists hold is the belief that whites will only tolerate the advancement of people of color when it serves their interests (Bell, 1995, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lopez, 2003). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) contended, “Civil right *gains* for communities of color coincide with the dictates of white self-interest. Little happens out of altruism alone” (p. 18). For critical race scholars, improved conditions for people of color have to do with timing. In order for whites to allow progression for people of color, the interests of white policymakers and people of color must align at the same point in time. Therefore, interest convergence ensures that racial progress will only advance at the pace that white people allow and determine (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lopez, 2003).

**Formation and examples of interest convergence.** Legal race scholar Derrick Bell (1987, 1992, 1995, 2004) is considered to be the founding thinker of interest convergence theory. Bell (2004) developed a formula for interest convergence theory that stated, “Justice for blacks vs. racism = racism. Racism vs.



obvious perceptions of white self-interest = justice for blacks” (p. 59). In other words, when justice for blacks is faced against racism, racism will always win. However, when racism is in opposition to white self-interest, then justice will prevail for blacks. Bell (2004) wrote, “Black rights are recognized and protected when and only so long as policymakers perceive that such advances will further interests that are their primary concern” (p. 49).

Bell (2004) used the abolition of slavery in the northern states and the Emancipation Proclamation as two major examples of interest convergence in America’s early political history. Bell provided several reasons of white self-interest in the abolition of slavery in the northern states:

... idealism stemming from the Revolution with its “rights of man” ideology; the lesser dependence of the northern economy on a large labor force; the North’s relatively small investment in slaves combined with the great hostility of the white laboring class to the competition of slaves; the fear of slave revolts; and a general belief that there was no place for “inferior” blacks in the new societies. (p. 50)

Although Bell acknowledged that idealism did play a small role in the abolition of slavery in the northern states, he concluded that idealism was merely the tipping point for a decision that was primarily grounded in white self-interest.

Additionally, Bell pointed out that the abolition of slavery in the northern states required a major effort on the part of abolitionists and was not easily accomplished by the government. The main dilemma of freeing slaves was an

economic problem of who would compensate the slave owners for their loss of property. In the end, it was the slaves that were required to pay for their freedom through their labor. Emancipated slaves were required to work as indentured servants up until their market value was achieved (Bell, 2004). Bell (2004) concluded:

But freedom even for those black who were emancipated under these statutes left much to be desired. No longer slaves, they certainly were not yet citizens. Indeed, their intermediate status carried with it many of the obligations [such as having to pay taxes] but few of the privileges of citizenship [such as voting]. (p. 51)

Not only was the government reluctant to pay the economic costs of ending slavery, but they were also unwilling to provide blacks with the rights of full citizenship. These facts display the low level of commitment on the part of the government to provide justice for blacks, only furthering Bell's argument of interest convergence.

The Emancipation Proclamation is what Bell (2004) called a classic example of interest convergence, as it was the first federal action of justice for blacks. He established a well-known argument that the main purpose of the Civil War was to preserve the Union, and ending slavery was simply a by-product. Bell (2004) pointed to a famous letter written by President Lincoln to the editor of the *New York Tribune*, in which Lincoln stated:

My paramount objective in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union, without freeing any

slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union. (p. 53)

This quote from President Lincoln clearly shows that the emancipation of slaves was a lower priority than preserving the Union. As the Civil War pressed on, military advisors encouraged emancipation as a means for enlisting blacks in the Union army, while at the same time destroying the southern economy due to its dependence on slave labor (Bell, 2004). Therefore, the Emancipation Proclamation was in the best interest of white policymakers whose main goal was to preserve the Union.

Another strong point in the argument for interest convergence in the Emancipation Proclamation is the fact that it did not legally free any slaves. The proclamation did not apply to slaveholding states that had already sided with the Union, and those territories that were under the control of the Confederacy were beyond the reach of the federal law (Bell, 2004). The Emancipation Proclamation was more of a symbolic act, rather than legal action. Bell (2004) contended, "... the remedy for blacks, appropriately viewed as a 'good deal' by policy-making whites, often provides benefits for blacks that are more symbolic than substantive" (p. 56). A look at American political history suggests that justice for blacks was only tolerated when it suits the political agenda for white policymakers.

**Brown v. Board of Education as an anti-communist decision.** In 1980, Bell published a controversial article in the Harvard Law Review questioning the motives of the Brown v. Board of Education decision. He argued that the Brown verdict was only accomplished because it advanced the interests of white policymakers. At the time, Bell's article was highly scrutinized because the Brown decision was so highly revered as a landmark case against racism. Bell (2004) wrote, "Indeed, the *Brown* decision has become so sacrosanct in law and in the beliefs of most Americans that any critic is deemed wrongheaded, even a traitor to the cause" (p. 130). Nevertheless, critical race scholars attributed the interest convergence theory in modern times to Bell's analysis of the Brown decision.

In his article, Bell argued that the Brown decision was not mainly for the advancement of people of color, but rather an instrument to advance foreign policy during the Cold War (Bell, 1995). During that time, the United States was highly scrutinized around the globe for its hypocritical treatment of people of color. Segregation proved to be a contradiction to America's promotion of freedom and democracy. Bell (2004) commented, "The coincidence of litigation aimed at eliminating the constitutional justification of state-sponsored racial segregation and the nation's need to strengthen its argument that democratic government was superior to its communist alternative was more than just a happy coincidence" (p. 59).

In fact, blacks had been pleading with the courts to end racial segregation for decades (Bell, 2004). However, what made the Brown case different was that it

arose at a time when America needed to desperately improve its global image. Bell (2004) explained:

Within a few years of the war's ending in 1945, the United States was deeply engrossed in what became a Cold War with the Soviet Union. Both nations were seeking to convert to their governmental systems the many people emerging from long years under colonial domination. Most of these peoples were not white and needed little prodding by communist adherents to feel the deepest concern as they heard about the continuing segregation and other racial injustices that flourished in the United States, with little or no redress provided to punish even those who committed the most brutal lynchings. (p. 60)

Consequently, America needed to do something drastic to prove that democracy was effective and equitable. The timing was perfect for the Brown decision because it was the ultimate political move that would establish the perception of equality in democracy. Bell (1995) wrote, "The decision helped to provide immediate credibility to America's struggle with communist countries to win the hearts and minds of emerging third world people" (p. 23). Moreover, the Brown decision was not an act of anti-racism, but rather anti-communism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Bell (1995) concluded:

I contend that the decision in *Brown* to break with the court's long-held position on these issues cannot be understood without some consideration of the decision's value to whites, not simply those concerned about the

immorality of racial inequality, but also those whites in policymaking positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation. (p. 22)

**School segregation today.** The high level of school segregation witnessed today only legitimizes Bell's theory of interest convergence in the Brown decision. Education scholars have argued that schools today are even more segregated than prior to the Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954 (Bell, 1995; Kozol, 2005; Lewis et al., 2008; Nieto, 2005; Noguera, 2004; Orfield, 2001). This outcome indicates that the Brown decision was merely a political façade rather than a legal decision with serious policy backing. During the past 25 years, no genuine federal policies have been instituted that would force integration in schools (Kozol, 2005). In fact, since the Brown decision the Supreme Court has made a couple of decisions that have allowed for the enhancement of racial segregation in public schools (Orfield, 2001).

Immediately following the Brown decision, many urban areas were faced with white flight in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, desegregation efforts in schools became increasingly more difficult as white families moved into the suburbs away from families of color (Bell, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Orfield, Eaton, & Harvard Project on School Desegregation, 1996). In 1974, the Supreme Court ruled in *Milliken v. Bradley* that forced integration through bussing between urban communities of color and predominately white suburban areas was impermissible. Subsequently, the decision encouraged white flight to occur because white families

could protect their children from experiencing integration in schools by moving into suburban school districts (Orfield, Eaton, & Harvard Project on School Desegregation, 1996).

More recently in 2007, in a combined case (*Parents v. Seattle School District and Meredith v. Jefferson*), the Supreme Court prohibited assigning students to public schools based on race for the purposes of racial integration. In Seattle, students were allowed to apply to any school in the district. Unlike many urban cities, Seattle had a significant population of white students still attending public schools (approximately 40 percent). Naturally, higher performing schools and schools with newer facilities were the most popular among student preferences. The school district used a tiebreaking system to decide which students would be selected to the most popular schools. The first priority went to students with siblings attending the school. The second factor was race for the purpose of achieving racial balance. Depending on the school's demographics, white students or students of color could benefit from the selection process. Nevertheless, the court found the selection process to be unconstitutional. As a result, Seattle schools have suffered greatly in achieving racial balance in their public schools. Sonia Nieto (2005) concluded:

School segregation has become an endemic problem in U.S. schools, reflecting residential and other patterns of social segregation. Regardless of the growing diversity in schools around the country, and despite the desegregation movement that began over fifty years ago, racial and ethnic

segregation is on the rise. Students in U.S. schools are now more likely to be segregated from students of other races and backgrounds than at any time in the recent past. In fact, according to researcher Gary Orfield (2001), for Blacks, the 1990s witnessed the largest backward movement toward segregation since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and the trend is continuing. Moreover, Latinos now have the dubious distinction of being the most segregated of all ethnic groups in terms of race, ethnicity, and poverty. (p. 59)

In 2001, Gary Orfield, a law and education professor at Harvard University, published a study on the current state of school segregation. In summary, he wrote:

Our schools remain largely segregated and are becoming more so. Segregated schools are still highly unequal. Segregation by race relates to segregation by poverty and to many forms of educational inequality for African American and Latino students; few whites experience impoverished schools. Efforts to overcome the effects of segregation through special programs have had some success, but there is no evidence that they have equalized systems of segregated schools. (p. 51)

Although there are special integration programs at the local level, Orfield argued that they are not enough. Orfield (2001) called for stronger federal policy in order to effectively implement desegregation plans. However Bell (2004) contended that in accordance to interest convergence theory, actual desegregation efforts would never be realized.



Bell (2004) summarized interest convergence theory into two main principles. He wrote:

*Rule 1.* The interests of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interest of whites in policy-making positions. This convergence is far more important for gaining relief than the degree of harm suffered by blacks or the character of proof offered to prove that harm.

*Rule 2.* Even when interest-convergence results in an effective racial remedy, that remedy will be abrogated at the point that policymakers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior societal status of whites, particularly those in the middle and upper classes. (p. 69)

As shown in the aftermath of the Brown decision, Brown did very little for students of color. Although it is a landmark of racial progress in America, we have not come very far in our desegregation efforts in schools. This truth has only legitimated Bell's interest convergence principles stated above.

### **Whiteness as Property**

One aspect of Bell's (2004) interest convergence theory argued that whites will allow for the advancement of people of color when it serves their own economic interests. In addition, historically whites have also oppressed people of color out of reasons for economic gain. Critical race theorist Cheryl Harris (1993) pointed out that the sole purpose of slavery was for the economic advancement of whites. In fact, Bell asserted that racism is not only rooted, but also motivated by the political

economy. Bell (2004) argued, “. . . it is racism that underlies the paradox of a nation built on the combination of free-market economy and popular democracy” (p. 78). Bell is convinced that without racism, capitalism and democracy could not coexist in America. More specifically, in a democracy where the working and poor classes are a significant percentage of the population, one would think that they would work against capitalism. Nevertheless, Bell asserted that racism is the key element that prevents the overthrow of capitalism in a democracy.

In 1993, Professor Harris published a prominent article in the Harvard Law Review, which asserted that the benefits of whiteness are equivalent to notions of property. Harris understood that property is not solely defined by physical materials, but can also be characterized by rights or powers that in turn have social and economic value. These property rights and privileges date back to slavery when whiteness bestowed freedom and slaves were legally viewed as the property of whites. Harris (1993) wrote:

Slavery as a system of property facilitated the merger of white identity and property. Because the system of slavery was contingent on and conflated with racial identity, it became crucial to be “white,” to be identified as white, to have the property of being white. Whiteness was a characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings. (p. 1721)

In modern times, Harris has argued that whiteness provides white people with status, privileges, and power. Similar to material property, the benefits of possessing whiteness have social and economic worth. Harris gave current

examples such as racist housing, employment, and educational practices that promote white dominance both socially and economically. She asserted, “In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset . . .” (p. 1713).

The property value of whiteness is so powerful that all white people (and multiracial people who can pass as white), regardless of economic class, are privileged. Harris (1993) explained:

The wages of whiteness are available to all whites regardless of class position, even those whites who are without power, money, or influence.

Whiteness, the characteristic that distinguishes them from blacks, serves as compensation even to those who lack material wealth. (p. 1759)

Moreover, whiteness is particularly beneficial to poor and working-class white people because it prevents them from being at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy (Bell, 2004; Harris, 1993). Bell (2004) argued, “Racism (and the creation of the large racial underclass) has arguably made poor and working-class whites feel better about their relative plight, giving them a consoling sense of superiority and status vis-à-vis African Americans, Hispanic Americans . . .” (p. 79). Bell (2004) pointed out that racism is what prevents a powerful revolt from the poor working-class because it prevents poor white people and poor people of color from forming a political alliance. Harris (1993) expanded:

White workers often identify primarily as white rather than as workers because it is through their whiteness that they are afforded access to a host of public, private, and psychological benefits. It is through the concept of whiteness that class consciousness among white workers is subordinated and attention is diverted from class oppression. (p. 1760)

The racial hierarchy allows poor white people to better accept economic inequity because at least they are not at the very bottom of the ladder where poor people of color have been assigned.

Furthermore, Bell (2004) and Harris (1993) have argued that the property rights of whiteness are and have been historically affirmed, legitimated, and protected through the law. The economic value of whiteness is why Bell (2004) believed that racism is permanent in America. The poor and working classes by far outnumber the powerful elite, but racism is key to the success of capitalism. Consciously or unconsciously, wealthy white people are concerned with maintaining the status quo, while poor white people are satisfied with not being black. Racism and white supremacy are crucial to the maintenance of capitalism in America because these factors hinder the poor and working classes from uniting in a revolution.

### **Critical Race Theory and Class**

One critique of CRT has been its lack of dialogue on class (Darder & Torres, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Darder and Torres (2004) contended, "Because of this lack of a theoretically informed account of racism and capitalist social

relations, critical race theory has done little to further our understanding of the political economy of racism and racialization” (p. 99). However, as shown above through the prominent work of Bell’s interest convergence theory and Harris’ whiteness as property conjecture, CRT does thoroughly discuss the intersections of race and class. As noted with the intersectionality of a person’s identity, it is difficult to categorize oppression as racist, classist, or both. As a result, theorizing racism through a capitalist lens (or visa versa) is complicated and not always easy to recognize. In fact, race scholars have also disapproved of critical pedagogy theorists for not including racism in their discussion of the political economy (Allen, 2004). Nevertheless, this dissertation utilizes the founding critical race theory tenets of interest convergence as its theoretical framework because it does explicitly discuss economic class within the context of race. This lens is optimal in answering my research questions because the study is positioned toward poor students of color.

### **Context of Schooling in the Obama Era**

Numerous commentators on the Obama Administration’s education policy mention the immense emotion felt on Election Day 2008. The election of our very first black president was a day that many thought they would never see in their lifetimes. President Obama ran a campaign promising change and hope for a better future. In addition, Obama has continually expressed his commitment to reform education. As a result, many Americans have had high expectations for President Obama. They hope that he can improve race relations in America, dismantle the

status quo, lead us into a better future, and change the disparate state of public education.

### **Stimulus Aid and Race to the Top**

One of the very first initiatives that President Obama took on shortly after inauguration, was approving stimulus aid in hopes it would jump start the dismissal economy. Part of the stimulus package included over \$100 billion dollars towards education for initiatives such as college Pell grants, work study, Title I, special education, educational technology, Head Start, and teacher quality programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2009a). This amount was significant in that it nearly doubled the previous Department of Education budget (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b). To education scholars, this investment in education was a strong indicator of the high level commitment that President Obama had to improving public education (Au, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2009).

Included in the education stimulus monies were \$4.35 billion for competitive state grants called Race to the Top (White House, 2011). These resources were set aside for the U.S. Department of Education to reward states that were willing to comply with the federal vision for education. One aspect of this federal vision was quite controversial in that it required states to evaluate and reward teachers based on student performance. Teachers' unions and progressive scholars often contest merit-pay because it overemphasizes high stakes testing and moves more towards market-based schooling (Au, 2009; Giroux, 2009). Au (2009) contended, "In advocating policy that bases teacher pay partly on student performance, Obama

begins to lean toward more conservative, corporate-minded school reform advocates” (p. 311). Au’s point is valid in that conservatives have applauded Obama’s reform efforts (Brooks, 2009). Race to the Top encouraged states to change laws and policies in a relatively short amount of time in order to compete for funds.

Race to the Top essentially changed the role of the federal government in public education. Historically speaking, public education has been a state responsibility in both funding and managing. Nevertheless, Obama’s vision requires a different federal influence. Darling-Hammond (2009) agreed, “Obama’s agenda will require a new and different federal role in education—not a more intrusive one, but a more strategic one that recognizes the important of innovating toward success rather than regulating toward compliance” (p. 216).

### **The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act**

In March 2010, the U.S. Department of Education published, “A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is a far-reaching statute, which funds public education in areas of professional development, specialized education programs, instructional materials, and parental involvement programs. The proposal for the reauthorization of ESEA focused around the follow areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2010):

- (1) Improving teacher and principal effectiveness to ensure that every classroom has a great teacher and every school has a great leader;
- (2)

Providing information to families to help them evaluate and improve their children's schools, and to educators to help them improve their students' learning; (3) Implementing college- and career-ready standards and developing improved assessments aligned with those standards; and (4) Improving student learning and achievement in America's lowest-performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions. (p. 3)

The blueprint not only proposed several reform ideas, but also changed the function of the federal government in public education. The blueprint stated (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), "... We have sought to redefine the federal role in education: shifting from a focus merely on compliance to allowing state and local innovation to flourish, rewarding success, and fostering supportive and collaborative relationships with states, districts, and nonprofit partners" (p. 39). Overall, the federal government is becoming more involved in public education by way of funding.

One major paradigm shift from previous administrations is that the Obama Administration wants to reward successful programs, and districts that can show results of student achievement, with additional funding. This reform ideology moves away from the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind Act by implementing a rewards model instead of punitive measures. This philosophy is an extension of Race to the Top in the hope that change will occur faster through a rewards system. The blueprint asks states and districts to monitor progress and measure growth, and reward success, instead of merely identifying failure. For



those schools that continue to be unsuccessful, the Obama Administration offers school turnaround grants (for up to five years) for districts that are willing to implement one of four predesigned intervention models (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The blueprint goes on to list numerous other funding opportunities for states and districts that are willing to comply with the federal government's ideology and reform solutions. Consequently, the Obama Administration's reauthorization of ESEA looks to change the process for allocating federal funds to states, districts, and schools, thus providing the federal government with more power and control over our nation's public education system.

### **Secretary of Education**

In President Obama's selection of Secretary of Education, several contenders included the New York City Public Schools Chancellor Joel Klein and the Washington D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee (Brooks, 2008; Kohn, 2008). Both gained national attention for the drastic reform efforts in their respective school districts. Most notably, Rhee fired 36 principals (some at high performing schools, including the school that her own children attended), 270 teachers, and 100 central office personnel, closing twenty-one schools, and paying students cash for good behavior, all in her first year and half in office (Ayers, 2009; Giroux, 2009; Turque, 2008). However, among the most discussed by newspaper opinion columnists and education scholars were frontrunners Linda Darling-Hammond, an education professor at Stanford University, and Chicago Public Schools Superintendent Arne Duncan. Darling-Hammond gained significant attention when she was named to

lead the Obama education transition team. Nevertheless, Duncan was known to be a close friend and advisor to the President.

Darling-Hammond was well liked by many critical education scholars, mainly very liberal thinkers, and despised by conservative op-ed writers, particularly New York Times columnist David Brooks (Au, 2009; Brooks, 2008; Giroux & Saltman, 2008; Giroux, 2009; Kohn, 2008). Brooks (2008) called the appointment of Darling-Hammond to be “the biggest setback for reform” (p. 2). He claimed that Darling-Hammond represented the status quo in not going far enough in her reform ideas. Brooks argued that greater funding and smaller class size were superficial reforms, what he called part of the establishment (Brooks, 2008). In contrast, liberal columnist Alfie Kohn (2008) for *The Nation* wrote, “Darling-Hammond, meanwhile, tends to be the choice of people who understand how children learn . . . Her viewpoint is that of an educator, not a corporate manager.” (p. 2). Nevertheless, Obama’s education ideology was inline with the conservatives. Au (2009) wrote:

Obama thus implies that liberals represent the status quo in education, side against reform, do not ask teachers to change their practices, do not believe in accountability, and are mainly interested in asking for more money.

Conversely, Obama’s “reformers” want vouchers, do not consider funding to be a factor, push teachers to change, and work for more accountability.

Ironically, the conservative argument against the appointment of Linda Darling-Hammond as secretary of education, that she was not a true

“reformer” (Kohn, 2008), is actually based on Obama’s own position. (p. 314)

As a result, Duncan was selected to be the Obama Administration’s Secretary of Education.

Although conservative op-ed writers of the Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, and the New York Times were pleased by this announcement, many critical education scholars were deeply disappointed (Au, 2009; Giroux & Saltman, 2008; Giroux, 2009; Kohn, 2008). Giroux and Saltman (2008) commented:

Obama’s call for change falls flat with this appointment, not only because Duncan largely defines schools within a market-based and penal model of pedagogy, but also because he does not have the slightest understanding of schools as something other than adjuncts of the corporation at best or the prison at worse. (p. 2)

Giroux and Saltman went on to point out that during Duncan’s tenure as superintendent of Chicago Public Schools (the third largest district in the nation), he set an agenda that highly militarized and corporatized schools for a district that was 90 percent poor and nonwhite.

Duncan created more military schools than any other school district in the nation (Giroux, 2009). Andy Kroll (2009) attested:

Chicago's school system is currently the most militarized in the country, boasting five military academies, nearly three dozen smaller Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps programs within existing high schools, and numerous

middle school Junior ROTC programs. More troubling yet, the military academies he's started are nearly all located in low-income, minority neighborhoods. This merging of military training and education naturally raises concerns about whether such academies will be not just education centers, but recruitment centers as well. (p. 1)

Giroux (2009) argued that these highly stringent environments for poor students of color not only create a pipeline to the military, but also prepare students for prison life. Chicago Public Schools strict zero tolerance policy resulted in over 8,000 student arrests in 2003, with 830 of those aged 12 and under (Advancement Project, 2005). Giroux (2009) concluded, "Under Duncan's leadership, underperforming schools came to resemble prisons, illustrated most visibly in the ever-increasing use of police and security guards along with . . . metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and other technologies of fear and containment" (p. 262).

In addition to Duncan's harsh zero tolerance policies in schools, he has also been criticized for his neoliberal model of school reform. Duncan is a supporter of increased privatization of public education, including for-profit charter schools (Au, 2009; Giroux, 2009). Giroux and Saltman (2008) declared, "At the heart of this plan is a privatization scheme for creating a 'market' in public education by urging public schools to compete against each other for scarce resources . . ." (p. 3). The problem of free-market ideology in education is that with competition some students will always lose out, and therefore, an opportunity gap will always be present. Giroux and Saltman (2008) reasoned, "What Duncan and other neoliberal economic

advocates refuse to address is what it would mean for a viable educational policy to provide reasonable support services for all students and viable alternatives for the troubled ones” (p. 6).

### **Obama’s Education Policy**

Some education scholars argue that the Obama Administration will merely be an extension of the neoliberal education policies from the Reagan and Bush Administrations (Au, 2009; Giroux, 2009; Orelus, 2008). Au (2009) explained, “... he [Obama] fails to offer significant reform for education policy today. This failure results in the continuation of a system of education premised on the basic principles and assumptions associated with capitalist production, competition, and inequality” (p. 310). Most of this criticism stems from Obama’s vision and purpose of public education. Giroux (2009) wrote:

Regarding the purpose and meaning of education, Obama’s views do not differ significantly from those many conservatives who have attempted for the last thirty years to undermine public and higher education with market-driven rationalities. Obama consistently argues that the relevance of education lies primarily in creating a trained workforce that will enable the United States to compete in a competitive global economy. (p. 257)

Although a well-trained workforce is important, scholars contended that a superior education must also teach students about social responsibility, and to be democratic citizens and critical agents of change (Giroux, 2009; Ayers, 2009).

Additionally according to education scholars, there were flaws in the connection between education and global capitalist competition. Obama subscribes to human capitalist theory, which states that improved educational investment in people results in increased human capital and thus increased economic advantage (Au, 2009). However, research has shown that no positive correlation exists between a nation's academic achievement and economic well-being. Therefore, the assumption that schools should be run based on capitalist enterprise is questionable (Au, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2009) wrote, "... our current economic crisis is not caused by a lack of educated workers ... This crisis is linked to our value system and the elevation of developing wealth over developing people" (p. 352).

Nevertheless, critical race education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) argued that President Obama must take an economic approach to education reform in order for interest convergence to occur. Ladson-Billings (2009) suggested that the American public is losing faith in our failing public education system and is no longer willing to generously fund an unworthy cause. She believes that Obama must convince Americans to invest in public education as a means to improve our economy and quality of life. Ladson-Billings (2009) expanded:

By positioning the education sector as an economic engine, benefits are provided not only to students but to the economy more broadly. Education becomes a new employer, business partner and incubator, and workforce developer in the community. If we are able to make education an economic

engine, we can ultimately make education central to social, cultural, and economic vitality. (p. 353)

To this point, Darling-Hammond (2009) reported, “While campaigning for the presidency, Senator Obama repeatedly pointed out the acute need for dramatic education reform and investment . . . He often used an economic frame for these messages to make the case for those concerned about American jobs and competitiveness” (p. 213). Moreover, Obama’s economic argument may be his strategy for reaching those who are unconcerned about the state of education. Ladson-Billings (2009) went on to point out that the nation’s largest (and most expensive) school districts are serving predominately students of color. In accordance to the tenets of critical race theory, interest convergence is the only way for Obama to create change in our public education system especially for students of color.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the literature surrounding the problems that plague efforts to educate poor students of color, the intersection of race and class is a constant. In order to effectively answer my research questions, this dissertation must use a critical race theory lens with an emphasis on class in order to address the multiple effects of both racism and capitalism in schools. For this reason, it is through a critical race theory lens that I examined the Obama Administration’s education speeches. In Chapter Three, I discuss in detail how I attempted to answer my research questions using a critical discourse analysis methodology.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD**

#### **Introduction**

Public education has been called the civil rights issue of this generation. As described in the previous chapter, America is currently facing a deep injustice because of the limited educational opportunities for poor students of color. Everything from school facilities to teacher quality to academic programs offered to our poor students of color is simply a disgrace to our country. In this land of plenty, we offer very little to our poor children of color in schools. Although we promise every citizen the equal opportunity of achieving the American Dream, our public education system does not support this ideal with its inequitable infrastructure.

The current condition of public education is one problem that can no longer be ignored by the American public. When faced with the worst economy that this generation has ever seen combined with two unpopular and expensive wars, many are looking to our federal government to mend America's woes. During the presidential campaigning season in 2008, Senator Barack Obama pledged to repair the economy, end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and fix public education. It was a tall order for any candidate, but the majority of Americans believed that he was the right man for the job.



This study investigated the discourse used by President Obama and his education team regarding their plans to improve public education. A thorough understanding of their ideologies for educational reform is significant to the future of American public education because these ideologies inform their solutions. Thus, their ideologies represent the direction in which we are headed in the field of education. This chapter explains the methodology that was used in this research.

### **Methodology**

This study used qualitative research in the form of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the Obama Administration's speeches and documents regarding education reform. More specifically, this dissertation used a critical race theory framework to analyze the data and answer its research questions. To begin, I conducted a CDA of speeches from President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to identify the underlying ideologies that were present in the administration's plans for education. Additionally, education reform briefs from the U.S. Department of Education and White House were also examined as supportive documents. Finally, after underpinning ideologies were identified, further analysis of speeches determined how these ideologies impact reform solutions for poor students of color.

### **Research Questions**

This dissertation answered two research questions through a critical race theory lens. They are as follows:

- Using a critical discourse analysis, which ideologies underpin the Obama Administration's education speeches in relation to poor students of color?
- How do these ideologies inform the Obama Administration's proposed solutions to the education of poor students of color?

### **Setting**

I voted for Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election because, aside from his political party (I am a democrat), I viewed him as a symbol of hope and change. President Obama ran much of his campaign on the hopes and dreams of common Americans. He promised change in our nation's federal government, and change in the lives of ordinary people. For many Americans, his message was just what voters needed to hear. At a time when many Americans were suffering from a failing economy and tired of an unsupported war, we were ready for a change. On Tuesday, November 4, 2008, a record number of voters came out to vote for change. I was working late that day and although I was dead tired on my way home, I made sure to stop at my local polls to cast my ballot. When I got home, I sat in front of the television and watched history unfold with my parents on the phone. When they announced that Senator Obama had won, I heard my father's voice fill with joy on the other end of phone line. He said, "Never in my lifetime, did I ever expect to see a black president." I cried tears of happiness that night. As a woman of color, no other event in my lifetime had ever given me so much hope for our country. Election Day 2008 was a moment in history that I will remember forever.

## **Positionality**

I believe that no research is completely objective and free from bias in its findings. As a researcher, I own the fact that I am full of conscious and unconscious bias that may at times be reflected in my findings. I am a politically active liberal democrat, but this did not prevent me from being critical of the Obama Administration's education ideologies and proposed reform ideas. This research is grounded from a critical perspective, and as such, had critical findings. I tried my best to keep my political agenda out of the data analysis process. However, all educational research is inherently political, and this project is no exception.

## **Speech Presenters**

There are two major speech presenters in this study: President Barack Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. The president is obviously the top leader of his administration and, as such, the primary speaker for this research. Secretary Duncan was selected as the secondary speaker because he is the prominent leader of the Obama Administration's education team. In addition, speeches from six leaders of the U.S. Department of Education were also added to the data set. These leaders included Deputy Secretary Tony Miller, Under Secretary Martha Kanter, Deputy Under Secretary Robert Shireman, Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education Thelma Melendez de Santa Ana, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement James Shelton III, and Department of Education Chief of Staff Joanne Wiess. Deputy Secretary Miller and Under Secretary Kanter served directly under Secretary Duncan in the U.S.

Department of Education; thus, they were a natural choice to be included in the study. The remaining leaders from the U.S. Department of Education were selected for the availability of their speeches on the U.S. Department of Education website.

In order to learn more about my study's primary speech contributor, I read both of the President's books, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* and *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (Obama, 1995; 2006). President Obama had an unusual childhood. He was born to a Kenyan father and a white mother in Hawaii in 1960. At the age of six, Barack moved to Indonesia to live with his mother's second husband where he spent four years of his childhood. He then moved back to Hawaii to live with his grandparents and attended an elite private school from fifth grade through high school graduation. This is interesting to my study because President Obama never attended public schools. He is a product of foreign education and private schooling. Additionally, the President elected to send his own school age children to private school. Having not participated in America's public education system, President Obama does not have much personal experience with the system that he is trying to reform. Nevertheless, many Americans are counting on him to dramatically improve the system.

Obama was elected the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States and inaugurated January 20, 2009. He was previously a U.S. Senator for the state of Illinois from 2005 until his inauguration in 2009. Additionally before becoming president, Obama was a law professor at the University of Chicago, author of two best-selling

novels, community organizer, and a state senator. During his first year in office as President, Obama was awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize for his exceptional efforts in strengthening international diplomacy (especially among Muslim nations). Obama was only the fourth U.S. President to receive this honor and was the first to receive the prize during his first year in office, amongst President Roosevelt, President Wilson, and President Carter. President Obama donated the entire \$1.4 million dollar prize to various charities worldwide.

Secretary Arne Duncan is the secondary speech contributor to this study. Duncan was named the U.S. Secretary of Education on January 20, 2009. Prior to becoming secretary, from 2001 until the time of his appointment as secretary, Duncan was the chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools. He was the longest standing CEO of the largest city school districts in the country at the time of his appointment. In addition, Duncan ran a non-profit education organization and started an elementary charter school in Chicago. Secretary Duncan is known to be a close personal friend and basketball pal of President Obama.

## **Research Design**

### **Data Collection Methods**

This study used qualitative analysis to answer the above research questions. More specifically, speeches from President Obama, Secretary Duncan, and other leaders from the U.S. Department of Education were used to identify the Obama Administration's underlying ideologies and solutions for public education. I

selected 45 speeches for examination to answer the research questions, as shown on the following Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1  
*President Obama's Speeches*

Date	Title
March 10, 2009	Remarks by the President to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on a Complete and Competitive American Education
April 24, 2009	Remarks by the President on Higher Education
July 24, 2009	Remarks by the President on Education
September 8, 2009	Prepared Remarks of President Barack Obama: Back to School Event
November 4, 2009	Remarks by the President on Strengthening America's Education System
January 6, 2010	Remarks by the President on the "Educate to Innovate" Campaign and Science Teaching and Mentoring Awards
January 19, 2010	Remarks by the President on Race to the Top at Graham Road Elementary School
March 1, 2010	Remarks by the President at the America's Promise Alliance Education Event
May 9, 2010	Remarks by the President at Hampton University Commencement
June 7, 2010	Remarks by the President at Kalamazoo Central High School Commencement
July 29, 2010	Remarks by the President on Education Reform at the National Urban League Centennial Conference
August 9, 2010	Remarks by the President on Higher Education and the Economy at the University of Texas at Austin
September 14, 2010	Remarks by the President in Back to School Speech in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
October 5, 2010	Remarks by the President and Dr. Jill Biden at White House Summit on Community Colleges
October 19, 2010	Remarks by the President at Signing of Executive Order for the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans

Table 2  
*Secretary of Education Duncan's Speeches*

Date	Title
June 22, 2009	Turning Around the Bottom Five Percent: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference
July 24, 2009	The Race to the Top Begins: Remarks by Secretary Arne Duncan
July 28, 2009	Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to the National Council of La Raza
November 9, 2009	Economic Security and a 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Education: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Chamber of Commerce's Education and Workforce Summit
November 10, 2009	The Promise of Promise Neighborhoods: Beyond Good Intentions: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Harlem Children's Zone Fall Conference
February 1, 2010	Investing in Education: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to the National School Boards Association
March 8, 2010	Crossing the Next Bridge: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks on the 45 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of "Bloody Sunday" at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, Alabama
March 15, 2010	Reform, Accountability, and Leading from the Local Level: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks to the National League of Cities' Congressional City Conference
July 14, 2010	Equity and Education Reform: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
July 15, 2010	Three Myths of High School Reform: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the College Board AP Conference
July 27, 2010	Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the National Urban League Centennial Conference
July 27, 2010	The Quiet Revolution: Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the National Press Club
September 13, 2010	Thinking Beyond Silver Bullets: Remarks of Secretary Arne Duncan at the Building Blocks for Education: Whole System Reform Conference in Toronto
November 30, 2010	Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the Release of America's Promise Alliance Report, "Building a Grad Nation"
December 7, 2010	Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at OECD's Release of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 Results

Table 3  
*Additional Officials' Speeches*

Date	Title
October 26, 2009	Under Secretary Martha Kanter's Remarks to the New England Board of Education
May 21, 2009	Deputy Under Secretary of Education Robert Shireman Testifies Before the House Education and Labor Committee
July 12, 2009	Deputy Under Secretary Robert Shireman's Remarks at the National Association of Financial Aid Administrators
September 10, 2009	Remarks of Joanne Weiss to the Annual Meeting of American Diploma Project Network
September 19, 2009	Under Secretary Martha Kanter's Remarks to the Women Administrators in Higher Education
January 21, 2010	Under Secretary Martha Kanter's Remarks at the Association of American College and Universities Annual Meeting
February 1, 2010	Under Secretary Martha Kanter's Remarks at the 2010 AIEA Conference
February 3, 2010	Remarks of Dr. Thelma Melendez de Santa Ana to the National Association for Bilingual Education
May 9, 2010	Remarks by Dr. Martha J. Kanter, Under Secretary, 40 <sup>th</sup> Commencement of Rhodes State College
June 10, 2010	James H. Shelton, III, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement, Testifies Before the House Committee on Education and Labor
July 9, 2010	Under Secretary Martha J. Kanter's Remarks at the Excelsior College Commencement
August 11, 2010	The Role and Responsibilities of States in Increasing Access, Quality, and Completion: Under Secretary Martha J. Kanter's Remarks at the SHEEO Higher Education Policy Conference
September 14, 2010	College-Ready Students and Student-Ready Colleges: Remarks of Deputy Secretary Tony Miller at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Conference
September 20, 2010	Citizenship and Pathways for a Green Economy: Remarks by the Under Secretary Martha Kanter at the Sustainability Education Summit
November 30, 2010	Start to Finish: Deputy Secretary Tony Miller's Remarks at the Federal Student Aid Conference

Fifteen education speeches were selected for President Obama. All speeches were given within his first two years in office as President. Speeches were selected



based on their high relevance to education. The transcripts were directly copied from the White House website ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)). Fifteen speeches were selected for analysis from Secretary Duncan. Secretary Duncan has given over 50 speeches related to education since his appointment. All speeches selected were chosen based on their relevance to race and class. Finally, various leaders of the U.S. Department of Education presented 15 additional speeches included in the data set. All transcripts were taken from the U.S. Department of Education website ([www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)).

Additionally, some education documents from the Obama Administration's education team were included in the data set for analysis. For example, the White House website offered an outline of the administration's education plan including their progress and guiding principles. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education website published several policy briefs on various education reform topics such as Race to the Top. These documents were used as supplementary evidence to support the analysis of speeches and used for triangulation of the findings.

### **Instrumentation**

All speech transcripts were entered into NVivo (a computer based qualitative research program) for analysis. NVivo assisted by identifying reoccurring themes and patterns of language used by the speakers. Additionally, I used NVivo to code the transcripts.

## **Limitations to the Study**

There are three main limitations to this study that may have affected the outcomes of my analysis. First, I only used speeches that had been written in advance; often speechwriters wrote them. I acknowledge that this factor may have impacted my results because certain terms or phrases may have been the voice of a political speechwriter, rather than that of the presenters. Nevertheless, I do believe that the ideologies that emerged from the speeches belonged to the Obama Administration. Second, I only used speeches and documents that were available to the public via official federal government websites. Therefore, they had been approved for dissemination to the public and were controlled solely on how the federal government chose to represent itself. In other words, I only had access to public information and did not have inside information on the administration's plans for education. Finally, a limitation to this study is the short timeframe of only the first two years of Obama's presidency. I am aware of the fact that political agendas do change over time. Nevertheless, this limitation could not be avoided due to the timeframe of my doctoral program.

## **Theoretical Framework**

I used critical race theory as my theoretical framework to analyze the data. More specifically, I used the tenets of interest convergence to better understand the ideological underpinnings that the Obama Administration presented. Critical race scholar, Derrick Bell (2004) summarized interest convergence theory into two main principles. He wrote:

*Rule 1.* The interests of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interest of whites in policy-making positions. This convergence is far more important for gaining relief than the degree of harm suffered by blacks or the character of proof offered to prove that harm.

*Rule 2.* Even when interest-convergence results in an effective racial remedy, that remedy will be abrogated at the point that policymakers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior societal status of whites, particularly those in the middle and upper classes. (p. 69)

Interest convergence theory was selected as the theoretical framework for this dissertation because it assisted in understanding the purpose of policy reform for poor students of color. Additionally, the main purpose of this type of framework is to expose the oppressive nature of power structures so that the research may lead to social change (Hatch, 2002). My goal for this research was that it would improve educational opportunities for poor students of color by creating more critical awareness of the Obama Administration's educational ideologies and the ways they inform their reform solutions. Political consciousness is the first step toward change.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

I used a critical discourse analysis to examine the Obama Administration's education speeches. CDA centers around the way discourse performs, confirms,

legitimizes, reproduces, or challenges relations of power and dominance in society (van Dijk, 2008). Van Dijk (2008) described this:

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately resist social inequality. (p. 85)

CDA assumes that text and discourse are not random or arbitrary, but rather deliberate in constructing power formations (Luke, 1995). Although CDA scholars use various theoretical frameworks, van Dijk (2008) explained, “The typical vocabulary of many scholars in CDA will feature such notions as ‘power’, ‘dominance’, ‘hegemony’, ‘ideology’, ‘class’, ‘gender’, ‘race’, ‘discrimination’, ‘interests’, ‘reproduction’, ‘institutions’, ‘social structure’ and ‘social order’, besides the more familiar discourse analytical notions” (p. 87). These notions coincide very well with the theoretical framework of critical race theory used in this dissertation.

Moreover, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) provided eight main tenets of CDA:

1. CDA addresses social problems
2. Power relations are discursive
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical

6. The link between text and society is mediated
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
8. Discourse is a form of social action

Additionally, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) contended, "What is distinctive about CDA is both that it intervenes on the side of dominated and oppressed groups and against dominating groups, and that it openly declares the emancipatory interests that motivate it" (p. 259). This research is in support of poor students of color, and thus, CDA is an excellent fit.

### **Ideology and Hegemony**

In order to better understand CDA, one must recognize its relationship to notions of ideology and hegemony. CDA scholars have contended that discourse is the material form of ideology, which supports hegemony (Fairclough, 1995). Ideology is a system of ideas that manifests itself in economic and political theory and practice. Hegemony is the domination and oppression of one group over another. Fairclough (1995) explained hegemony in detail when he wrote:

Hegemony is leadership as well as domination across the economic, political, cultural and ideological domains of society. Hegemony is the power over society as a whole of one of the fundamental economically defined classes in alliance (as a bloc) with other social forces . . . Hegemony is about constructing alliances, and integrating rather than simply dominating subordinate classes, through concessions or through ideological means, to win their consent. (p. 76)

It is important to note that hegemony is not achieved by force or violence, but rather from implicit ideologies. Hegemony is so powerful that it is often unnoticed because the ideologies become natural or common sense. This fact makes the beneficiaries of hegemony especially difficult to counter because the origins of hegemony are hard to identify.

Moreover, Fairclough (1995) discussed the relationship between discourse and hegemony:

In so far as conventions become naturalized and commonsensical, so too do these ideological presuppositions. Naturalized discourse conventions are a most effective mechanism for sustaining and reproducing cultural and ideological dimensions of hegemony. Correspondingly, a significant target of hegemonic struggle is the denaturalization of existing conventions and the replacement of them with other. (p. 94)

CDA scholars contend that it is discourse on the micro level that supports and sustains hegemony on the macro society. Van Dijk (2008) provided a relevant example of the micro influencing the macro when he wrote:

For instance, a racist speech in parliament is a discourse at the micro level of social interaction in the specific situation of a debate but at the same time may enact or be a constituent part of legislation or the reproduction of racism at the macro level. (p. 87)

It is the goal of CDA to discover instances in discourse that support domination and oppression. Luke (1995) wrote, "... the task of a critical sociological discourse

analysis would be to see how broader formations of discourse and power are manifest in the everyday, quotidian aspects of text” (p. 11).

**Application of Critical Discourse Analysis**

The application of CDA is not necessarily linear or clearly defined. CDA can be applied within multiple contexts and in the order of description, interpretation, and explanation all at the same time. Nevertheless, Fairclough (1995) showed a diagram (Figure 1) that depicts the application of CDA in critical research:

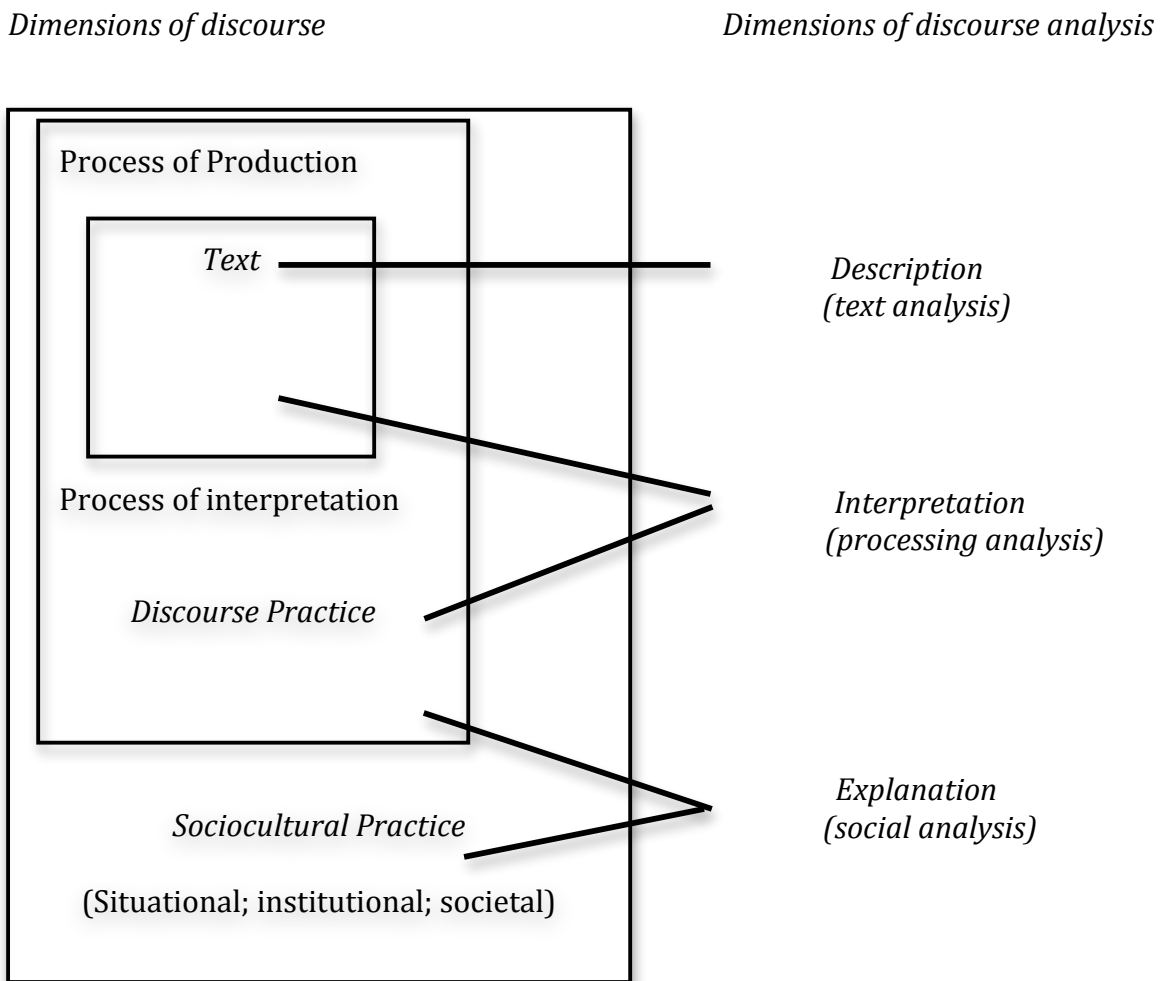


Figure 1 Fairclough’s Application of CDA

This representation shows a three-dimensional conception of discourse. Fairclough argued that discourse is simultaneously text (spoken or written), discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), and sociocultural practice. Therefore, discourse can be placed within a number of sociocultural contexts at the same time. For example, discourse can be simultaneously within the immediate situation, a wider institutional or organizational context, and within a broader societal level. However, the method of CDA should go in the order of description, interpretation, and explanation. As Fairclough (1995) described, “The method of discourse analysis includes linguistic *descriptions* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and *explanation* of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes” (p. 97). It is important to note that each step of the process is interrelated in that how the discourse is described affects the interpretation, which will naturally impact the explanation. Moreover, a thorough plan for the data analysis process was required for successful implementation of this study.

### **Data Analysis**

In an attempt to answer the provided research questions, this dissertation utilized the analytical procedures outlined by Marshall and Rossman (1989). They provided eight phases to the data analysis process: organizing the data, immersion in the data, generating categories and themes, coding the data, writing analytical memos, offering interpretations, searching for alternative understanding, and writing the report. These seven steps of data analysis served the purpose of not



only deducing the data, but also of creating more manageable steps for examination and interpretation.

### **Organizing the Data**

This stage of analysis entailed organizing the speeches from President Obama and Secretary Duncan, along with any supporting speeches from other leaders of the U.S. Department of Education and documents regarding the administration’s education agenda (such as the Obama education plan on the White House website). During this phase, I entered all transcripts into a computer-based program, NVivo, designed for the management of qualitative analysis (for a complete list of speeches see Tables 1, 2, and 3). Additionally, a log was maintained to record all pieces of data. An example is provided below in Table 4 (adapted from Marshall & Rossman, 1989):

Table 4  
*Log of Data-Gathering Activities*

Date	Title	Place	Activity	Who	What
March 10, 2009	A Complete and Competitive American Education	Hispanic Chamber of Commerce	Speech	President Obama	First education speech as president – discusses the need to improve education
2009	Obama’s Education Plan	White House website	Document	Obama Administration	Outlines Obama’s plans for education reform
July 28, 2009	Remarks to the National Council of La Raza	National Council of La Raza	Speech	Secretary Duncan	Discusses education reform for Latino/a students

## **Immersion in the Data**

This phase of the data analysis process involves thoroughly reading the data set several times. According to Marshall and Rossman (1989), it is the researcher's goal during this stage to become intimately familiar with the data. The researcher should be able to absorb each data piece within the context with the larger data set. More specifically, I identified how each text fit and added to the research. If a given data point was found to be irrelevant or did not contribute to answering the research questions, it was eliminated from the data set.

## **Generating Categories and Themes**

The purpose of this stage was to identify major categories and themes. Marshall and Rossman (1989) explained, "Identifying salient themes, reoccurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together is the most intellectually challenging phase of data analysis, and one that can integrate the entire endeavor" (p. 158-159). Using a critical race theory framework, I conducted an inductive analysis to discover the emerging themes and patterns. NVivo assisted by generating lists of common words used in speeches and documents. These words were then grouped into ideologies. For example, Table 5 shows a sample of listing key words that were grouped together under an ideology:

Table 5  
*Key Words/Ideologies*

	<u>Economic Ideals</u>	<u>Interest Convergence</u>	<u>Meritocracy</u>
Key Words	Competition Free-Market Choice	Investments Global/World Power Better for Society	American Dream Opportunity Upward Mobility

This phase of the data analysis process allowed me to answer the first research question by identifying the main ideologies present in the Obama Administration's vision for education.

### **Coding the Data**

Once general categories were established, I then coded the data by applying a coding strategy to the identified themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). I coded the texts using NVivo. I used the following codes for further analysis: achievement gap, economy, poor students and/or students of color, responsibility, accountability, investments, competition, global power, opportunity, America's future, and the American Dream. I coded to recognize the achievement gap and poor students and/or students of color in order to understand the context in which the speakers discussed poor students of color. Responsibility and accountability were coded to analyze whom the speakers held responsible for education. I also noticed that opportunity and the American Dream were often discussed, so they were also coded. Finally, the economy, competition, investments, global power, and America's future, were coded to gain a better understanding of the Administration's economic focus for education. Each highlighted portion of the text provided an example or instance of a particular ideology or ideologies that were employed in a speech.

### **Writing Analytical Memos**

This phase of the analytic process encourages the researcher to write private thoughts throughout the study. Marshall and Rossman (1989) contended, "Writing notes, reflective memos, thoughts, and insights is invaluable for generating the

unusual insights that move the analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative” (p. 161). For this reason, I kept a journal with me at all times during the analysis process to record my thoughts and to help formulate my ideas. I found that keeping all of these notes in one journal was helpful in looking back at the progression of my ideas.

### **Offering Interpretations**

This stage of the process requires the researcher to interpret the data in order to develop an understanding of the relationships between themes, draw conclusions, and create a story line (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). This is also a time to again evaluate the usefulness of each text and determine its relevance. Marshall and Rossman (1989) continued, “The researcher should determine how useful the data segments drawn on to support the emerging story are in illuminating the questions being explored and how they are central to the story that is unfolding about the social phenomenon” (p. 162). I used a handwritten matrix, similar to Table 6 below, to answer the second research question having to do with the relationships between ideologies and education reform solutions.

Table 6  
*Ideologies and Education Reform Solutions Worksheet*

		Ideologies			
Education Reform Solutions		White Supremacy	Improving the Economy	Competition and Privatization	Meritocracy
	Higher Standards	(Filled in during analysis)			
	Race to the Top	(Filled in during analysis)			
	Turning Around Lowest Performing Schools	(Filled in during analysis)			

Quotes from the data filled the empty spaces of the table. These quotes were used as evidence to support the findings that were drawn in answering the second research question. Additionally, this matrix assisted in organizing and managing the ideas necessary to tell the story of the research findings.

### **Searching for Alternative Understandings**

This phase entailed the researcher’s combing through the data to find counterexamples of the patterns and themes, and consider different explanations for the conclusions drawn. Although this seems counterintuitive, I needed to address all counterarguments in order to strengthen my own conclusions. Marshall and Rossman (1989) wrote, “Alternative explanations *always* exist, and the researcher must identify and describe them, and then demonstrate how the explanation she offers is the most plausible” (p. 162). By openly addressing the

negative instances of the patterns and alternative explanations, I believe that my research became less vulnerable to criticism.

### **Writing the Report**

The final stage of the analytical procedures was to develop the report. Although Marshall and Rossman (1989) provided several different and creative approaches to writing the report, I used a more formal tone since this research was for a dissertation in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Education.

### **Conclusion**

Through the analytical process outlined above, and the use of critical discourse analysis, I was able to systematically identify the underlying educational ideologies of the Obama Administration and explain how they informed their ideas for education reform. More specifically, I was interested in the ways in which the Obama Administration either supported or undermined racial and class domination in education. Luke (1995) stated, "A further requirement of a critical, political sociology is to begin systematically explicating how texts operate in particular political interests to sustain relations of domination and power" (p. 18). Considering this, I believe this work offers valuable insights related to the undermining and dismantling of power constructs that promote oppression in education. Many education discourses provided by the Obama Administration are taken for granted and not critically examined by the public. I expect this research to be a contribution to the limited critiques of the Obama Administration's education

ideologies and reform solutions. In Chapter Four, I discuss the findings of the first research question and make an argument for interest convergence.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **UNDERLYING IDEOLOGIES AND WHITE SELF-INTERESTS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to uncover the underlying ideologies represented in the Obama Administration's education speeches by conducting a critical discourse analysis of the dataset. My intention was to investigate the meaning of these ideologies for poor students of color and examine their impact on public education. Moreover, this research aimed to explain how these underpinning ideologies have informed the Obama Administration's education proposed reform policies.

President Obama gave 411 official speeches, comments, or remarks during his first year in office. Of those published on the White House website, 13 focused specifically on education. During President Obama's second year in office, he gave 491 speeches, statements, or remarks. Of those published, 11 focused primarily on education. Since Arne Duncan's appointment as U.S. Secretary of Education in January of 2009, the Department of Education website published 87 speeches given by Secretary Duncan. It is important to note that this Administration has invested over \$100 billion to improve public education through Race to the Top grants, Investing in Innovations funds, and the American Recovery Act. This down payment was not only a signal of the Obama Administration's commitment to changing



education, but it was also a catalyst that changed the role of the federal government in education.

Public education was clearly on the agenda for the Obama Administration, along with ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, healthcare reform, and turning around our troubled economy. The exciting news was that President Obama helped to bring our failing education system to the political forefront. Every day news articles were printed in national and local media that discussed the state of education. Moreover, the film and television industries have taken a greater interest in public education. Some examples during this time were the Oprah Winfrey Show that aired several episodes regarding the education crisis; a high-profile documentary titled, *Waiting for Superman*, which chronicles the lives of five students desperately seeking a better education; and NBC Nightly News that aired a weekly program called, *Education Nation*. There were also more and more non-profit and charter organizations such as Teach For America, Students First, Harlem Children's Zone, Uncommon Schools, Achievement First, Green Dot Public Schools, and the New Teacher Project that gained popularity and national attention. Collectively, all of these efforts enhanced a national discussion on what to do about public education.

We were also living in a very interesting political climate, which Secretary Duncan coined, "The Quiet Revolution" (Duncan, 2010f). Duncan was referring to a united effort on the part of parents, students, teachers, school administrators, community members, elected officials, and leaders from the business and non-profit

sectors as they came together to demand change in our public schools. The momentum surrounding education had been growing for some time, and this research was intended to shed light on the Obama Administration's response to the demands of the people.

### **Research Questions**

As outlined in Chapter Three, this study sought to address two research questions:

- Using a critical discourse analysis, which ideologies underpin the Obama Administration's education speeches in relation to poor students of color?
- How do these ideologies inform the Obama Administration's proposed solutions to the education of poor students of color?

This chapter answers the first research question, while Chapter Five discusses the findings of the second research question.

### **Overview of the Data**

Thirty speeches from President Obama and Secretary Duncan were selected for analysis. Fifteen additional speeches from Deputy Secretary Tony Miller, Under Secretary Martha Kanter, Deputy Under Secretary Robert Shireman, Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education Thelma Melendez de Santa Ana, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement James Shelton III, and Department of Education Chief of Staff Joanne Wiess, were also added to the data set in order to gain a broader perspective of the Obama Administration. Deputy Secretary Miller and Under Secretary Kanter were selected since they directly

served under Secretary Duncan. In addition, speeches from the other officials were selected due to their availability on the U.S. Department of Education website.

These speeches were used to support the findings through triangulation.

After reading the data set as a whole, three categories emerged. First, all speakers used economic language and coupled their education speeches with an economic agenda. For example, every speech in the data set used the word economy at least once. In addition, several speeches contained words such as invest, global economy or market, costs, competition, and global power or leader. The second category that surfaced from the data was a belief in meritocracy, equal opportunity, and the America Dream. The speeches included references to education in terms of the great equalizer of opportunity in our society. Finally, there was thorough discussion of the underperformance of poor students of color and recommendation to reverse this problem.

From these three categories, I coded the data set with the assistance of NVivo (a computer-based software used for qualitative research). I used the following codes for further analysis: achievement gap, economy, poor students and/or students of color, responsibility, accountability, investments, competition, global power, opportunity, America's future, and the American Dream. I coded to identify the achievement gap and poor students and/or students of color in order to understand the context in which the speakers discussed poor students of color. Responsibility and accountability were coded to see whom the speech presenters held responsible and blamed for the plight of education. I also noticed that

opportunity and the American Dream were often discussed, so these were also coded. Finally, the economy, competition, investments, global power, and America's future, were coded to gain a better understanding of the Administration's economic focus related to education. Table 7 below displays the number of codes in the data set per speaker.

Table 7  
*Number of Coding Instances*

Code	Number of References from President Obama	Number of References from Secretary Duncan	Number of References from other Leaders in the U.S. Department of Education	Total Number of References in the Data Set
Achievement Gap	12	34	17	63
Economy	51	49	38	138
Investments	29	20	9	58
Poor Students and/or Students of Color	48	144	46	238
Responsibility	30	15	8	53
American Dream	30	11	4	45
Opportunity	17	35	21	73
Accountability	16	37	11	64
America's Future	23	7	12	42
Competition	52	32	33	117
Global Power	8	2	8	18

Throughout and after the coding process, I also wrote analytical memos in a journal to assist in processing the information. Once the coding was complete, I searched through the data to enrich my interpretations and connections among the codes. In addition, I also read chapters from Barack Obama's (2006) book, *Audacity of Hope*, and read education policy briefs from the White House website in order to validate

my findings. Policy briefs included, A Blueprint for the Reauthorization of ESEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2010); Fact Sheet: The Race to the Top (White House, 2011a); and The Obama Education Plan (White House, 2011b). The following are my findings in answering the first research question above. Once all the findings are reviewed, this chapter presents an analysis of the underlying ideologies through an interest convergence theory lens.

### **Findings of Underpinning Ideologies**

Four major findings are thoroughly discussed in this chapter. First, nearly every education speech provided by all of the speakers was coupled with an economic agenda. Clear economic overtones were apparent in their discussions of education. Second, the Obama Administration displayed a deep concern for America's ability to remain a global power amongst heavy international competition. The speakers displayed a deep fear of other nations taking over America's place in the world as an economic leader. Third, President Obama and leaders of the U.S. Department of Education shared a common belief in the American Dream and education's role as the great equalizer. Some speakers believed that meritocracy exists in America, while others contended that education needs to work toward this goal. Finally, both President Obama and Secretary Duncan suggested in their speeches that the underperformance of poor students of color was due to cultural inferiority and family irresponsibility. This perception is a deficit-oriented ideology that was pervasive in the discussion of poor students of color.

## **Education = Economy = Education**

After reading all 45 speeches, I concluded that the Obama Administration's education plan was coupled with an economic agenda. Nearly every speech in the dataset mentioned education's role in the economy. More specifically, I coded for the economy a total of 138 instances. This was the most frequently coded ideology of the dataset and close to evenly distributed throughout the speeches. The President accounted for 51 references, Secretary Duncan had 49 instances, and leaders from the U.S. Department of Education made 39 references to the economy as a group. Moreover, President Obama (2010e) stated several times, "Education is an economic issue. Education is the economic issue of our time" (p. 2). President Obama referred to education as an "economic issue" for a total of ten times in the dataset. Obviously, the President placed a significant emphasis on education in his plans for the economy, and he believes that the two are strongly connected. It is also important to note that all of the speeches in the data set were given during the beginning of 2009 through the end of 2010. This time period was arguably the worst recession that America had faced since the Great Depression. Therefore, it is understandable that the economy would be on the speakers' minds. Nevertheless, four economic arguments emerged from the data that will be discussed further.

**"Educating our way to a better economy."** The first premise outlined by the Obama Administration was that education is fundamental to a prosperous economy. Secretary Duncan (2010c) contended, "In the long run, there is no choice but to educate our way to a better economy" (p. 2). In other words, America must

educate its way out of the recession. This ideology argued that a better education system will lead to a better economy. President Obama (2009a) stated, “For we know that economic progress and educational achievement have always gone hand in hand in America” (p. 1).

President Obama’s belief in the relationship between the economy and education was one that was shared by the U.S. Department of Education. It is clear Secretary Duncan (2009c) understood this connection when he began a speech with:

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to discuss the state of American education—which in some ways is one and the same with the American economy. I believe that the quality of our education system says as much about the long-term health of our economy as the stock market, the unemployment rate and the size of the gross domestic product. That’s because the quality of our work and the intellectual breadth and depth of our future leaders is directly related to the quality of education we provide today. So I begin my remarks by recognizing America’s common agenda to promote economic security through education. (p. 1)

Undoubtedly Secretary Duncan believed that America’s education system is a strong indicator in the success of our long-term economy. In fact, he believed that education is just as telling as other markers such as the stock market or the gross domestic product. Deputy Under Secretary Shireman (2009) agreed, “Having a more educated population is a worthy goal in and of itself. But the goal is about

more than individual opportunity and social mobility. It is about the future of our economy and our place in the world” (p. 1). Shireman noted that although education is important to opportunity and social mobility, education is also significant to our future economy. Finally, Under Secretary Kanter (2010b) could not agree more. She concluded, “All across the Education Department, we are building on the commitment President Obama has made to help more students succeed, so as a nation we can educate our way to a better economy” (p. 3). In short, President Obama has three leaders from the U.S. Department of Education repeating the same ideology that as a nation, we must educate our way to a better economy.

**Financing America’s future through investments.** The second piece to President Obama’s economic agenda in education was that America must heavily invest money into public education in order to see a brighter economic future. There were 58 instances in the dataset that mentioned investments. President Obama accounted for more than half of those references with 29 codes for investment. Building off of the first premise that a better education system will lead to a better economy, the President argued that we must invest money to improve education. Secretary Duncan (2010a) reported, “At a time when other government spending is frozen, the President is investing in education because he understands that education is the path to economic security for our future” (p. 2). Despite tough economic times, President Obama justified intense spending in education as a means to restore the economy. Obama (2009b) explained, “Because improving education is central to rebuilding our economy, we set aside over \$4 billion in the



Recovery Act to promote improvements in schools. This is one of the largest investments in education reform in American history” (p. 2). The President (2009a) continued to make the case for these investments when he stated, “For every dollar we invest in these [educational] programs, we get nearly \$10 back in reduced welfare rolls, fewer health care costs, and less crime” (p. 2). Reduced spending on social services in the future was another reason why President Obama believed increased spending on education should be considered a financial investment.

**What the achievement gap will cost us.** The third element discussed by the Obama Administration was the economic consequences of the racial achievement gap. Several speeches provided by the speakers expressed concern about the underperformance of students of color when compared to their white counterparts. Often, the speakers spouted off data that displayed the huge achievement disparities between white students and students of color. More specifically, the most common achievement gap discussed was high school graduation rates. For example, Obama (2010a) reported:

Over 1 million students don’t finish high school each year—nearly one in three. Over half are African American and Latino. The graduation gap in some places between white students and classmates of color is 40 or 50 percent. And in cities likes Detroit and Indianapolis and Baltimore, graduation rates hover around 30, 40 percent—roughly half the national average . . . Graduating from high school is an economic imperative. (p. 2)

Duncan (2010e) supported the President when he stated:

Two thousand high schools in our country, only 2,000, produce half of our nation's dropouts and almost 75 percent of our dropouts from minority communities—our African-American and Latino young men and women. For our country, that is economically unsustainable and morally unacceptable.  
(p. 3)

These statistics are not new information, but the Obama Administration shed light on the economic repercussions of the racial divide. President Obama (2009b) explained, “Meanwhile, African American and Latino students continue to lag behind their white classmates—an achievement gap that will ultimately cost us hundreds of billions of dollars because that’s our future workforce” (p. 2).

The Obama Administration repeatedly referred to a specific report, conducted by McKinsey and Company (2009), which detailed the economic impact of the achievement gap. This report was referenced in five speeches by three leaders from the U.S. Department of Education (Duncan, 2010b, 2010h; Kanter, 2009a, 2009b; Miller, 2010) and thus, showed that the report has influenced the Department. Secretary Duncan (2010h) discussed:

... enormous achievement gaps among black and Hispanic students portend even more trouble for the U.S. in the years ahead. Last year, McKinsey & Company released an analysis which concluded that America’s failure to close achievement gaps had imposed—and here I quote—“the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession.” (p. 2)

The Obama Administration believed so strongly in the economic impact of the achievement gap that they went as far to assign a dollar amount. More specifically, Under Secretary Kanter (2009a) also cited the report by stating:

McKinsey ends their report with some startling estimates about the economic impact of the achievement gap . . . if we had been able to close the racial achievement gap where Hispanic and black performance had caught up with that of White students by 1998, GDP in 2008 would have been \$300-\$500 billion higher or roughly 2-4 percent of the GDP. (p. 2)

It is clear that the Obama Administration viewed the racial achievement gap in economic terms. Their concern and reasons for closing the achievement gap were at least in part motivated by economics. Duncan (2010b) concluded, “The educational inequities of today are going to translate into economic obsolescence of tomorrow . . . We must recognize that America’s achievement gap hurts not just the children who are cheated of a quality education but the nation itself” (p. 4).

**“A knowledge economy.”** The last major topic to the Obama Administration’s economic agenda in education was that our current and future economy is knowledge based. Unlike times in the past where the economy depended on workers’ skills, the speakers contended that today’s economy depends on workers’ skills and knowledge. President Obama (2009d) asserted, “The currency of today’s economy is knowledge” (p. 2). In other words, the more education one has, the more competitive they become in the economy. The President (2009b) explained, “In an economy where knowledge is the most valuable

commodity a person and a country have to offer, the best jobs will go to the best educated . . .” (p. 1). The Obama Administration has coined this ideology, a knowledge economy.

The term, knowledge economy, was stated 12 times by four speakers total (Arne Duncan, Matha Kanter, Tony Miller, and Barack Obama). All speakers argued that the key to economic growth is a better-educated society. Deputy Secretary Miller (2010) stated, “In the knowledge economy, education, especially a college education, is the new game-changer driving economic growth” (p. 1). Under Secretary Kanter (2010b) agreed with Miller’s assessment when she stated:

We are living in a knowledge economy, and other countries are recognizing this reality, but the U.S. is lagging behind and we must educate the public to recognize that in order to succeed in our new world, it will take higher and higher levels of skill and knowledge to compete and do well. (p. 1)

Not only was Kanter concerned with the future success of America’s economy, but also she was concerned with America’s ability to compete internationally. This concern was the next significant finding to this research.

### **“Our Competition is Growing”**

Related to the economic agenda in education, the speakers of this study were especially troubled by the mounting economic international competition. Duncan (2010h) urged:

The hard truth is that other high-performing nations have passed us by during the last two decades. Americans need to wake up to this educational

reality—instead of napping at the wheel while emerging competitors prepare their students for economic leadership. (p. 1)

President Obama (2010b) agreed:

As I said before, there are a number of actions we can take as a nation to enhance our competitiveness and secure a better future for our people, but few of them will make as much of a difference as improving the way we educate our sons and daughters . . . Countries that out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow and I refuse to let that happen on my watch. (p. 1)

With advances in technology, combined with increasing globalization, the President was worried about America's ability to compete in the international market. Obama (2009a) illustrated:

In a 21<sup>st</sup>-century world where jobs can be shipped wherever there's an Internet connection, where a child born in Dallas is now competing with a child in New Delhi, where your best job qualification is not what you do, but what you know—education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success, it's a prerequisite for success. (p. 2)

Under Secretary Kanter (2010a) echoed the President's concern when she stated:

. . . we come to a shared vision that the status quo of early learning, K-12 and higher education as we are today won't afford our students the levels of access, quality and achievement they will need to be successful in our democratic society and compete in the global economy. (p. 1)

This Administration believed that improving education was at the heart of increasing America's ability to globally compete. Obama (2010a) emphasized this ideology when he declared, "So make no mistake: Our future is on the line. The nation that out-educates us today is going to out-compete us tomorrow. To continue to cede our leadership in education is to cede our position in the world" (p. 2).

This concern was so prevalent that I coded for international competition a total of 117 instances. President Obama appeared to be the most troubled by this issue, as he referenced competition with 52 instances. Often, the speakers cited statistics that ranked international student achievement and college graduation rates. For example, the President (2010a) reported, "One assessment shows American 15-year-olds now ranked 21<sup>st</sup> in science and 25<sup>th</sup> in math when compared to their peers around the world" (p. 2). In another speech, Obama (2009a) added, "In 8<sup>th</sup> grade math, we've fallen to 9<sup>th</sup> place. Singapore's middle-schoolers outperform ours three to one. Just a third of our 13- and 14-year-olds can read as well as they should" (p. 2). Under Secretary Kanter (2009b), based on the McKinsey & Company (2009), confirmed:

This April McKinsey report[ed] on "The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools." They said that the U.S. lags significantly behind other advanced nations in educational performance and is slipping further behind in math, science and literacy. In 2006, we ranked 25<sup>th</sup> of 30 nations in math and 24<sup>th</sup> of 30 in science. The academic performance of our 15 year-old

students lags behind that of students in countries like Canada, the Netherlands, Korea and Austria with whom we compete for service-sector and high-value jobs. (p. 2)

These rankings distressed the speakers because of the forecasted economic repercussions. President Obama (2010e) continued:

Now, when it comes to the economy, I said that in today's world we're being pushed as never before. From Beijing to Bangalore, from Seoul to San Paolo, new industries and innovations are flourishing. Our competition is growing fiercer. And while our ultimate success has and always will depend on the incredible industriousness of the American worker and the ingenuity of American businesses and the power of our free market system, we also know that as a nation, we've got to pull together and do some fundamental shifts in how we've been operating to make sure America remains number one. (p. 2)

The President's aim of remaining in first place was an economic goal. In fact, there was thorough discussion by the speakers in America's capability to continue to be an international economic leader.

**If you're not first, you're last.** The Obama Administration discussed education reform within the context of remaining the economic leader of the world. The President (2010f) insisted, "As far as I'm concerned, America does not play for second place, and we certainly don't play for ninth" (p. 3). Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education Thelma Melendez de Santa Ana (2010) stated, "Change is needed, both to ensure our children's success and to maintain our

standing in the world” (p. 2). Melendez de Santa Ana (2010) continued in the same speech:

More and more of our children must do this [speak multiple languages], if our nation is to continue to lead in the global economy; if we are going to help bring security and stability to the world; and if we are going to foster understanding and build ever-stronger and more productive ties with our neighbors. (p. 6)

The Assistant Secretary focused on the benefits of multilingualism for the country, and not the advantages for the student. First and foremost, she was concerned with America leading the global economy.

President Obama (2009a) echoed this assertion, “. . . America’s place as a global economic leader will be put at risk . . . if we don’t do a far better job than we’ve been doing of educating our sons and daughters” (p. 1). It is clear that for this Administration the motivation behind education reform was connected to the concerns of remaining an international economic leader. Moreover, there was also detailed conversation addressing the economic costs of America falling behind its international competitors.

**Economic costs of the international achievement gap.** As quoted above, the President cited different statistics that show American student achievement to be significantly lower than our international competitors. The President (2009a) also pointed out, “Our curriculum for 8<sup>th</sup> graders is two full years behind top performing countries. That’s a prescription for economic decline” (p. 3). Not only



was American curriculum behind, but also college graduation rates. The President (2010f) commented:

In just a decade, we've fallen from first to ninth in the proportion of young people with college degrees. That not only represents a huge waste of potential; in the global marketplace it represents a threat to our position as the world's leading economy. (p. 3)

Again, the President connected worsening education to economic turn down within a global context. Furthermore, the Obama Administration went beyond generalities, and evaluated specific dollar amounts.

Much like the racial achievement gap discussed earlier, the same McKinsey and Company (2009) report also assessed the economic impact of the international achievement gap. Under Secretary Kanter (2009b) referenced the report when she stated, "They say that if we had been able to close the international achievement gap over the last 25 years the U.S. GDP in 2008 would have been \$1-2 trillion dollars higher. That's 9 to 16 percent of our GDP" (p. 2). In short, the Obama Administration had a significant economic interest in closing the international achievement gap. This economic interest was magnified during a time of one of the greatest recessions this country has ever seen. Nevertheless, the emphasis on bettering education in order to improve our standing in the global economy is still worth discussion.

## **The “American Dream” and Equal Opportunity**

Although President Obama and members of the U.S. Department of Education stressed the economic motivations behind improving education, they also expressed concern for upholding the American Dream and expanding equal educational opportunity. The President (2010g) insisted:

So in the end, this is about building a brighter future where every child in this country—black, white, Latino, Asian, or Native American regardless of color, class, creed—has a chance to rise above any barrier to fulfill their God-given potential. It’s about keeping the promise at the heart of this country that we love. The promise of a better life. The promise that our children will dream bigger, hope deeper, climb higher than we could ever imagine. That’s the promise that so many of you work to advance each and every day in your own respective fields. And as long as I have the privilege of being your President, that’s a promise that I intend to work to keep. (p. 3)

The speakers acknowledged the tremendous disparities that existed in education, and understood those discrepancies as unequal opportunity. Even though all presenters mentioned educational opportunity, no one spoke more on the need for education equity than Secretary Duncan. Opportunity was coded in the dataset 73 times, but Duncan accounted for nearly half of these instances with 35 references. Duncan not only discussed equal opportunity more frequently, but he also mentioned poor students and/or students of color more often. Poor students and/or students of color were discussed 238 times by the speakers. Secretary

Duncan made 144 references to these students, whereas the President and leaders of the U.S. Department of Education only made 48 and 46 references respectively.

Duncan discussed the connection of educational equity and civil rights on numerous occasions. For instance, Duncan (2009c) declared, “The extreme inequity in the quality of public education is profoundly un-American. Education is the civil rights issue of our generation and equality of opportunity is at the heart of America’s social compact” (p. 5). Duncan (2010b) continued, “Few civil rights are as central to the cause of human freedom as equal educational opportunity” (p. 1). It is clear that Secretary Duncan understood educational equity as a civil rights issue. For Duncan, America had some work to do in actualizing education’s potential for equal access to upward mobility. Secretary Duncan (2010c) concluded, “But as we continue [Martin Luther] King’s battle to realize equal opportunity, let us add to that legacy by living up to our national creed. Let us finally make education the great equalizer in America” (p. 5).

Although Duncan recognized that for many students, education in its current state is not the great equalizer in America, other leaders still believed that America is a meritocracy. The President (2009d) shared, “. . . we’re going to protect the dream of our founding and give all of our children, every last one of them, a fair chance and an equal start in the race to life” (p. 4). Obama (2009c) continued to a group of students:

And even when you’re struggling, even when you’re discouraged, and you feel like other people have given up on you—don’t ever give up on yourself.

Because when you give up on yourself, you give up on your country. The story of America isn't about people who quit when things got tough. It's about people who kept going, who tried harder, who loved their country too much to do anything less than their best. (p. 3)

The President assumed that students who academically underperform choose to do so by insinuating that they are giving up as if failure in our education system is a choice for our students. Despite the extreme educational inequities that exist, President Obama and select members of the U.S. Department of Education still persisted that the American Dream is possible for all and anyone can achieve success through hard work. Assistant Secretary Melendez de Santa Ana (2010) stated, "Experience has taught me that education equalizes differences in background, culture and privilege, and gives every child a fair chance—and it was evident from the tour that American's everywhere share this common belief in education as our economic salvation" (p. 2). Melendez de Santa Ana assumed that education was a fair system where any student can receive its economic rewards.

President Obama (2009a) agreed, "It's the founding promise of our nation: That we can make of our lives what we will; that all things are possible for all people; and that here in America, our best days lie ahead. I believe that" (p. 6). The President's remarks did not acknowledge the structural barriers that prevent some from making of their lives what they will. Perhaps the President held these beliefs because he sees himself as the ultimate case for the American Dream. Obama (2009a) shared his story in a speech before a Latino audience:

When I was a child my mother and I lived overseas, and she didn't have the money to send me to the fancy international school where all the American kids went to school. So what she did was supplement my schooling with lessons from a correspondence course. And I can still picture her waking me up at 4:30 a.m., five days a week, to go over some lessons before I went to school. And whenever I'd complain and grumble and find some excuse and say, 'Awww, I'm sleepy,' she'd patiently repeat to me her most powerful defense. She'd say, 'This is no picnic for me either, buster.' And when you're a kid you don't think about the sacrifices they're making. She had to work; I just had to go to school. But she'd still wake up every day to make sure I was getting what I needed for my education. And it's because she did this day after day, week after week, because of all the other opportunities and breaks that I got along the way, all the sacrifices that my grandmother and my grandfather made along the way, that I can stand here today as President of the United States. It's because of the sacrifices. See, I want every child in this country to have the same chance my mother gave me, that my teachers gave me, that my college professors gave me, that America gave me. (p. 5)

Obama's childhood story implied that anyone could become president if they were willing to make sacrifices and work hard. He shared this same story in numerous speeches to enforce the idea that the American Dream was alive and well by focusing on the sacrifices he and his family made. He did not explicitly discuss the opportunities and advantages that he had compared to other poor students of color

(including an elite private secondary education). Instead, he ignored those facts as if they were insignificant.

However, there were instances in which the President admitted that education was not what it should be in terms of opportunity for social mobility. In his book, Obama (2006) wrote:

Throughout our history, education has been at the heart of a bargain this nation makes with its citizens: If you work hard and take responsibility, you'll have a chance for a better life. And in a world where knowledge determines value in the job market, where a child in Los Angeles has to compete not just with a child in Boston but also with millions of children in Bangalore and Beijing, too many of America's schools are not holding up their end of the bargain. (p. 159)

In other words, the President believed that education has historically provided opportunity for upward mobility, but today's education system falls short in that regard. President Obama (2009a) summarized, "What's at stake is nothing less than the American Dream" (p. 2).

### **Poor Students of Color are to Blame**

The language used by the Obama Administration when discussing students of color indicated that they are to blame for their own underachievement and the downfalls of the country. In fact, the President suggested that parents and students of color change their behaviors in order to be of better use to society. Moreover, both President Obama and Secretary Duncan suggested in their speeches that the

underperformance of poor students of color was due to cultural inferiority and family irresponsibility. The speakers argued that parents and students were primarily responsible for the underperformance of poor students of color, and they must change their culture and priorities in order to succeed in school. Following a discussion of poor students, Secretary Duncan (2010d) contended:

Those barriers start in the home where too many children spend too much time with TV instead of with books and where some parents—overwhelmed by the demands of work or by their personal demons—are simply unable to meet their responsibilities. (p. 1)

This statement assumes that poor parents and students are not taking enough responsibility in their child's and their own education. The President put the onus on parents and students when he (2009b) asserted, "It will take parents asking the right questions at their child's school, and making sure their children are doing their homework at night . . . Ultimately, their education is up to them. It's up to their parents" (p. 3-4).

In addition to placing the principal responsibility of education on the home, the Administration also argued that government alone could not fix the problems of public education because parents and students are equally to blame. After a discussion of the underperformance of black and Latino students, America's high school dropout rate, and American students not being prepared for college, in his book, Obama (2006) wrote, "I don't believe government alone can turn these statistics around. Parents have the primary responsibility for instilling an ethic of

hard work and educational achievement in their children” (p. 160). Moreover, this viewpoint implies that the government can never be held solely accountable for the underachievement of poor students of color because it is the parents who have the primary responsibility. Following a discussion surrounding America’s lowest-performing schools, Obama (2009d) continued:

Lifting up American education is not a task for government alone . . . it will take parents getting more involved in their child’s education . . . It will take students accepting more responsibility for their own education . . . it’s going to take that kind of effort from parents to set a high bar in the household.

Don’t just expect teachers to set a high bar. You’ve got to set a high bar in the household all across America. (p. 5)

Along with instilling work ethic, establishing high expectations, taking responsibility, asking the right questions, and checking homework, Duncan contended that parents must also do a better job in supporting their children. He (2009b) stated to a Latino organization, “Still, all of these new resources will not be enough if parents and communities don’t do a better job of encouraging and supporting kids to college graduation” (p. 3). Again, the focus was on the parents.

Moreover, the President found that cultural deficits in the home prevent black children from achieving at the same rates as white children. Obama (2006) explained in his book:

Many of the social or cultural factors that negatively affect black people, for example, simply mirror in exaggerated form problems that afflict America as



a whole: too much television (the average black household has the television on more than eleven hours per day), too much consumption of poisons (blacks smoke more and eat more fast food), and a lack of emphasis on educational achievement.

Then there's the collapse of the two-parent black household, a phenomenon that is occurring at such an alarming rate when compared to the rest of American society that what was once a difference in degree has become a difference in kind, a phenomenon that reflects a casualness toward sex and child rearing among black men that renders black children more vulnerable—and for which there is simply no excuse. (p. 245)

Statements such as these are vulnerable to criticism because this perception is a deficit-oriented discussion of students of color. As such, the President (2010d) acknowledged this criticism in a speech before a primarily black audience:

Then some people say, well, why are you always talking about parent responsibility in front of black folks? And I say, I talk about parent responsibility wherever I talk about education. Michelle and I happen to be black parents, so I may add a little umph to it when I'm talking to black parents. (p. 6)

Even still, his statements leave much to criticize. Arguing that parents of color need to do more for their children is deflecting responsibility away from the government and the rest of society.

Lastly, the President blamed students for the dropout crisis in America. In a speech to a Latino audience, the President (2009a) stated:

... dropping out is quitting on yourself, it's quitting on your country, and it's not an option—not anymore. Not when our high school dropout rate has tripled in the past 30 years. Not when high school dropouts earn about half as much as college graduates. Not when Latino students are dropping out faster than just about anyone else. (p. 4)

In this context the term “dropout” is primarily referring to students of color, and the term is placing the onus on the students. To “dropout” implies that the student is mainly to blame for “giving up.” In this statement, the President was simplifying dropping out of high school to students quitting. Obama contended that dropping out of high school is an option that students of color choose to do. He does not acknowledge the schools’ or education system’s failure to maintain their students through graduation. In addition, he framed the dropout problem to be a Latino problem by pointing out that Latinos have the highest proportion of dropouts.

### **Interest Convergence Analysis**

The findings outlined above indicate that the Obama Administration placed a large emphasis on the economy when discussing education reform. Moreover, the speakers were concerned with America’s capacity to compete in the global economy. Broadly speaking, I believe that the Obama Administration must take an economic approach in conversations of improving education for poor students of color for reasons of interest convergence. As discussed in Chapter Two, interest

convergence theory argues that the advancement for people of color will only occur when there is an interest being met for elite white leaders. In this situation, the Obama Administration was convincing white leaders that enhancing public education for all students, including poor students of color, would ultimately benefit them by creating a better economy. Deputy Under Secretary Shireman (2009) admitted, "Having a more educated population is a worthy goal in and of itself. But this goal is about more than individual opportunity and social mobility. It is about the future of our economy and our place in the world" (p. 1). In other words, wealthy elites may not care about upward mobility or equal opportunity, but they should care about improving education for the future of this nation's economy.

The Obama Administration used interest convergence by heavily focusing on the economic benefits to better educating poor students of color. The speakers focused largely on the nation's economic costs of the racial achievement gap and high dropout rates for students of color in order to show white self-interest. They discussed these focus areas because quantitative dollar amounts can be assigned to the costs. As described in Chapter Two of this dissertation, critical race scholar Derrick Bell (2004) simplified interest convergence theory into two rules. The first principle is applied to the findings sections of this chapter, while the second tenet is applied to the findings section of the next chapter. Bell (2004) outlined the first rule when he wrote:

The interests of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interest of whites in policy-

making positions. This convergence is far more important for gaining relief than the degree of harm suffered by blacks or the character of proof offered to prove that harm. (p. 69)

Interest convergence occurs when the interests of white elites align with progress for people of color. Critical race theorists contend that whites will only tolerate the advancement of people of color when it serves their interests (Bell, 1995, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lopez, 2003). Bell (2004) also developed a formula that describes this phenomenon, “Justice for blacks vs. racism = racism. Racism vs. obvious perceptions of white self-interest = justice for blacks” (p. 59). In other words, when justice for people of color alone competes against racism, racism will always win. However, when racism is competing with obvious white interests, then justice for people of color will prevail. When interest convergence occurs, the primary purpose is to further white self-interest even though part of the end result may include advancement for people of color.

### **White Self-Interest in Closing the Achievement Gap and Curbing Dropouts**

The most obvious evidence of the first rule of interest convergence is the Obama Administration’s overt discussion of the economic benefits to closing the racial achievement gap. As discussed in the findings section above, five different speeches by three leaders from the U.S. Department of Education reference the same McKinsey and Company (2009) report (Duncan, 2010b, 2010h; Kanter, 2009a, 2009b; Miller, 2010). The speakers referenced the following conclusions stated in the report:

If the gap between black and Latino student performance and white student performance had been similarly narrowed, GDP in 2008 would have been between \$310 billion and \$525 billion higher, or 2 to 4 percent of GDP. The magnitude of this impact will rise in the years ahead as demographic shifts result in blacks and Latinos becoming a larger proportion of the population and workforce. If the gap between low-income students and the rest had been similarly narrowed, GDP in 2008 would have been \$400 billion to \$670 billion higher, or 3 to 5 percent of the GDP . . . Put differently, the persistence of these educational achievement gaps imposes on the United States the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession. (p. 5-6)

By assigning an actual GDP dollar amount to the achievement gaps for poor students and students of color, this report is clearly drawing attention to the economic repercussions of an inadequate education system. Leaders from the U.S.

Department of Education utilized this report in order to explain to elite whites why they should take interest in closing the achievement gap. Not only did the report assign a dollar amount, but it also mentioned the growing populations of people of color in America as if to say the economic imperative will only grow with the increasing number of students of color. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) reported that Latino and Asian populations in the United States grew by 43% each in the last ten years; blacks grew by 12%; and multi-racial people grew by 32%.

Whites were the slowest growing population of all races in the past ten years with a growth of only 5%. Currently, there are over 50 million Latinos in America,

accounting for one in six Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The President (2010g) recognized this racial shift when he reported:

Today, Latinos make up the largest minority group in America's schools—more than one in five students overall—and they face challenges of monumental proportions. Latino students are more likely to attend our lowest-performing schools, more likely to learn in larger class sizes, more likely to drop out at higher rates. Fewer than half take part in early childhood education. Only about half graduate on time from high school. And those who do make it to college often find themselves underprepared for its rigors. In just a single generation, America has fallen from first to ninth in college completion rates for all our students. Now, this is not just a Latino problem; this is an American problem. We've got to solve it because if we allow these trends to continue, it won't just be one community that falls behind—we will all fall behind together. At a time when unemployment rates for Americans who've never gone to college is almost double what it is for those who have gone to college; when most of the new jobs that are being created require some higher education; when other countries are out-educating us today to out-compete us tomorrow; making sure that we offer all our kids, regardless of race, a world-class education is more than a moral obligation. It is an economic imperative if we want to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (p. 2)

In this statement, Obama desperately tried to convince his audience that all Americans would benefit by assisting Latino students. Latino students are the fastest growing population and the President acknowledged the economic impact they will have on our country, if they continue to underachieve. The McKinsey and Company (2009) report also recognized these trends and warned that the economic consequences would only increase if nothing were done about the sizable racial achievement gap.

Interestingly, these McKinsey and Company (2009) statistics were presented to predominately white audiences of power. Kanter discussed these numbers before Women Administrators in Higher Education and the New England Board of Education. Miller presented the report at the Federal Student Aid Conference and Duncan before the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. These audiences were selected for a reason. The audience members were in positions of authority with influence on policy, and the presenters were hoping to convince their audience of the economic reasons behind closing the achievement gap. Bell (2004) reminded us, "Black rights are recognized and protected when and only so long as policymakers perceive that such advantages will further interests that are their primary concern" (p. 49).

Nevertheless, Secretary Duncan did reference the McKinsey and Company (2009) report at one event commemorating the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. The Edmund Pettus Bridge became famous in 1965 when peaceful civil rights demonstrators were attacked by

armed police officers. Understanding that the event commemorated the bravery of civil rights activists, one can assume that the audience had numerous people of color in attendance. At that event, Duncan (2010b) stated:

We must recognize that America's achievement gap hurts not just the children who are cheated of a quality education but the nation itself. Last year, McKinsey & Company released an analysis that concluded the nation's achievement gaps have imposed "the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession" on America. That is one reason why I absolutely reject the argument that securing equal access for black and brown children is a zero sum game that pits their interests against those of other children. America needs the abilities and talents of all its children to succeed and thrive. If we help our children, we strengthen our nation. (p. 4)

Notice that before this audience, Duncan did not go into dollar amounts or the GDP. Instead, he addressed a common fear of whites that educating students of color will somehow take away power from white students. A zero sum game is a capitalist ideal, which argues that in every market there are winners and losers. When one party benefits, another party must give up some power or advantage. Within this context, poor and working class whites are the most convinced of a zero sum game in education because they are the closest to the bottom.

As pointed out in Chapter Two, this ideology is also an important aspect of interest convergence theory. Bell (2004) wrote, "Racism (and the creation of the large racial underclass) has arguably made poor and working-class whites feel



better about their relative plight, giving them a consoling sense of superiority and status vis-à-vis African Americans, Hispanic American . . ." (p. 79). Within education, the racial hierarchy of student achievement allows for poor and working-class whites to better accept their economic circumstance because at least they are not at the very bottom with poor students of color. Therefore, poor and working-class whites have the most to lose when creating a more equitable education system that improves the achievement of poor students of color.

It is important to note that Duncan addressed the concern of a zero sum game with the McKinsey and Company (2009) report before a general public audience in the South. All other references to the McKinsey and Company report were before private audiences and made no reference to a zero sum game. In fact, this instance was the only mention of a zero sum game in the entire data set. I believe that Duncan discussed this concern before this particular audience because of the historical racial tensions and high levels of poverty in the South. The South has the highest levels of poverty in the country with Dallas County (where Selma is located) at a staggering 35% living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). In particular, poor and working class whites in this part of the country benefit from a racist education system because their whiteness is the only advantage keeping them from the very bottom. Critical race scholar, Cheryl Harris described this concept of whiteness as property. She (1993) explained:

The wages of whiteness are available to all whites regardless of class position, even those whites who are without power, money, or influence.

Whiteness, the characteristic that distinguishes them from blacks, serves as compensation even to those who lack material wealth. (p. 1759)

In his speech, Secretary Duncan attempted to calm the fears of whites when referencing the McKinsey and Company (2009) report by arguing that the entire nation will benefit if we improve the educational outcomes for poor student of color. Duncan desperately assured his white audience members that they would not lose power when bettering the educational circumstances for poor students of color. In other words, the reign of white supremacy will remain with or without educational equity for students of color.

As mentioned above, the Obama Administration was concerned over the high dropout percentages for students of color. The President (2010c) reported, “Over 1 million students don’t finish high school each year—nearly one in three. Over half are African American and Latino. The graduation gap in some places between white students and classmates of color is 40 or 50 percent” (p. 2). The Obama Administration clearly racialized America’s dropout problem as a problem for students of color. Nevertheless, the speakers worked hard to build an economic case for curbing the high number of high school dropouts. Duncan (2010f) pleaded:

Our children are at risk. Their future—and ours—is at risk. We must prepare them to compete in a global economy, and that requires all of us to move outside of our comfort zones. We have to challenge the status quo—because the status quo in public education is not nearly good enough—not

with a quarter of all students and, almost half, 50% of African-American and Latino young men and women dropping out of high school. (p. 1)

The President (2010c) expanded:

In recent years, a high school dropout has made, on average, about \$10,000 less per year than a high school graduate. In fact, during this recession, a high school dropout has been more than three times as likely to be out of work as someone with at least a college degree. Graduating from high school is an economic imperative. That might be the best reason to get a diploma, but it's not the only reason to get a high school diploma . . . high school dropouts are more likely to be teen parents, more likely to commit crime, more likely to rely on public assistance, more likely to lead shattered lives. What's more, they cost our economy hundreds of billions of dollars over the course of a lifetime in lower wages and high public expense. (p. 2)

Take note that the President was not asking that students of color complete college or obtain graduate degrees; he was merely requesting that students graduate from high school. Even with a high school diploma, students of color will not be significantly better off. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2002), full-time workers with a high school diploma made on average \$30,400 dollars, while high school dropouts made \$23,400 dollars. Those with a bachelor's degree earned on average \$52,200 dollars per year, and workers with a professional degree earned \$109,600 dollars a year. Going from a \$23,400 dollar annual income to a \$30,400 dollar annual income does not create dramatic differences in the lives of poor

students of color. A significant impact would be made if poor students of color obtained college and professional degrees. Then, these students would be making over twice as much with a college education, and over four times as much with a professional degree. However, the Obama Administration did not stress that students of color attend college. They only wanted them to be slightly better off by graduating high school so that they would be less of a burden to society. Although there was adequate discussion of the current knowledge-based economy that our students face, equal access for poor students of color into higher education was absent from the conversation.

In the final sentences of the quote above, the President mentioned the high social costs of high school dropouts. Here the President was calling high school dropouts a burden to our society and our nation's economy. He mentioned their high costs and low earning potential, along with their higher likelihood to commit crime. In other words, reducing the number of high school dropouts would not only benefit society with less crime and teenage pregnancies, but more importantly, it would better our economy. The President (2009a) explained the high public expense of poor people when he stated, "For every dollar we invest in these [educational] programs, we get nearly \$10 back in reduced welfare rolls, fewer health care costs, and less crime" (p. 2). Again, the President was using the first principle of interest convergence theory to showcase white self-interest. The speakers were not so much concerned about improving life conditions of poor students of color, but primarily concentrated on the economic benefits for the

taxpayers. Curbing dropouts meant creating more productive workers that in the future would not only cost us less to support, but also these workers could participate more effectively in the economy by earning more money. In short, the Administration's focus on the high numbers of students of color dropping out was part of a strategy to improve our nation's economy and is a form of interest convergence.

The Obama Administration's emphasis on getting more students of color to graduate from high school was not for the primary benefit of students of color. As shown above, the students themselves would see limited economic gain in their annual income. However, the Administration pointed out that society and more importantly, taxpayers would see the greatest return on their investment when more students graduated from high school. In addition, merely promoting students of color to graduate from high school posed little threat to the status quo of power. White elites face minimal to no risk at all in allowing for more students of color to graduate from high school because the vast majority of those poor students of color will not be allowed into higher education. In a study funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Greene and Forster (2003) found only 20% of black students and 16% of Latino students graduate from high school prepared for college. This study qualified college readiness as students who meet the minimum class requirements for admission to a four-year college and demonstrate basic literacy skills. As you can see, white supremacy is not challenged in higher education when such small percentages of students of color are permitted to attend college.

## **White Self-Interest in Deficit-Oriented Ideology and Meritocracy**

In addition, a white self-interest is met in deficit-oriented ideology. When Duncan and Obama blamed the behaviors and culture of poor students of color for the inequity in educational outcomes, they were essentially letting white policymakers off the hook for creating a more equitable education system. Bonilla-Silva (2010) called this ideology cultural racism, he explained:

This cultural frame is very well established in the United States. Originally labeled as the 'culture of poverty' in the 1960s, this tradition has resurfaced many times since . . . The essence of the American version of this frame is "blaming the victim," arguing that minorities' standing is a product of the lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values. (p. 40)

Akom (2008) expanded:

The central claim of the culture of poverty thesis is that a pathological set of behaviors exists for Black people/people of color that set us apart from "the American mainstream". The "dysfunctional culture" that the thesis insists exists among Black people/people of color is characterized by a sense of resignation, nihilism, an inability to delay gratification, low educational motivation, low social and economic aspiration, a trend toward female-centered families (matrifocality), and an inadequate moral preparation for employment. (p. 206)

President Obama and Secretary Duncan essentially used a culture of poverty framework when explaining the underperformance of poor students of color.

If students and parents are to blame, then white policymakers are not responsible for students' access to opportunity. Bonilla-Silva (2010) described the consequences of this ideology:

When cultural racism is used in combination with the “minimization of racism” frame, the results are ideologically deadly. If people of color say they experience discrimination, whites . . . do not believe them and claim they use discrimination as an “excuse” to hide the central reason why they are behind whites in society: their presumed “laziness.” (p. 40-41)

In other words, deficit-oriented ideology, or cultural racism, supports white supremacy by not admitting to discrimination and deflecting responsibility onto the oppressed.

Additionally, the culture of poverty ideology lacks empathy and compassion for those that live in poverty. Hooks (2000) contributed:

To be poor in the United States today is to be always at risk, the object of scorn and shame. Without mass-base empathy for the poor, it is possible for ruling class groups to mask class terrorism and genocidal acts. Creating and maintaining social conditions where individuals of all ages daily suffer malnutrition and starvation is a form of class warfare that increasingly goes unnoticed in this society. (p. 45-46)

Not only has the Administration shown lack of sympathy for poor students of color by implying that the problem is within them, but this standpoint also does not take

responsibility for what local, state, and federal governments can do to improve education. Professor Noguera (2008) wrote:

Differences related to socioeconomic status and income, the educational backgrounds of parents, the kind of neighborhood a student lives in, and most importantly the quality of school a student attends, significantly affect student achievement. Such factors influence the academic performance of all students, but because of the tendency to over-emphasize the influence of culture on the performance of racial groups, they are often ignored . . . There is a lot that our nation could do to reduce poverty and racial segregation, to equalize funding between middle class and poor schools, to lower class size, and to insure that we are hiring teachers who are qualified and competent. These are all factors that research has shown can have a positive effect on student achievement, and none of them involve trying to figure out how to change a person's culture. (p. 93-94)

Sadly, the Obama Administration was blaming the culture and behaviors of poor students of color instead of focusing on reforms that would have a significant impact on poor students of color across the country. Noguera (2008) concluded:

It could be argued that the success or failure of students cannot be attributed to the amount of culture they do or do not possess. Rather, a close examination of achievement patterns at their schools may reveal conditions within them that play a major role in shaping the academic outcomes of students. Ironically, broad generalizations about culture are so widely



embraced and deeply imbedded in popular thinking about race and school performance that they manage to exist even when there may be empirical evidence to undermine their validity. (p. 93)

In addition, the belief in the American Dream and a meritocracy also contains white self-interest. This ideology implies that we live in society free of institutionalized racism or classism, where everyone competes on a level playing field. As stated in the findings section, President Obama and other members of his educational leadership team played up the American Dream and described their own stories of humble beginnings. In fact, the President discussed the American Dream 30 times in the dataset. However, these stories are problematic, Akom (2008) described:

... these rags-to-riches stories are often produced and reproduced without detailed attention to the present effects of past discrimination, or, more specifically, without a discussion of the complex interplay of United States racial hierarchies on social class formation in the Black community. (p. 207)

The omission of structural barriers and discrimination in these stories of the American Dream only supports white supremacy. This is to the benefit of whites because not only does it deny white privilege, but it also frees white policymakers of the pressures to create equal opportunity. McIntosh (1998) discussed a dominant group's unwillingness to admit to privilege within the context of gender:

... I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are over-privileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They

may say they will work to improve women's status, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. Denials which amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages which men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened or ended. (p. 188)

In other words, the American Dream only protects white supremacy because meritocracy denies the existence of white privilege.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, the education speeches of the Obama Administration contained underlying ideologies that support interest convergence. Improving education for poor students of color occurs if white policymakers can see their own self-interests being met. Thus, the Obama Administration spent quite a significant amount of time convincing white elites that they would benefit from better educational outcomes of poor students of color. This is a possible reason why all of the presenters' speeches were coupled with an economic agenda and why there was an underlying ideology of cultural deficit thinking. Otherwise, white policymakers would take very little interest in advancing and investing in public education. Critical race scholars, Delgado and Stefancic (2001), reminded us, "Civil rights *gains* for communities of color coincide with the dictates of white self-interest. Little happens out of altruism alone" (p. 18).

In Chapter Five, I discuss the findings of the second research question surrounding the proposed reform solutions presented by the Obama Administration. I explore these findings through an interest convergence perspective, and provide my own recommendations for the transformation of educational outcomes for poor students of color.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **PROPOSED SOLUTIONS, WHITE SELF-INTEREST, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

This study sought to understand the underpinning ideologies that were present in the Obama Administration's education speeches. This chapter explains how the underlying ideologies presented in the previous chapter impact the Obama Administration's proposed solutions for education reform and, more specifically, what they mean for poor students of color. In addition, the proposed reform efforts are examined through the lens of interest convergence theory. This chapter concludes with my own recommendations to the Obama Administration and a reflection on interest convergence theory to critical race scholars.

#### **Research Questions**

Two research questions were addressed in this study:

- Using a critical discourse analysis, which ideologies underpin the Obama Administration's education speeches in relation to poor students of color?
- How do these ideologies inform the Obama Administration's proposed solutions to the education of poor students of color?

In the Chapter Four, I discussed and analyzed the underlying ideologies of the Obama Administration's education speeches. This chapter answers the second

research question, along with an interest convergence analysis and discussion of my own informed recommendations.

### **Findings Related to Proposed Solutions**

The Obama Administration's proposed solutions were highly influenced by economic ideals. Race to the Top was heavily motivated by economic ideologies. In addition, economic ideology results in increased competition and privatization of public education. For this Administration, it was an ideological goal to turn public education into more of an economic market. All of these findings are discussed in detail below.

### **Race to the Top's Economic Overtones**

After a thorough reading of the dataset, it is clear that economic interests have heavily motivated the Obama Administration's proposed solutions to education reform. Not only was an economic agenda broadly stated in nearly every speech of the data set, but also there were detailed discussions of the economy when presenting solutions to the nation's troubling education system. To date, the most far-reaching education reform that this Administration has produced is a funding competition entitled, Race to the Top. Race to the Top was a contest between states that competed for a portion of \$4.35 billion federal dollars. On the White House website (March 12, 2011) a fact sheet on Race to the Top opened with, "Providing a high-quality education to every young American is vital to the health of our nation's democracy and the strength of our nation's economy" (p. 1). This sentence provides justification and reasoning for the Race to the Top competition by

connecting education to the economy. Essentially, this opening line argues that the strength of our economy depends on a high-quality education system. Therefore, as a nation we must improve education if we want to better our economy.

During President Obama's first two-years in office, his and others' speeches primarily focused on the Race to the Top funding competition as its main reform agenda. The President (2010d) admitted:

Now, over the past 18 months, the single most important thing we've done—and we've done a lot. I mean, the Recovery Act put a lot of money into schools, saved a lot of teacher jobs, made sure that schools didn't have to cut back even more drastically in every community across this country. But I think the single most important thing we've done is to launch an initiative called Race to the Top. (p. 1)

In order for states to win a portion of the \$4.35 billion dollars, states had to meet four reform components. The U.S. Department of Education (2009c) outlined the following as its four reform areas:

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy.
- Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction.
- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most.

- Turning around our lowest-achieving schools. (p. 2)

**Higher standards.** The first piece of Race to the Top encouraged states to adopt national common academic standards for math and English-Language Arts. Part of the purpose of having common standards was to even out academic expectations across the country and also raise academic standards in states with low expectations from their students. Arne Duncan (2009c) reported:

Study after study shows that standards vary wildly and the states with the lowest standards are lying to children—by telling them they are ready for college or work—when they are in fact unable to compete—and the evidence is everywhere at every level. NAEP—which is the organization that periodically administers a national test to a sampling of students from across the nation—just issued a report showing that 30 states set 4<sup>th</sup> grade standards too low. And the news gets worse as students get older. International test results show that we are 10<sup>th</sup> in the world in 8<sup>th</sup> grade science and fifth in the world in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math. (p. 2)

President Obama (2009a) confirmed:

Today's system of 50 different sets of benchmarks for academic success means 4<sup>th</sup> grade readers in Mississippi are scoring nearly 70 points lower than students in Wyoming—and they're getting the same grade. Eight of our states are setting their standards so low that their students may end up on par with roughly the bottom 40 percent of the world. (p. 3)

Notice that both leaders were concerned with normalizing academic standards, but more importantly, they were primarily alarmed with the nation's ability to compete internationally. Obama mentioned the eight states with the lowest standards in order to compare them to the bottom 40% of the world. In a different speech, Obama (2009d) expanded:

The first measure [of Race to the Top] is whether as state is committed to setting higher standards and better assessments that prepare our children to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And I'm pleased to report that 48 states are now working to develop internationally competitive standards—internationally competitive standards because these young people are going to be growing up in an international environment where they're competing not just against kids in Chicago or Los Angeles for jobs, but they're competing against folks in Beijing and Bangalore. (p. 3)

In other words, America's academic standards must be on par with our international competitors in order to give our students a fighting chance in the global market. Again, the President's motivation behind raising academic standards was grounded in his purpose of bettering the economy.

**Turning around the lowest performing schools.** Another element to qualifying for Race to the Top funding was turning around the lowest performing schools. More specifically, the Obama Administration defined the lowest performing schools as schools with high dropout rates. In a speech explaining Race to the Top, Duncan (2009b) stated:



And finally, to turn around the lowest-performing schools, states and districts must be ready to institute far-reaching reforms, replace school staff, and change the school culture. We cannot continue to tinker in high schools that are little more than “dropout factories” where students fall further behind, year after year. (p. 2)

The Administration has coined these low performing schools “dropout factories,” which primarily serve poor students and students of color. Secretary Duncan (2010g) reported:

In 2002, the nation had 2,000 high schools that were dropout factories, about 15 percent of all high schools. These “dropout factories,” were 60 percent or less of ninth graders graduated four years later, produced half of all the nation’s dropouts, and almost three-fourths of our African-American and Latino boys and girls who dropped out. (p. 1)

In another speech, Duncan (2010b) expanded:

... we all too often under-invest in disadvantaged students; that they still have fewer opportunities to take rigorous college-prep courses in high school; that too many black, and brown, and low-income children are still languishing in aging facilities and high schools that are little more than dropout factories. (p. 1)

Five different speakers used the term “dropout factory” for a total of eighteen times in the dataset. First, comparing schools to factories is an economic association.

Factories manufacture products, and in a sense, the Administration is viewing students as products through their language.

More importantly, the President was concerned with turning around these “dropout factories” for economic gain. The President (2010c) admitted:

In recent years, a high school dropout has made, on average, about \$10,000 less per year than a high school graduate. In fact, during this recession, a high school dropout has been more than three times as likely to be out of work as someone with at least a college degree. Graduating from high school is an economic imperative. That might be the best reason to get a diploma, but it’s not the only reason to get a high school diploma . . . high school dropouts are more likely to be teen parents, more likely to commit crime, more likely to rely on public assistance, more likely to lead shattered lives. What’s more, they cost our economy hundreds of billions of dollars over the course of a lifetime in lower wages and high public expense. (p. 2)

Here, the true motivations for turning around low-performing schools became evident. High school dropouts cost our economy more than had they finished high school. The President’s goal of turning around “dropout factories” is in hopes of bettering our economy.

### **The Influence of Economic Ideals**

In addition to the economy being the primary motivator of education reform, the Obama Administration’s education plan was heavily influenced by economic ideals of competition and privatization. Many of their goals, focus areas, and

strategies were grounded in economic principles. This became very evident as I read through the dataset. For example, six speakers used the word “competition” or “competitive” over 90 times total in the dataset. This shows an emphasis and a belief in the power of competition.

**Competition.** There were several instances in which the speakers discussed their education plans in competitive terms. A prime example was the President’s goal of leading the world in college graduates. This goal was mentioned in over 30 speeches in the dataset of only 45. The President (2010f) declared:

In just a decade, we’ve fallen from first to ninth in the proportion of young people with college degrees . . . in the global marketplace it represents a threat to our position as the world’s leading economy. As far as I’m concerned, America does not play for second place, and we certainly don’t play for ninth. So I’ve set a goal: By 2020, America will once again lead the world in producing college graduates. (p. 3)

Clearly, first-place was of importance to the President. According to his statement, second place was not even acceptable for America. The President did not want to be a leader in the world economy; he wanted to be the leader. Deputy Under Secretary Shireman (2009) explained:

As you know, President Obama has established a bold goal for America: to restore our place in the world as the country with the largest proportion of adults with college degrees. Having a more educated population is a worthy goal in and of itself. But this goal is about more than individual opportunity

and social mobility. It is about the future of our economy and our place in the world. (p. 1)

In this statement, Shireman shed light on the true motivation behind having the highest proportion of college graduates. The goal was not simply for improved opportunity or upward mobility, but rather more for the purposes of competing in the global economy.

Other education reform strategies also utilized competition, such as the Race to the Top funding contest. Even in its title, the word “race” signified that there would be winners and losers. However, the President argued that the competition would be beneficial for even those states that did not receive funding. As a result of the competition, several changes went into immediate effect even before winners were chosen. President Obama (2009a) reported:

And so far, the results have been promising and they have been powerful. In an effort to compete for this extra money, 32 states reformed their education laws before we even spent a dime. The competition leveraged change at the state level. And because the standards we set were high, only a couple of states actually won the grant in the first round, which meant that the states that didn't get the money, they've now strengthened their applications, made additional reform . . . So understand what's happened. In each successive round, we've leveraged change across the country. (p. 4)

The President argued that competition is essentially good because it improves all of the states, not just the winners. Nevertheless, not all states received funding, and

there were states that lost the competition. Some criticized Race to the Top because it was not funding the students that needed it the most. To this criticism, the President (2010d) responded:

I know there's a concern that Race to the Top doesn't do enough for minority kids, because the argument is, well, if there's a competition, then somehow some states or some school districts will get more help than others. Let me tell you, what's not working for black kids and Hispanic kids and Native American kids across this country is the status quo. That's what's not working. What's not working is what we've been doing for decades now. So the charge that Race to the Top isn't targeting at those young people most in need is absolutely false because lifting up quality for all our children—black, white, Hispanic—that is the central premise of Race to the Top. (p. 4)

In this statement, the President does not actually address the concern that some states will not win, nor does he defend the competition model. He simply stated that the previous status quo did not work for students of color, and so he was trying something different. However, the President did not explain how students of color would specifically benefit other than stating the general phrase that Race to the Top would lift the quality of education for all children.

In addition, the Obama Administration was also a strong proponent of expanding charter schools. In a speech about turning around underperforming schools, Secretary Duncan (2009a) declared, "I'm a big supporter of these successful charter schools and so is the president. That's why one of our top priorities is a \$52

million increase in charter school funding in the 2010 budget. We also want to change the law and allow federally funded charters to replicate” (p. 2). Charter schools are public schools, but are independently managed and free from local district regulations. Part of the argument for charter schools (especially in poor performing districts) is that they encourage schools to improve in order to compete for students. Secretary Duncan (2009a) commented, “The charter movement is one of the most profound changes in American education, bringing new options to underserved communities and introducing competition and innovation into the education system” (p. 2). Prior to the introduction of charter schools, schools serving poor communities faced hardly any competition for students. Unable to afford private schools, poor students had no other choice, but to attend their resident school. Charters have provided more educational options to poor families, but they are currently not capable of serving all poor students. Charter schools are often smaller than their resident schools, and thus, have a very limited enrollment. Most successful charters are required to hold lotteries since their number of applicants outnumbers the amount of spaces available. Again, the lotteries are another form of competition since not all students will win.

**Privatization.** Additionally, the Obama Administration’s support of the expansion of charter schools was a move toward increased privatization of schooling. Nevertheless, the Administration contended that charter schools increase innovation because they are granted more freedom in just about every aspect of the school (i.e. hiring practices, teacher evaluations, curriculum,

assessments, school calendar, and professional development). To address concerns of privatization, Arne Duncan (2009a) stated:

Many people equate charter with privatization and part of the problem is that charter schools overtly separate themselves from the surrounding district . . . Instead of standing apart, charters should be partnering with districts, sharing lessons, and sharing credit. Charters are supposed to be laboratories of innovation that we can all learn from. (p. 3)

Unfortunately, competition does not allow extensive collaboration between charters and districts because competition for students often creates hostile relationships. In short, charters will remain private entities because of their autonomy from the local districts.

Moreover, the Obama Administration was also very committed to strengthening relationships between public education and the business community. The President (2010f) admitted to taking advice from the business community in shaping education as he described:

So it was no surprise when one of the main recommendations of my Economic Advisory Board—who I met with yesterday—was to expand education and job training. These are executives from some of America’s top companies. Their businesses need a steady supply of people who can step into jobs involving a lot of technical knowledge and skill. They understand the importance of making sure we’re preparing folks for the jobs of the future. (p. 3)

Secretary Duncan (2009c) confirmed:

I extend my hand in partnership to the Chamber [of Commerce] and more broadly to the business community. I ask for your help, your input, your ideas and your support. I need you members across America to take a more active role in education reform . . . about 38 percent of school board members have a business background. That's a great start, but there's much more you can do . . . And you can invest in education—because it's the best return on investment you will ever make—producing not only the employees you need but the customers as well. (p. 5)

By asking for more involvement from the business community, Duncan was also asking for an increase of corporate influence in the classroom. In return, Duncan promised businesses better workers and consumers. This example shows Duncan's understanding of the role of education in a capitalist market. According to this statement, schools have a purpose of creating not only workers, but also effective consumers who can participate in the economy. Once again, the Obama Administration was feeding into economic interests linked to a profit motive.

### **Interest Convergence Analysis**

The second principle of interest convergence theory states that progress which results from interest convergence will only have a minimal impact on people of color at best. Bell (2004) contended, “. . . the remedy for blacks, appropriately viewed as a ‘good deal’ by policy-making whites, often provides benefits for blacks that are more symbolic than substantive” (p. 56). In other words, most of the



solutions in the advancement of people of color will be shallow or empty promises. Of those few reforms that do benefit people of color and have depth in their reach, Bell argued that those would eventually be scaled back in order to maintain white supremacy. Bell (2004) explained the second rule of interest convergence theory when he wrote, “Even when interest-convergence results in an effective racial remedy, that remedy will be abrogated at the point that policymakers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior societal status of whites, particularly those in the middle and upper classes” (p. 69). Back in Chapter Two, it was discussed in detail the ways in which the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was reduced to merely a symbolic measure by following court cases. Interest convergence theory states that once a solution for people of color is viewed as a threat to white supremacy, then it will be limited to a simple gesture rather than a mandate with real consequences.

Unfortunately, the proposed solutions by the Obama Administration were true to the second rule of interest convergence theory in that they have not produced any dramatic results in the education of poor students of color. These solutions all sound well intentioned, but they will not produce an astounding impact for poor students of color. None of the proposed reform ideas poses a threat to white supremacy, and thus, white policymakers will approve of them. This unfortunate reality is a major disappointment, especially since it is coming from a black president.

## **Improving the Schools that Poor Students of Color Attend**

The guidelines to Race to the Top were so broad that they could be interpreted in a number of ways. None of the four components requires drastic changes in the education of poor students of color. Nevertheless, there is one element that specifically addresses the schools the poor students of color attend. The final aspect of Race to the Top declared that states develop a pledge for turning around the lowest performing schools. President Obama (January 19, 2010) explained the last component of Race to the Top when he stated:

We laid out a few key criteria and said if you meet these test, we'll reward you by helping you reform your schools . . . Fourth, we encouraged states to show a stronger commitment to turning around some of their lowest performing schools. (p. 2)

Notice the choice words of this statement. The Administration merely "encourages" states to display a "stronger commitment" to turn around schools. Encouragement is not a requirement. In addition, a stronger commitment does not mean a sophisticated plan with actual implications for poor students of color. Finally, the President only supported states in turning around "some" of their lowest achieving schools. Some schools are not all schools or even most schools. In fact, some can simply mean more than one. Unfortunately, the President's summation of the fourth component to Race to the Top was not an aggressive requirement that states drastically improve the schools poor students of color attend.

In addition, the proposed methods for fixing these schools and improving the quality of education for poor students of color were not innovative or astounding.

The President (2009d) recommended:

There are a number of different strategies that school districts are employing to fix these schools that are in such tough shape. One strategy involves replacing the principal, replacing much of the staff, and giving the school a second chance. Another strategy involves inviting a great nonprofit to help manage a troubled school. The third strategy involves converting a dropout factory into a successful charter school. (p. 3)

The first strategy advocates for replacing personnel in the low performing schools, but does not specify exactly who will take these positions. Low performing schools are tough places in which to work and, regrettably, there is not a long list of exceptional principals and teachers waiting to work in these schools. Most low performing schools are considered to be hard to staff already, so it is unclear that replacing the staff will be much better. The next two strategies involve outside nonprofits and charter organizations to take over struggling schools. The President did not specify which types of nonprofits would take over these schools, so that strategy is vague. Nevertheless, charter schools are not all equally successful. Some charter schools make outstanding gains in their communities, while others are considered to be mediocre and some are downright failures. Obama (2010d) admitted:

Charter schools aren't a magic bullet, but I want to give states and school districts the chance to try new things. If a charter school works, then let's apply those lessons elsewhere. And if a charter schools doesn't work, we'll hold it accountable; we'll shut it down. (p. 5)

In other words, charter schools as a solution to troubled schools are a hit or miss. The President willingly allowed states to experiment with charter schools on poor students of color. Unfortunately, many poor students of color will be affected and opportunity will be lost when their charter school fails. All in all, none of the strategies proposed by the President has proven to be successful on a large scale. Therefore, white elite policymakers have nothing to fear in this measure. The solutions to turning around low performing schools are weak and will not force wealthy whites to give up a form of power. This example displays the second rule of interest convergence theory in that the remedy for people of color is merely symbolic rather than substantive.

### **Solutions Should Not Primarily Serve White Interests**

The Obama Administration's education platform was an extension of a long legacy of interest convergence in America. As discussed in Chapter Two, interest convergence dates back to the Civil War. In that example, freeing the slaves was merely a byproduct of preserving the Union. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the main goal was to improve international relations during the Cold War. Although the Supreme Court found segregation in schools to be illegal, the motivation behind the decision was mainly for international image. In fact, racial segregation continues to

permeate our public school system to a greater extent than ever before. Therefore, the Obama Administration's education reform plan may have a slight positive impact on the education of poor students of color, but it is significant to note that the end goal is to improve the economy. White self-interest will never create drastic improvements in the education of poor students of color because social justice and equity are not the purpose for the reform. Education reform that supports white interests will ultimately result in the promotion of white supremacy. When interest convergence occurs, people of color progress an inch, while whites advance a mile ahead.

### **Deficit-Oriented Ideologies = No Real Remedy for Poor Students of Color**

One reason the Obama Administration's proposed solutions do not go far enough is because there is an underpinning ideology that blames the culture of poor students of color. Akom (2008) contended:

As we enter the twenty-first century, a recycled (yet new) version of the culture of poverty thesis is gaining visibility and credence . . . The major thread connecting these scholars is the notion that the attitudes and behaviors of Black people/people of color are responsible for large disparities in the realms of education and employment. (p. 206)

If poor students of color and their parents are solely responsible for their underperformance in school, then there is no reason to develop far-reaching reforms because the answer is within them. Hence, President Obama and leaders of the U.S. Department of Education did not develop sophisticated solutions for

systemic change because they did not deem them to be necessary. According to meritocratic and deficit-oriented ideologies, people of color have the power to change their destiny. Duncan (2009c) insisted, “I reject this idea that demography is destiny. Despite challenges at home, despite neighborhood violence, and despite poverty, I know that every child can learn and thrive” (p. 2). This assumes that any child can escape poverty, if he or she just works hard enough, therefore, denying the need to dramatically change the system since every student is capable of success. This view does not take structural racism into account and only reinforces notions of race-neutrality or colorblindness. Lopez (2003) commented, “The belief that colorblindness will eliminate racism is not only shortsighted but reinforces the notion that racism is a personal—as opposed to systemic—issue” (p. 69).

Moreover, the Obama Administration did not address the prevailing white privilege and supremacy that hinders poor students of color from achieving at the same levels of their wealthy and white counterparts. McIntosh (1998) explained:

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already. (p. 192)

The Obama Administration never admitted or acknowledged the pervasive white privilege that prevails in America's education system, and as such, maintained the myth of meritocracy.

Additionally, the culture of poverty ideology implies that the failure of poor students of color is normal. Deficit thinking presumes failure because it is an explanation for failure. Unfortunately, the consequences of this assumption are dire. Noguera (2008) reasoned:

When failure is normalized and no one is disturbed by low student achievement, it can be nearly impossible for student outcomes or schools to change. Reforms may be implemented—new textbooks and new curricula may be adopted, schools may be reorganized and restructured, principals may be replaced—but unless there is a strategy for countering the normalization of failure, it is unlikely that disparities in achievement will be reduced or that schools will ever change. (p. 101)

Deficit-oriented ideology does nothing to fight against the normalization of failure for poor students of color. In fact, it only maintains those hegemonic notions of failure for those students.

### **Economic Ideology = No True Solution for Poor Students**

An actual solution to creating a more equitable education system for poor students of color cannot be motivated by economic ideals of competition and privatization. These economic ideologies create a market within public education where some students must lose in order for others to win. In that system, poor

students of color will continue to lose when participating in our nation's education system. We need a complete economic restructuring of our education system where the wealth of the rich is redistributed to accommodate the needs of the poor. It is not socially just to provide the least to the students with the greatest needs. Schools that serve high concentrations of poor students simply cannot succeed under our current model. Poor students of color come to schools with many needs that are related to their low-incomes. Noguera (2008) contended:

Closing the racial achievement gap and pursuing greater equity in schools will undoubtedly be a long term, uphill struggle that is fraught with difficulty because historically the education of Whites and non-Whites remains profoundly unequal. Educators must continue to recognize that the sources of inequity typically lie outside of schools—in disparities in income and wealth, in inequity in parent education and access to healthcare, and in access to good paying jobs and vital social services. (p. 101)

In order to address these inequities found outside of our schools, we need a revolution that insists on our nation reducing the gap between rich and poor. It is intolerable that in the land of plenty, students should go hungry or receive an abysmal education. Hooks (2000) asserted, "Our nation is becoming a class-segregated society where the plight of the poor is forgotten and the greed of the rich is morally tolerated and condoned" (p. vii). We have the resources and the know-how to provide all poor students of color with an excellent education, but we choose not to. Hooks (2000) concluded:



To stand in solidarity with the poor is no easy gesture at a time when individuals of all classes are encouraged to fear for their economic well-being. Certainly the fear of being taken advantage of by those in need has led many people with class privilege to turn their backs on the poor. As the gap between rich and poor intensifies in this society, those voices that urge solidarity with the poor are often drowned out by mainstream conservative voices that deride, degrade, and devalue the poor . . . We need a concerned left politics that continues to launch powerful critique of ruling class groups even as it also addresses and attends to the issues of strategic assault and demoralization of the poor, a politics that can effectively intervene on class welfare. (p. 46)

The only way to do this is by intensifying the redistribution of wealth in this country.

### **Critique of Interest Convergence Theory**

This study adds to the growing body of research that validates the existence of interest convergence theory. Nevertheless, now that interest convergence theory has been shown in various instances and disciplines, critical race scholars must move beyond identifying interest convergence and begin to either work with or against it in order to fight against racism. Derrick Bell, the creator of interest convergence theory, believed that racism would continue forever (Bell, 1992). However, I am hopeful that the next generation of critical race scholars will continue his work and begin to find alternative ways to achieve progress for people of color.

As critical race scholars, we need to begin asking, must we operate within the confines of interest convergence? In order for people of color to advance, we must dismantle white supremacy. We need policies that remove or retract power from whites, and unfortunately, interest convergence does not allow for this to happen.

### **A Recommendation for Strategic Alliances**

Barack Obama's 2008 campaign for presidency focused on two central themes, hope and change. I am hopeful that there is a way to dismantle white supremacy in America's education system. Professor Cornell West (1999) wrote:

To be part of the democratic tradition is to be a prisoner of hope. And you cannot be a prisoner of hope without engaging in a form of struggle in the present moment that keeps the best of the past alive. To engage in that struggle means that one is always willing to acknowledge that there is no triumph around the corner, but that you persist because you believe it is right and just and moral. (p. 12)

The revolution to change educational outcomes for poor students of color does require struggle, but it is still possible.

Soon enough, people of color will outnumber whites in critical parts of the country. Nevertheless, there are deep-rooted divides that dissuade people of color and other oppressed groups from forming revolutionary coalitions. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explained, "First, we must recognize that our differing experiences with oppression create problems in the relationships among us. Each of us lives within a system that vests us with varying levels of power and privilege" (p. 457).

Although power and privilege do create barriers in developing relationships, strategic alliances between differently oppressed identity groups are necessary for systemic change. Collins (2000) continued, “Reconceptualizing oppression and seeing the barriers created by race, class, and gender as interlocking categories of analysis is a vital first step. But we must transcend these barriers by moving toward race, class, and gender categories of connection by building relationships and coalitions what will bring about social change” (p. 457).

Admittedly, forms of oppression in America differ in terms of race, class, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. However, the solution lies within Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1995) notions of intersectionality. The majority of people in America have interlocking identities, which can be utilized to form strategic alliances.

McIntosh (1998) wrote:

Difficulties and angers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same; the advantages associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage that rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex, and ethnic identity than on other factors.

Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking . . . (p. 191)

Therefore, all oppressed identity groups can and should work toward the dismantling of all forms of privilege because empathy allows for and fosters alliances. For example, white gay men or wealthy white women should form alliances with poor people of color because they experience and understand

oppression themselves. Strategic alliances are the only way to change the power dynamics within American society. No single identity group can do it alone. It will take the strength of many identity groups to form alliances, which will enable a revolution.

### **Conclusion**

Hooks (1995) concluded, "For our efforts to end white supremacy to be truly effective, individual struggle to change consciousness must be fundamentally linked to collective effort to transform those structures that reinforce and perpetuate white supremacy" (p. 195). As discussed in this dissertation, our current education system perpetuates white supremacy at the expense of poor students of color. We must find ways to form allies among those in power and at the same time, raise consciousness among the apathetic. Noguera (2003) suggested:

We can make significant improvements in the quality of public education available to poor children in urban areas. We have the resources, the know-how, and the models to do this. Those who understand the importance of education must work with creativity and a sense of urgency to find ways to generate will, to make those who are presently indifferent or unconcerned understand what is at stake. (p. 157)

I hope that this dissertation is a contribution to raising consciousness and a form of advocacy for poor students of color everywhere in America.

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