

Contextualizing Diversity in Education
EAD 822: Diverse Students and Families
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W.E.B. Du Bois, the astute American sociologist and civil rights activist is quoted in saying “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” in regards to the direction that must be taken to confront contemporary injustices predicated upon difference. To fully understand the depth of his thinking one must not only delve into the historical creation of the problem he alluded to, but also understand the problem’s implications for the future.

Historically, in the Western world the concept of naming to delineate difference has existed since European explorers landed upon the shores of what would later become America. The word “Indian”, which was used to refer to those who were indigenous to the New World, was socially invented to serve as the instrument to unify or aggregate the many different native cultures, languages, and ways of living into one classifiable group who would later become conquered and enslaved (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). Similarly, the term “African American” is an aggregated classification not only used to mark distinct external differences, but also employed to encompass the shared experience of the many culturally diverse groups of Africa that were captured and sold into the system of slavery. As observed in both of these scenarios in America, Whites have become the “non-defined definers of other people” (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012, p. 18), as they have held the authority to determine difference based upon the distinction of others in comparison to themselves.

Throughout American history the insidious cycle of being named and then categorized, whether based upon the social concept of race, sexual orientation, class, sex, and disability, has affected all major aspects of life including employment, housing, education, and health (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). The external differences that African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Middle Easterners have in comparison to Whites places them into distinct groups and categories, where they are marginalized and often victimized for being deemed as inferior (Race-The Power of an Illusion, 2003). The strategic usage of the “color line”, coupled with the ignorance of how difference is used as a tool to perpetuate the status quo, is instilling the belief of meritocracy in the popular majority (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). Cardinally, this misdirected vision uses the social phenomena of “difference” to blur the political, social, and economic forces that exist in our country (Lipman, 2003).

The product of naming and categorizing various individuals results in a stratified social hierarchy based upon gross generalizations and false stereotypes. The problem with the yawning divide seen within this hierarchy is that some groups are privileged at the expense of others, so it must be perpetuated, either consciously or subconsciously, to maintain its existence (Johnson, 2006). In the past - particularly with the case of African Americans - the one-drop rule, Jim Crow System, and the deliberate attempts made to prevent racial mixing between African Americans and the dominant community substantiated and solidified their position of being at the *bottom*. Additionally, as these groups inherited an oppressed position in society they often were objectified within particular categories where stigmatizations of delinquency, misbehavior, and unworthiness perpetuated beliefs of inferiority (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). More recently it is people’s cowardice, particularly, though not exclusively, politicians, who are fearful of using class and race based rhetoric to name oppression for what it is as this carries the risk of

challenging the hierarchy within society and jeopardizing the luxuries allotted to those at the *top*. Essentially, race has become woven into the fabric of America and used as a tool to reinforce an asymmetrical society.

The fallacy of race is that it is merely an illusion. Beyond skin color, body shape, hair form, and color of eyes, human beings have not existed long enough to develop much genetic variance (Race-The Power of an Illusion, 2003). It is merely a social concept constructed and accepted as factual, despite not possessing any biological validity (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012). Unfortunately, America has organized all of its politics, laws, and economics around a widely accepted, though heavily erroneous belief.

Most notably, the manifestation of difference has now become visible in the education system. It originally stemmed from America's naming of Black and Brown individuals, and has been more recently perpetuated by the polarization of income and wealth, and continues to be supported by the stigmatizations carried with being labeled as disadvantaged, culturally deprived, or at-risk (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The precondition to understanding an individual's existence in the world is derived from thoughtfully being conscious of their culture. Because far too many educators are socially and culturally distanced from those they serve in schools, they fail to teach authentically (McIntyre, 1997). The education system's failure justifies *those* students in *those* schools being victimized by the "politics of disposability", and naturally they succumb to the standardization, economizing of education, and neoliberal demands (Lipman, 2003). The lack of "cultural synchronization" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 17) between student and teacher has created the false stigma that Black and Brown students need to be controlled to be taught, hence the push for the highly-regimented and militarization of schools found in disproportionately minority communities. The influence that political and economic issues have had on our nation's education system has enhanced some students' intellect, while others have been deceived by yet another form of "racialized" social control (Lipman , 2009) that only benefits those who lack "difference".

One of the most effective ways to confront the current injustices around difference found within the education system would be to develop the social capital of these communities. Similar to how Asians advantageously used the pervasiveness of racial lumping together to challenge economic disparities and unjust political policies (Rosenblum & Travis, 2012), the parents of these oppressed communities must collaborate and mobilize (Noguera, 2004). If parents were to collaborate with the school to increase teacher effectiveness and student outputs, this would essentially translate into an increased level of social capital where they would develop the capacity to mobilize the community to dismantle the subjugation, failure, and exploitation found in their lives that has been based upon their label of being "different" (Noguera, 2004).

Ultimately, "the problem of the color line" is deeply rooted in our history and carries the potential to define the American trajectory into the future. Americans must be insightful enough to understand the complexities of difference and be bold enough to challenge it; for even those who do not acknowledge it, their silence makes them complicit to it. Either we will become a country for its people or our differences will continue to privilege some while oppress others.

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