

Article

Look How Far We Haven't Come: The Possible Implications of Current Educational Context and Practices for Young Black Males by Amanda VandeHei Carter

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Abstract: Data that are derived from high stakes testing in the United States have created rhetoric of fear and criticism around our public K–12 educational system. Stakeholders often blame these low-test scores on the school, administration, or teachers. Due to the way that this data is shared with the general public Different from this narrative, within many schools, high stakes testing data are reported in an aggregated fashion, usually by students' race. While the general public may be pointing their finger at schools, administrators, or teachers for poorly achieving students, these folks can quickly shift the blame to certain populations of students who are not performing well on standardized tests. Teachers spend time sorting and labeling children into groups and categories in an effort to "fix the problem". While sometimes well intended, the planning, instruction, and assessment of daily and weekly instruction is focused on an end result of getting particular groups of students to score better on standardized tests. This article provides the counter narrative to this conversation and it strives to tell the story of a student who has fallen victim to standardized unauthentic curriculum. Multiple case study was the methodology used for this research. Consistent with this methodology, the data were gathered through one-on-one interviews, classroom observations, and small group discussions. Hardiman's model of White Identity Development (WID) and Freebody and Luke's four resources model were the conceptual frameworks that were used to guide the study. The findings shared in this article represent the data collected from one participant in this multiple case study.

Keywords: counter narrative; critical literacy; white identity development; children

1. Introduction

Data derived from high stakes testing in the United States have created rhetoric of fear and criticism regarding our public K–12 educational system. Stakeholders often blame these low-test scores on the school, administration, and/or teachers, because of the way these data are shared with the general public.

Different from this narrative, within many schools, high stakes testing data are reported in an aggregated fashion, sometimes by students' race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic standing. While the general public may be pointing its finger at schools, administrators, or teachers for the poorly achieving students, these individuals can quickly shift the blame to certain populations of students who are not performing well on standardized tests. Teachers spend time sorting and labeling children into groups and categories in an effort to "fix the problem". While sometimes well intended, the planning, instruction, and assessment of daily and weekly instruction are focused on a result of particular groups of students scoring better on standardized tests.

This article provides the counter narrative to this conversation and strives to tell the story of a student who has fallen victim to standardized unauthentic curriculum. It is no wonder that diverse

students disengage with curriculum when they are unable to see themselves, their family, their culture, their values, or any part of their identity represented in any element of the school day, particularly during literacy instruction.

Additionally, it should be noted that the composition of this article is a direct attempt to oppose the traditional, Eurocentric, way of reporting data. Just as I encourage teachers to resist hegemonic, scripted, standardized curriculum, I feel empowered by journals and editors who encourage nontraditional means of academic writing and I am taking advantage of that liberty.

2. Background

The perspectives that are shared in this piece are the result of a multiple case study that took place in an elementary school that is part of a large urban school district in the southwest region of the United States. The purpose of the original study was to investigate whether white elementary teachers' perception of whiteness influenced their critical literacy practices. As is common with case study, multiple data sources were used during this study, including interviews, observations, and multiple small group discussions. The study consisted of six white elementary school teachers. The individual had to identify as white and teach literacy in order to be a participant in this study. The findings of the original multiple case study can be found in the dissertation entitled *A Multiple Case Study of Whiteness and Critical Literacy Practices Among White Elementary Teachers in Urban Public Schools* [1]. However, for this piece, I would like to focus on one participant, third-grade teacher, Miss Burke.

Miss Burke was observed six times during the multiple case study. Each observation lasted for 30 min and occurred while the teacher was providing literacy instruction. During each of the observations, I sat at a desk or table in the participant's classrooms. I recorded all utterances made by the teacher throughout the thirty-minute observation using my laptop. As is common with observation in a qualitative study, I also noted the teaching environment. My role during the observations was that of participant observer. The students (in the elementary classroom) were not aware of the purpose of the study, but the participating teacher was.

For the original case study, the utterances that were made by the teacher were coded using Freebody and Luke's [2] four resources model, which was one of the conceptual frameworks that guided the study. The categories within the four resources model include code breaking, text participant, text user, and text analyst. The first process, code breaking, occurs when students learn the relationship between and across spoken sounds and writing symbols. The second process occurs when the students encounter texts as text participants, which involves them developing the intellectual resources to engage in the meaningful understanding of the text discourse in and of itself. The third process includes the social aspect of reading and it involves the student recognizing their role as a text user [2]. We learn our position as reader and our instinct of what and how to use a text through social interactions around literacy. When children are quite young, this process happens when parents and children discuss a character's motivation in choice making, or disappointment in the ending of a story. In the classroom, this process happens with teacher-student discussion. During such discussion, the teacher sometimes takes for granted that the students have comprehended the text; thus, the teacher asks the students to make inferences from the text and support their inferences with evidence from the text. Through extensive modeling and conversational interaction between students and texts, this process then becomes one that students take on as their own, while independently reading or conversing about text that they have read. The fourth process that Freebody and Luke [2] include as one of the four processes a reader should employ when encountering text includes students learning their role as a text analyst. This process calls for the reader to pay close attention to the language and idea systems that are used within a particular text. A text analyst understands that people with particular orientations and dispositions to the information write all texts, although the writer may attempt to be factual or neutral in their presentation of text [2].

For each observation, I tallied the number of utterances for each process: code breaking, text participant, text user, and text analyst. Table 1 notes the data from Miss Burke's classroom observations.

Generally speaking, Miss Burke almost never provided opportunities for her students to be text users or analysts.

Table 1. Miss Burke’s Four Resources Examples.

| | Code Breaking | Text Participant | Text User | Text Analyst |
|----------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Number of Utterances | 10 | 29 | 0 | 1 |

A second data source for the original multiple case study was individual interviews. Each participant, including Miss Burke, took part in two semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in person in the participants’ classroom or in a classroom that was not currently being occupied with staff or students. Both of the interviews were semi-structured, recorded, and transcribed. Each interview addressed two themes: Whiteness and critical literacy. Open-ended questions were used in order to allow for guided conversations rather than structured queries [3]. Furthermore, although I was pursuing a consistent line of inquiry, the line of questioning for each case study interview was fluid rather than rigid [4].

During the initial and final interview, the participants were asked to identify their white racial identity stage using an abbreviated model of Hardiman’s model of White Identity Development (WID) [5]. The document included the names of each stage, with a few defining characteristics from the stage. Participants were also asked to provide examples that justify their placement in this particular stage.

Last, small group discussions comprised a third data source for the original multiple case study. Small group discussions were held in a participant’s portable classroom that was on the elementary school site. One small group discussion meeting happened each week for the duration of one month. Before the initial meeting, the participants were provided with the book *Racism Explained to My Daughter* by Tahar Ben Jelloun [6] and then asked to read the text by the first meeting date. This book was chosen because of its readability. While racism and whiteness can be difficult topics to discuss; this text explains both matters in an easy to understand manner while addressing their complexity. This text was used to drive conversation during the first three meeting times. During our meeting time, open-ended questions were asked in regard to race, racism, and whiteness.

I asked the participants if they would be interested in reading a piece about critical literacy and young Black males during the third small group discussion, recognizing that a majority of our discussion time had focused on whiteness in elementary schools and wanting to have an opportunity for the participants to learn about and discuss critical literacy. The decision to choose this article was based on previous discussions regarding the increase of African American students attending the school, as well as an indication during the initial interviews that most of the participants were not familiar with critical literacy or how to implement the practices in their classroom. The suggestion of reading the article was well received by the participants and they agreed to read “*I Hate This Stupid Book!*” *Black Males and Critical Literacy* by Summer Wood and Robin Jocius [7]. During our fourth and final small group discussion, open-ended questions were asked in regards to understanding critical literacy practices, as well as race, racism, and whiteness.

As the small group discussions allowed the participants a chance to collectively respond to the material that we were reading, as well as hear how their colleagues reacted to and were impacted by the texts, the small group discussions served as an informal means of data triangulation. As we engaged with the ideas of racism, whiteness, and critical literacy, or *forbidden conversations*, as Lawrence [8] suggests, it was sometimes challenging to facilitate intergroup dialogue in a manner that encouraged new, or perhaps more advanced ideologies. I had to pay close attention to maintaining the participants’ trust and willingness to speak, because my role was to facilitate conversation. While the conversations during our, hour-long small group discussions were robust, and provided a great deal of data to support the participants’ WID, it should be mentioned that the data from small group discussions did not support the notion that the participants’ white racial identities had changed or further developed

from the first small group discussion to the last. This supports the work of Terry [9] and Clark [10], who both addressed the complexity of discussing whiteness, particularly in a homogenous group of white participants and further strengthened the argument that consciousness change and related behavioral change take time.

The data from the small group discussions indicate that Miss Burke is transitioning to the Acceptance Stage of Hardiman's WID model [5]. There was evidence that Miss Burke was transitioning to Acceptance, because her comments often indicated that she held an ideology regarding other racial groups and it was also evident that Miss Burke believes there are informal and formal rules of institutions, such as schools, which permit some behavior and prohibit others. Table 2 is an illustration of the coded comments that were made by Miss Burke during the small group discussions and illustrates that most of her comments were evidence of an individual in the Acceptance Stage of WID.

Table 2. Miss Burke—Coded Utterances—White Identity Development Stage.

| | Naïveté | Acceptance | Resistance | Redefinition | Internalization |
|----------------------|---------|------------|------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Number of Utterances | 0 | 15 | 4 | 0 | 0 |

3. Reflection of the Researcher

As mentioned earlier, the focus of the research while completing observations in Miss Burke's classroom was to take note of the literacy instruction that was occurring. In particular, special attention was given to record the dialogue and teachings of the teacher in order to determine whether critical literacy was cultivated within the literacy setting and, if it was, the extent of which it was used. The teachers were aware of the data being collected; however, the students were not.

After further analysis of the data, from a critical literacy perspective, I could not help but wonder about the students who were a part of Miss Burke's literacy instruction. What does the research say about students who are members of this teaching environment? Here is what I know about Miss Burke: she is a beginning teacher, she works in a Title 1 school, she is transitioning from the Naïveté to the Acceptance Stage of WID, and she relies on code breaking and text participant types of questioning when teaching literacy. Knowing these facts, what do "we know" about the future of the students in Miss Burke's third grade class? In particular, what does research say about the one little boy who was often assigned to sit at his own table facing the back wall of the classroom? While I do not know much about him, I can still picture his face, and even more vivid is the heartache I felt to watch him live in his own space observation after observation. Not being a member of the whole group conversations and from my perspective, being neglected by his teacher and peers, I cannot help but wonder about the damage that was done on a daily basis to this child. It was then that I decided that his voice did not deserve to be silenced any longer. I have chosen to give this student both an identity and a voice, and it is through him that I hope to encourage teachers to consider the impact of their teaching, even if for just one year of the student's academic career. So, let us switch lenses. Meet a third grader in Miss Burke's class. His name is Isa.

3.1. Isa's Third Grade Experience: Historical Context of Education and Oppression Research

Isa's plight in the American education system is not new or foreign to Students of Color and, in particular, young Black males. As Clark [11] points out, schools are systematically designed to privilege some, and Ladson Billings [12] focuses this statement with the acknowledgment that African Americans in the South were not provided universal secondary schooling until 1968. Ladson Billings [12] states, "Why, then, would we not expect there to be an achievement gap?" (p. 5).

The achievement gap is a commonly used term in the educational arena that refers to a gap in academic achievement between minoritized students and their majoritized white counterparts. Ladson Billings [12] urges her readers to consider the "wisdom of focusing on the achievement gap as a way of explaining and understanding the persistent inequality that exists (and has always existed) in our

nation's schools" (p. 4), while the achievement gap can be described in some research as being the result of stereotype threat, cultural mismatch, nature of curriculum, and/or pedagogical practices. In other words, in order to improve the achievement gap, educators and researchers need to focus on more than the current situation of schools and reflect upon the history of including and not including People of Color in our educational system.

Historically, in the United States, People of Color have been given far less opportunity to participate in the educational system. While historians note that inequalities in education have surrounded race, class, and gender, it is race where inequities continue to persist [12]. The educational history of African Americans, American Indians, and Latinos in the United States is not one to be proud of. Generally speaking, People of Color have been denied education and later provided limited education in an effort to maintain a servant class and to promote assimilation. According to Lawrence [8], just over 60 years ago schools were segregated by law in Washington, D.C., "In 1967, a federal court found that while the District had desegregated schools, it had maintained segregated classrooms within its schools through a system of tracking students that perpetuated the inequalities of the old *de jure* system" (p. 1353).

3.2. *Isa's Third Grade Experience: Current Context of Education and Oppression Research*

Unfortunately, some would argue that the oppression that is placed on Students of Color in the United States' educational system has not changed, but rather has become slightly more covert. Lawrence [8] describes today's segregation as *de facto* segregation. "De facto segregation does not constitute cognizable constitutional injury because it is caused not by actions traceable to the state, but by the private acts of individuals who 'choose' to live in a segregated neighborhood or send their children to a segregated school" (p. 1353). In today's society, the choice to send children to private schools stems from the fear that has been created around numerous policy reforms. Sorting and classifying schools and students based on standardized assessments and the rhetoric around teacher and school accountability are largely a result of policies and programs, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) [13], Race to the Top (RTTT) [14], and other local accountability measures. When parents and caregivers hear the reports that these accountability measures produce, a lack of trust in our public-system is fueled. It is then that parents with resources begin to research alternatives to their neighborhood schools. However, as Lawrence [8] points out, not all parents have the access and resources to flee and perhaps more significant is his point that no one is talking about the students who are left behind. "No one measures the enormous divestment in social and political capital that has accompanied white flight" [8] (p. 1359). Lawrence [8] states that, when no one is discussing the students who are left behind, they are also not addressing the subjects of race, racism, and segregation, which are the underpinnings of white flight, further complicating the situation.

When schools are segregated by race, whether implemented by law, as in our nation's past, or by choice, as is indicated by *de facto* segregation, as mentioned above, the economics of education indicate the permanence of "funding disparities that currently exist between schools serving white students and those serving students of color" [12] (p. 6). Among the many districts that Kozol [15] reports, the findings from New York City public school expenditures indicate that the per pupil spending for a student population that is 72% Black and Latino is \$11,627, while a suburb that is 91% white spends \$22,311 per student population (p. 272). Ladson Billings [12] refers to these disparities as *the educational debt*, which she juxtaposes oppositionally to *the achievement gap* to reveal that educational inequities do not derive from student performance (this is a symptom), but inadequate resource allocation.

3.3. *White Teachers and Students of Color*

As far as student and teacher demographics, Isa's classroom is the norm. In a classroom that is filled with a diverse student population, the female third-grade teacher, Miss Burke is white. According to the most current data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 80% of public elementary and secondary teachers identify as white [16]. While this difference in race is not problematic in and of itself, there is a growing body of research that supports the idea that white

teachers benefit from additional training that is related to WID, white cultural norms, under which many elementary schools function, or whiteness, which is oppressive to Students of Color, such as Isa.

When white teachers do not participate in the type of professional development that is mentioned above, there can sometimes be a cultural mismatch [17] between the student and teacher. In particular, as noted by Townsend [18], white teachers may lack cultural understanding, especially around elements of the more active and physical style of communication that characterizes African American adolescents. White teachers, such as Miss Burke, who represent teachers in the Acceptance Stage of WID [5] have learned a systematic ideology of race and in regard to racial issues and interactions, the individuals in this stage learn what shared opinions and beliefs are acceptable and unacceptable. This situation is representative of what Monroe [17] refers to as the discipline gap as Isa and Miss Burke do not share the same cultural framework, and because Miss Burke displays characteristics of someone in the beginning development of her own white identity. "Situating the discipline gap within the intersection of the teachers' and students' cultural norms may shed light to the persistence and prevalence of the problem [overrepresentation of Black students referred for behavior problems" [15] (p. 320).

While it is not known whether Isa was sent out of the classroom or if he was referred to the administration team for disciplinary reasons, Isa was removed from his classmates, facing the back wall of the classroom, not engaged in the course content, and also not included in the conversations by either his peers or his teacher in all of the six classroom observations completed for this study. This practice is exclusionary and problematic. Miss Burke has made a conscious effort to remove him from learning opportunities while the student is still present in the learning community. Noguera [19] explains this type of punishment, "Typically, schools rely on some form of exclusion or ostracism to control the behavior of students. Chastising a child who has misbehaved or broken a rule with a reprimand, or placing a child in the back of the room or out in the hallway for minor offenses, are common disciplinary practices" (p. 342).

Noguera [19] further discusses the implications of the aforementioned disciplinary measures by explaining that "when students realize they are not going to 'receive' rewards of education, they have little incentive to comply with the rules" (p. 343). "Students understand that if a teacher has low expectations of them or expects them to complete minimum amounts of work that they do not expect much of them" [19] (p. 347). While we cannot predict Isa's future, research indicates that students, in his case, may continue to meet his teacher's minimal expectations [19] or, even worse, he may self-select out of the education system at some point [11].

4. Findings: Isa's Likely Educational Future in the Context of Historical and Current Education and Oppression Research

I want to reiterate the idea that we cannot precisely predict Isa's educational success or failure; however, we can use what we know about his teacher as well as historical and current research in educational policy to understand how the choices that are made by Isa's third grade teacher are impacting his educational future.

One characteristic of white individuals in the passive Acceptance Stage of WID is excluding, avoiding, or ignoring People of Color, as they are different or strange or not quite right. This trait is evident by the manner in which Miss Burke removed Isa from the classroom community and did not include him during the whole group instruction. By doing this, Miss Burke is signaling to Isa that he does not belong in the classroom and her only choice is to "remove" him from the learning environment. We must remind ourselves that this is a third-grade student while some may argue that it is Isa's choice to stay engaged with the material and the content from a different location in the room. Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence that indicates this system of discipline is, in fact, the first step in what could be a devastating outcome for this young child.

4.1. Historical Context of Power and Control in Schools

As early as 1816, Thomas Jefferson advocated for the education of the American population and “simultaneously decried the notion that Blacks were capable of education” [12] (p. 6), and George Washington, who was conflicted about slavery, did not consider educating the enslaved children on his own Mount Vernon Plantation. A couple of themes become quite noticeable when we deconstruct ideas, such as this from our United States’ history, as well as who has had access to education, as well as the purpose of education.

The first theme, as mentioned earlier in this article, is that schools have been systematically designed to privilege some [11]. At various times throughout our nation’s history, individuals have been included or unincluded from education based on race, class, gender, and/or socioeconomic status.

The second theme is when changes or considerations were made to systems and laws to include oppressed groups into the educational system; they were usually met with a set of provisions or limitations. In other words, the inclusion of the oppressed into the educational platform was to promote a particular way of thinking. For example, American Indians were first provided education in the form of mission schools to further the cause of the church, and later boarding schools were developed to promote and encourage assimilation [12]. Simply stated, access to education was a way for the dominant culture to maintain social control.

4.2. Current Context of Power and Control in Schools

Currently, in the United States, public education is afforded to all, but, as I have previously pointed out, it is at a different cost to different groups of people, particularly those dependent on race and socioeconomic status. However, one thing that remains the same in education leadership of the past and present is the fixation with behavior management and control [19]. In fact, Noguera [19] has pointed out that order and control become the most important elements in education and they override everything else when teachers are fearful of or lack control of their students.

4.2.1. Zero Tolerance Policies

This fear of lack of control has led to a different way of omitting students from the public education system—zero tolerance policies. According to the United States (U.S.) Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics [16] zero tolerance policies mandate “predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses” (p. 117). Hirschfield [20] explain evidence of sociopolitical influences in the hardening of school discipline, when he refers to the increase in school crime and juvenile violence that occurred as early as the late 1980s. The reaction of the general public, which was highly influenced by media, was that of ‘moral panic’ [21], which in turn led to “quick-fix, punitive solutions (e.g., zero tolerance, metal detectors) that are disproportionate to actual threats of violence” [20] (p. 85). With policies, such as zero-tolerance, situational circumstances are often overlooked, because particular acts are met with predetermined consequences. In the past, some teachers may have felt comfortable handling inappropriate behavior or actions within their own classroom, but with zero tolerance policies, the idea of case by case discipline becomes unwelcome or “against the rules”, and the teachers feel as if they need to remove students from the classroom. This calls for school administration teams to determine the consequences for the misbehaving students based on the zero tolerance policies that are in place that have been implemented in the school or even the district. Removing the discretion of how to handle class room management problems on a case-by-case basis and removing the power from teachers and school authorities to disciplinary codes and zero tolerance policies have unfortunately increased suspensions and expulsions [20]. In other words, the students are being denied access to a public education.

4.2.2. School Accountability Movement

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, the United States is currently in the midst of a standardized testing and accountability movement. Formulas are applied to individuals, schools, districts, and even states to report who is or is not achieving using standardized assessment and attendance data. Fenning and Rose [22] “assert that the requirement for schools to meet federally mandated requirements for academic achievement has heightened the pressure for administrators to remove children who do not fit into the norms of the general population” (p. 537). Hirschfield [20] situates the economic debt within the school accountability narrative by explaining that the neo-liberal push for school accountability encourages school authority of financially strapped schools to exclude the low-achievers and truants in an effort to boost standardized test scores and attendance. This is another way for individuals in power to decide who is and is not welcome in the education system.

4.3. What Does This Mean for Isa?

Isa was in third grade at the time the data were gathered for this study. While he was still a part of the learning environment in the classroom, he was physically removed from his peers and was not directly included in whole or small group instruction. As an elementary classroom teacher for ten years, I understand that sometimes this strategy works. Some students need time to reflect, regroup, refocus, or even cool down in a space that is somewhat removed from the whole group. However, what becomes problematic is, during six classroom observations that happened over the course of two months, every time that I visited Miss Burke’s classroom, Isa was at his own table in the back of the room. During my observation time, it was obvious that Isa was not benefiting from academic instruction, but what was and is more bothersome to me is the social emotional damage that is being caused from this isolating behavior. *What is Isa starting to believe about whether he belongs in school?* As Noguera [19] highlights, “at a relatively young age students may have so many negative experiences in school that they soon begin to recognize that education is not working for them and will not provide them with access to desirable rewards” (p. 343).

The notion that as young children begin to “internalize the labels that have been affixed to them, and as they begin to realize that the trajectory of their education has placed them on is leading to nowhere, many simply lose the incentive to adhere to school norms” is even more indicative of Isa’s future [19] (p. 343). In Isa’s case, as a young Black male, not adhering to these norms might have significant consequences. Miss Burke is choosing to keep Isa in the classroom, but, as Isa gets older, he may recognize that school is not a place that is working to his advantage. “Most often it is the students who understand that school is not working for them, and who know that education will not lead to admission to college or access to a promising career, who typically cause the most trouble and disturbance in school” [19] (p. 345). It appears that Isa’s actions are not yet significant enough for him to be placed out the classroom, suspended, or expelled, but research indicates that African Americans are referred to the office for less serious and more subjective reasons [23]; so, given the intended and unintended messages that have been shared with Isa regarding access to education and the research that is related to how this impacts students self-efficacy, motivation, and behavior, one could conclude that a less serious infraction of school rules in the future could lead Isa to suffer the consequences of a zero tolerance policy. Furthermore, zero tolerance policies typically permit little consideration of the mitigating circumstances [20]. Usually, mitigating circumstances would refer to the situation where a behavior infraction has occurred, but, in Isa’s case, I would argue that the mitigating circumstances are the intended and unintended learning that has taken place in Isa’s educational journey regarding his access to education. If and when Isa’s behavior makes a teacher feel as if they need to rely on policies and procedures to fix a situation, who is going to examine the mitigating circumstances of his educational journey?

In Isa’s case, it is especially important to consider how current zero tolerance policies and accountability measures affect young Black males. Over 30 years of research supports the notion that there is an over-representation of African American youth who are being suspended and expelled

from school, as Fenning and Rose [22] point out. While some have tried to link this finding to the socioeconomic status of these students, Skiba et al. [23] have concluded that these practices are, in fact, based on bias and not the socioeconomic status of the student. In fact, they state, “racial disproportionality in school discipline, originating at the classroom level, *is* an indicator of systemic racial discrimination [23] (p. 30).

Those who tend to receive the most punitive discipline consequences in our educational system are generally Students of Color [22]. When students do not follow the hidden curriculum, or white cultural norms that are silently favored in classroom communities, teachers, especially white teachers, often become fearful of losing control. This fear then leads to the removal of “bad” students from the classroom, but, as Noguera [19] points out, removing bad students does not work, and new troublemakers will take their place. Instead, if we consider that young Black students are getting removed from classrooms, and that these decisions to remove them are, in fact, bias or discriminatory in nature, then it becomes easier to understand what Lawrence [8] refers to as a fear of Blackness. If only we could “recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions . . . If we could talk about our fears of Blackness we might fight ways to confront and alleviate them” [8] (p. 1371). Generally speaking, instead of continuing to promote a culture that rejects racism as “immoral and unproductive”, where “hidden or unconscious prejudice has become the more prevalent form of racism” [8] (p. 1371), perhaps change would happen in our educational system that would allow for Students of Color to stay in schools and not be forced into the school to prison pipeline.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (n.d.) [24], the school to prison pipeline is defined as “the policies and practices that push our nation’s schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems” (para. 1). As long as schools continue to function as institutions to maintain social control, they are continuing to operate as “breeding grounds for prisons” [11] (p. 51) and, as Noguera [19] points out, school punishment has essentially become the same as social punishment. Hirschfield [20] further supports these ideas by discussing how problems that have commonly occurred in schools, over time, have become criminalized. In fact, “schools often maintain or intensify their punitive efforts long after public panics over school violence subside” [20] (p. 85).

The statistics related to Black males and the school to prison pipeline are particularly significant to our student Isa. Here are just a couple from Clark [11]: Black males are 8% of public school students nationwide, but they constitute 37% of suspensions and approximately 800,000 Black men are in prison, while 500,000 are in college (p. 50). The research that was shared by Skiba et al. [23] report that African American students are more frequently subject to disciplinary actions in school settings than white students, and often for far less severe infractions than white students. Wald and Losen [25] add that African American students frequently receive more severe forms of punishment for the same infractions that are committed by white students. “The increase in level of severity of school punishment has thus disproportionately affected those who are being punished in the system most often—namely, Students of Color” [26] (p. 574). Simply stated, for Isa, it is going to be difficult to avoid the structures and systems that have been designed to take him from the schoolyard to the jailhouse [26]).

5. Recommendations: What Do Teachers Need to Know about Isa’s Educational Future?

But what if the teachers in Isa’s future became aware of the school to prison pipeline, began to problematize zero tolerance policies in their school and district, or even began to reflect on their own classroom experiences and what they believe about who deserves public education? What if Miss Burke began to wonder how her attitude and actions convey messages, overtly and covertly, to Isa and his belonging in school? What if Miss Burke had the opportunity to develop her white identity in a more complex fashion before becoming an elementary school teacher? All of these questions are hypothetical, as is the prediction of Isa being a part of the school to prison pipeline, but, at the same time, none of the questions that were asked in this paragraph seem difficult to answer.

5.1. Awareness of Self

At some point in their college journey, the pre-service teachers need to become aware of their race and how it matches or does not match with their prospective students. There needs to be a realization that the population of our nation's public schools is changing [12] and, in an effort to become culturally synchronized [27], pre-service and service teachers need to continue to develop their identity of self throughout their career as a teacher. Identity is not constructed overnight, whether it is cultural, racial, gender, socioeconomic, or any other part of our identity; it has been constructed over a duration of time. Subsequently, it makes sense, that it also takes time to question the norms that have been created with these identities. I recognize that this is an extremely difficult concept for some to consider, but when being presented with the possible outcome and reality for many students currently enrolled in Pre-K–12 classrooms throughout the United States, how can we not consider alternatives? Lawrence [8] also acknowledges the perplexity of the development of self in relation to racial identity and justice:

I believe that we are all racists, that we share a common history and culture where racism has played and still plays a central role . . . None of us is exempt from the wages of America's racism. We also share a belief and commitment to racial equality, and for the most part we are unaware of our racism. We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions. As our culture has rejected racism as immoral and unproductive, hidden or unconscious prejudice has become the more prevalent form of racism. (p. 1371)

Along with the development of self, teachers, and pre-service teachers, in particular, need continued education related to the hidden curriculum and social norms that are often associated with schools. In particular, teachers need to unpack their belief systems that are related to behavior and punishment of their future students. Often pre-service teachers take one course, entitled "classroom management" throughout their educational career and, unfortunately, all too often the focus of these courses is how to fit into white cultural norms, instead of understanding the purposes of our education and schools that have been to sort children based on educational accomplishments and place them on educational and career trajectories, socialize children, and ultimately maintain order and control [19]. It is with this understanding that future teachers can begin to develop their own philosophy that is related to classroom management and who belongs in school. Furthermore, they can begin to develop an understanding of how their behavioral expectations, as well as disciplinary responses, may impact the lives of their current and future students [17,28,29]. In particular, the connection to Isa, "because low-income African American students seldom receive instruction from teachers who share their cultural framework, culturally based misunderstandings based on race, ethnicity and social class may serve as a powerful reason to present trends in the discipline gap" (p. 32). These ideas are also related to Monroe's [17] promotion of immersion experiences that challenge cultural norms. Teachers begin to reflect on their own ways of knowing and how those may or may not be shared by different cultures through these experiences.

I argue that only through purposeful self-reflection and deliberate *forbidden conversations* [8] can we even begin to help teachers to develop their awareness of self and the intentional or unintentional consequences that this identity has in their classroom environment, expectations of students, and potential influence in the lives of their students.

5.2. Awareness of Pedagogy and Policy

Isa's teachers' use of culturally relevant pedagogy could greatly influence his educational journey. As Monroe [17] explains, "composite studies of culturally responsive teachers reveal that such practitioners function as determined, caring individuals whose disciplinary styles parallel approaches found in students' home environments" (p. 322). Although there are only a few empirical studies reported in this area, "culturally responsive disciplinary practices appear to promote better student outcomes by addressing behavioral concerns in the classroom rather than directing students to

administrators where they are likely to be subject to outcomes such as suspension” is also significant (p. 323). Fenning and Rose [22] support the ideas of culturally relevant pedagogy, by emphasizing that “having discussions about the cultural meanings of behavior would be critical in preventing and responding to common sources of discipline referrals that ultimately lead to the removal of Students of Color from the school setting” (p. 553). Skiba et al. [23] state it simply, “Teacher training in appropriate and culturally competent methods of classroom management is likely then to be the most pressing need in addressing racial disparities in school discipline” (p. 32).

Noguera [19] also speaks to the importance of student engagement as a way to promote student self-efficacy and belief that they belong in school, which in turn results in fewer students having hostile or antagonistic relationships with the adults that they work with in school. Specifically, while studying schools through perceptions and experiences of students (low, average, and high achieving), the preliminary findings indicated that most of the students felt that their teachers had low expectations of them and allowed them to complete minimal work. However, in support of high expectations, two of the schools that were studied, which also had the lowest suspension rates, “there was considerable evidence that students were being challenged by rigorous courses and supported by caring teachers” [19] (p. 341).

The literacy instruction that Isa was facing in third grade was consistent with the lack of rigor and low expectations. The data from the study showed that his teacher, Miss Burke, mostly used code breaking and text participant types of instruction, which leave little room for engaging or rigorous conversations that are related to literacy. In relation to pedagogy, teachers, such as Miss Burke, may (or may not) recognize that moving to using texts to teach students how to be text users and text participants requires students to speak to each other, move around, ask questions, and perhaps even question authority. These notions do not jive with a system that values order and control over participation, rigor, and possibly even enjoyment. For this reason, teacher educators need to provide opportunities for pre-service and service teachers to increase academic engagement and intellectually challenge students at school, while, at the same time, recognizing and feeling comfortable with a shift in the dynamic of “power” within the classroom.

Besides being educated about culturally relevant pedagogy and the best practices that keep students engaged and part of the classroom community, pre-service and service teachers also need to stay current with educational policy. Historically, ignorant masses that were xenophobic and virulently racist did not merely impose educational debt [12]. Sometimes, this is still the case today. In my work with teachers, in particular, white teachers, they often do not know what they do not know (myself included). While not an excuse for racist or oppressive teaching, I see this as an opportunity for teachers to learn more about becoming a solution to the school-to-prison pipeline, rather than contributing to it.

I see a parallel to how our pre-K–12 students are taught and how pre-service teachers and service teachers are offered education and professional development. Similar to the drill and kill, systematic, low level instruction our youth endure, pre-service teachers are often required to attend professional development trainings that are based on a product or program. There is an effort to provide a material or thing to “fix” learning instead of investment in the pre-K student, pre-service teacher, or teacher themselves. Noguera [19] supports this idea, when he discusses that “often it is the needs of students and the inability of schools to meet those needs that causes them to be disciplined” (p. 342). Furthermore, he states:

Too often, schools react to the behavior of such children while failing to respond to their unmet needs or the factors responsible for their problematic behavior. In so doing, they contribute to the marginalization of such students, often pushing them out of school altogether, while ignoring the issues that actually cause the problematic behavior. Schools also punish the neediest children because there is a fixation with behavior management and social control that outweighs and overrides all other priorities and goals. (p. 342)

In accord with this notion, teachers who strive to do things differently, for example, teach through a constructivist lens, which includes culturally relevant pedagogies and community-based instructional

techniques [30], are often undervalued and marginalized [17]. In other words, when the principal cannot dictate the behavior of the teacher and understand the teacher's social or cultural capital, they are oppressed and forced to conform.

What if teachers like Miss Burke, and the other teachers that were a part of this study for that matter, were allowed to participate in professional development sessions that analyzed suspension and expulsion data from their school, the district, and the state? Taking it a step further, Fenning and Rose [22] argue for the development of a diverse discipline team in schools. One that is composed of "individuals from cultures and ethnicities that represent the diversity of students found in the school" (p. 551). Creating a space for teachers and administrators to engage in the aforementioned professional development should also afford particular school sites to participate in or refute top-down zero policy policies. As Noguera [19] states:

Perhaps what is needed even more than a revival of ideals is a recruitment of educators who will question the tendency to punish through exclusion and humiliation, and who see themselves as advocates of children and not as wardens and prison guards. Without such personnel, the drive to punish will undoubtedly be difficult to reverse and abate. (p. 350)

6. Conclusions

This distant and immediate history of oppression in the United States seems obvious and uncontested to me, especially given the current political climate, yet there is resistance to combat the policies, procedures, and beliefs that often cause this oppression. The suggestions shared above, as an effort to improve the likelihood that more Black and brown children will graduate from high school, are not revolutionary. Ultimately, I am suggesting that the investment and development in the teacher, their racial identity, pedagogical practices, and problematic punitive discipline practices will lead to more Students of Color having an opportunity to attend school and enjoy the experience while they do.

They are ideas that have been accumulated from the current body of research and shared by others that are committed to social justice in schools. What I hope is somewhat different though is this time when reading these suggestions, we think of Isa. Because he is counting on us.

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