Equity and Empathy: Toward Racial and Educational Achievement in the Obama Era

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Reflecting on the 2008 election, Prudence Carter challenges the popular notion that President Obama's victory is symbolic of a postracial society in the United States. Citing statistics about the opportunity gap that still exists in our nation's schools—as well as the recent Supreme Court cases that served to halt racial desegregation—Carter argues that we must continue to push for truly integrated schools, where black and Latino students are provided with the resources, high standards, and care to meet their full potential. Although she sees President Obama's victory as a symbol of national potential, Carter calls on all of us to work toward ending the "empathy gap" that exists both in and out of our nation's schools.

On January 20, 2009, along with nearly 2 million other world citizens, I stood outside in frigid, wintry weather for hours on the National Mall in Washington, DC, to witness an event my sharecropper grandparents might have construed as impossible in their lifetimes (one I thought impossible in my own lifetime): the inauguration of President Barack Obama, the first president of African descent in U.S. history. Undoubtedly, historians will emphasize this historical moment for its first-ness, but I also want to honor President Obama for his two-ness, for his biracial heritage and for his ability to straddle what the 1968 "Kerner Report" referred to as two separate and unequal nations— black and white America (see National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders Report, 1968; also Hacker, 1992). Symbolically, an Obama presidency is loaded with profound meaning in the United States, a nation ravaged by the inhumanity of racism and racial discrimination. I delight in the possibility of the social and psychological benefits that President Obama's representation of excellence and leadership might have on black and brown schoolchildren, as well as their nonblack and nonbrown peers, as they become immersed in daily media images and messages about President Obama and his work.[1]

At the same time, I brace myself for the disappointment that will come when many Americans, even well-intentioned ones, promote the idea that we have become a color-blind and racially healed society. Because of the incredible multiracial coalition constructed by President Obama and his advisers, the media and pundits declare that ours has become a "postracial" society. The evidence asserts, however, that this is not the case. Structural racism, prejudice, discrimination, and basic cross-racial and cross-cultural intolerance persist in our society. As I am sure President Obama is aware, one irony of a black man winning the presidential election is that now many (white) Americans will believe that the playing field has been leveled completely and that this win, coupled with social and political outcomes that emerged in the 1960s (affirmative action policies, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 National Voting Rights Act), has more than compensated for the residual economic effects of slavery and colonization on African, Hispanic, and Native Americans.

But, have we sufficiently rectified the economic and educational disparities that are so highly correlated with skin color and ethnicity in our society to say that race no longer matters? I think not. By all indicators, we still have a long way to go before we can claim a postracial nation. While we know that the issue of inequality is multifold in its origin, I believe that an Obama administration, in conjunction with the state and national legislative branches, must develop educational policies that demonstrate a mindfulness of the massive educational "debt," to borrow from Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006), that people of color inherited from systems of colonization, genocide, and slavery. Certainly, that debt is not repaid because America has elected its first black president. The "opportunity gap" that exists across racial and correlating class lines is more expansive than that—much, much wider. That debt compounds over the decades as inequality continues to rise, enabling the rich to get richer and the poor to become poorer, in both relative and absolute terms.

This legacy of debt is reflected in both material and educational terms. The college diploma is in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries what the high school diploma became in the mid-twentieth century. In an increasingly technocratic and service-oriented economy, our nation requires graduates with specialized skills—especially ones that will shift the country toward the green economy promoted by the Obama team during the campaign. Such an economy will require a knowledge base of strong math, science, and literacy skills. If the test scores and college-going rates of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are any indication, then we can safely assume that a racial issue persists in American education.

Have We Overcome? Race, Inequality, and Educational Outcomes

Like me, President Obama and many in his administration (graduates of the most illustrious institutions such as Columbia, Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, and Yale) have benefited from interracial high school and collegiate expe-

riences. Our expensive and elite degrees have provided us with significant social and cultural capital, powerful and well-connected social networks, and a wealth of cultural insight and knowledge about how America's influential social, academic, economic, and political institutions operate. On average, though, fewer than 10 percent of undergraduates on selective college and university campuses are black, Latino, and Native American, which means very few youth overall will ever have the educational and social opportunities enjoyed by President Obama (see Fry, 2004; "The State of Black Student," 2009; *U.S. News & World Report,* 2005).

Quite the contrary, blacks and Latinos—who, according to demographic forecasts, will comprise a majority-minority by the middle of the twenty-first century—may not have the skills to lead this country if our schools do not adequately prepare them for higher educational attainment. Many black and brown children do not attend high schools that adequately prepare them for further educational opportunities. The current failure of past administrations to invest equitably in education has consequences. Today, the school dropout rate for Latinos is more than double the national average. One in five African American students will fail a grade in elementary or secondary school, while the average for students overall is one in ten. Only a third or less of African American, Latino, and Native American students are enrolled in college preparatory classes, compared to half or more of Asian and white students. The average white thirteen-year-old reads at a higher level and fares better in math than the average black or Latino seventeen-year-old (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007).

Further, far too many of our African American and Latino youth are headed to the University of the Penitentiary as the school-to-prison pipeline continues to expand. African American youth constitute 45 percent of juvenile arrests, although they comprise only 16 percent of the overall youth population (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2006). Their criminalization begins early in school: K–12 black students are twice as likely as their white peers to be suspended and three times as likely to be expelled from school (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2006). This crisis is particularly acute among males.[2]

It is clear that the levels of elementary and secondary school preparation in many urban districts must improve significantly before the number of African American, Latino, and Native American applicants to college increases. Many of our colleges and universities find themselves competing heavily over the limited "supply" of college-ready black and Latino high school graduates; this problem is compounded by the fact that many students who are accepted do not have the finances to attend. Now, an economic downturn and diminishing higher education budgets threaten college affordability even more. And although President Obama has committed himself to the development of a national college service program with greater financial aid opportunities, resources are finite.

So now our youth will comprehend that an African American person can rise—and has risen—to the presidency of the United States. At the same time, they will continue to notice that their own channels to upward mobility via academic ladders are closed off. A disproportionate share of our nation's urban schools continues to lag behind their wealthier suburban counterparts in academic excellence. More than five decades after the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, U.S. schools still face the daunting task of equalizing educational opportunity to enhance the life chances of racial and ethnic minority students.

School Segregation and the Supreme Court in a Society Not Past Race

In study after study, social scientists have shown that desegregation potentially ameliorates the conditions of poverty and reduces the inequality gap (Braddock, Crain, McPartland, & Dawkins, 1986; Crain, 1970). In theory, integrated schools are also conduits to the promotion of healthier social relations across racial lines. Yet many of our nation's African American, Latino, and Native American students remain segregated from their Asian and white peers— who often hail from significantly more affluent families and, as a result, gain access to more wealthy schools. These school demographics constitute a complete regression of the efforts made by our nation in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Orfield, 2009). Thus, the legacies of the historic struggles of civil rights hero(ine)s are endangered.

For this reason, many scholars and researchers—alongside activist educators, parents, and community members—continue to struggle to ensure that the battles fought by Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, and others to equalize educational opportunity across races have not been in vain. The road ahead is pothole-ridden, however. Case by case, the courts have dismantled one of the main redistributive and justice-oriented educational policies of the twentieth century. Thus, we must ask: What are the implications of an Obama administration for school desegregation?

School integration is, at least, a beginning step toward the realization of a balanced racial-achievement budget (again borrowing from Ladson-Billings's [2006] metaphor of the "education debt"). However, in the last decade, protests against desegregation have succeeded. Myriad courts' rulings have directly undermined the goal of school integration, affirming the will of white parents instead. This has occurred most recently in Seattle and Louisville, referred to as the "PICS" cases.[3] In 2007 the justices adjudicated another case highlighting the "American dilemma"—a term coined by Gunnar Myrdal (1944) and revived by political scientist Jennifer Hochschild (1984) that signals the contradictions between American democratic ideals, including equality and justice for all, and the reality of the determination of a white, middle-class majority that acts in its own best interest.[4] By a margin of five to four, once again the Supreme Court conceded to white resistance to integrationist practices,

outlawing school assignment plans that districts used to maintain some semblance of racial balance.

In a similar nod to our progress as a postracial society, in the 2003 *Grutter v. Bollinger* decision, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor forecast that in twenty-five years affirmative action in American education should no longer be needed. However, a postracial nation is not one that remains segregated. We now have to ask whether the powerful impact of both accumulated and contemporaneous disadvantages will keep many poor racial and ethnic minorities wedged at the bottom of the U.S. opportunity structure.

Distinguishing Desegregation from Integration

Even as thinkers have offered material rationales for why we must continue to fight for multiracial schooling in the United States, I remain mindful of the warning posited by one of America's early great sociologists, W. E. B. DuBois:

> A mixed school with poor and unsympathetic teachers, with hostile opinion, and no teaching concerning black folk, is bad. A segregated school with ignorant placeholders, inadequate equipment, poor salaries, and wretched housing, is equally bad. Other things being equal, the mixed school is the broader, more natural basis for the education of all youth. It gives wider contacts; it inspires greater self-confidence; and suppresses the inferiority complex. But other things are seldom equal, and in that case, Sympathy, Knowledge, and the Truth, outweigh all that the mixed school can offer (DuBois, 1935, p. 335).

More than a century ago, DuBois pointed out that schools with paltry material resources are bad for the advancement of racial minorities, and, furthermore, even schools with multifold and plentiful material resources are bad if they maintain unhealthy racial and ethnic climates. He maintained that the educational advancement of historically disadvantaged groups—specifically "black folks"—requires the proper mixture of myriad factors. This remains true today. In addition to a cadre of well-trained teachers bolstered by access to ample learning tools and aids, such educational mobility will also require a heightened consciousness among educators to "do diversity" with depth: by increasing their own knowledge base to help vanquish the injurious communicative divides among and between students and teachers who differ by race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status, among other social identities; by working to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn within the school; by maintaining a culture of high expectations for all students; by developing critically conscious and historically accurate pedagogy and curricula; and by preventing new forms of segregation within schools with due vigilance. Regrettably, although some of our nations' schools have achieved *desegregation*, few have ever attained *racial integration*.

In 2007 my research assistants and I conducted a study in two southern and two northeastern high schools, all of which achieved high levels of profi-

ciency and excellence on the mandated report cards required by the No Child Left Behind legislation. For half a year we visited these "good" schools almost daily. Though all the schools were considered multiracial, two were majority-white and two majority-black and/or Latino; the majority-white schools were also wealthier. We found that the academic experiences of black and Latino students in the majority-minority schools differed greatly, on average, from that of their counterparts in the majority-white schools. In both of the majority-white schools, we encountered only one or two African American and Latino students enrolled in the upper-echelon honors and advanced classes. Strikingly, when I asked teachers at the southern majority-white school, South County Prep, if they could locate high-achieving African American students among the more than three hundred enrolled in the school, they could only mention two girls.

Our survey study of 469 students found that the self-esteem of the black students in this particular school was the lowest of all the black students across the four schools. Along with their black peers at the northeastern majority-white school, these students were also least likely to report that they sought friends across different social and cultural lines. Meanwhile, their peers of similar socioeconomic backgrounds at the majority-black schools showed significantly high levels of what I term "cultural flexibility" and higher self-esteem (Carter, in press). Ethnographically, we observed that black students in the affluent white schools were segregated both in terms of academics and extracurricular activities, despite attending "desegregated" schools. That is, their presence in college preparatory courses (known to expand students' knowledge bases in significantly different ways than regular comprehensive high school courses) and their involvement in cultural activities such as band, orchestra, theater, and Model United Nations were much lower than that of their black peers in majority-black schools. In brief, we found that black (and Latino) students in the majority-white schools had little to no engagement in specific educational classes or activities that could potentially broaden their cultural horizons. Their schools' social organization, coupled with a particular cultural climate, conveyed both implicit and explicit messages about different racial and ethnic groups' academic and extracurricular turfs (Carter, 2005; Mickelson & Velasco, 2006; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).

If teachers and principals are not proactive about mitigating racial exclusion in social networks, curriculum, pedagogy, course participation, and extracurricular activities, then the racial baggage of distrust and prejudice that exists outside of the school's walls in families and communities will be brought into the school, manifesting itself in another sort of "opportunity gap." Educators in our nation's multiracial schools often lack the awareness or perhaps are ill-equipped to deal with the social and cultural challenges that arise within their walls. How does one come to love and respect his fellow students if fear and apprehension about his neighbor's social and cultural groups are firmly embedded in the psyche? As a researcher, I have found it distressful to have

to choose where to sit among racially (and ethnically) segregated lunch tables in school cafeterias that I have visited. With whites here, Asian students next to whites, and Latinos not far from the black students who are over there, I have learned the lunchroom's physical geography by its social layout in these mixed-race schools. Are we teaching our youth to accept racial segregation as a natural part of the human condition?

Thus, we must ask whether an Obama administration should proactively caution our nation from dismissing the relevance of race too quickly, when the reality is that many of our students still do not trust and interact across racial and class lines. The administration should support the struggle not only for mixed-race schools—by reversing the dangerous legal and policy trends that act on the false premise of a postracial society—but also for wholly integrated schools that attend not just to the proximity of students across racial groups but also to the social and cultural requisites of racial integration.

As researchers continue to evaluate the effectiveness of our nation's approaches to school integration, salient issues call attention to additional educational practice and policy needs in the coming years. How do schools maintain environments that diminish racial boundaries so that nondominant racial groups of students participate significantly more in high-status academic courses (Mickelson, 2001; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005)? Why is it that African American students attending majority-minority schools may maintain high grades and popularity among their same-race peers, while this is not the case for those attending majority-white, multiracial schools (Fryer, 2006)? While many majority-minority schools do not share the wealth of their fellow suburban, predominantly white schools, the more normative pattern in the former is for students to witness the representation of intelligence, competence, and smartness as a "black" or "Latino" thing. In the majority-white schools, harmful, racialized course-taking patterns (e.g., tracking) and extracurricular participation isolate the token handful of African American and Latino students, leaving both students and adults buying into a faulty racial logic that associates school success and high achievement with whiteness or with being Asian (see Ngo & Lee, 2007).

Minding the "Empathy Gap"

Throughout my years of research in multiracial and desegregated schools, I have heard African American and Latino students describe the latent racial animus they encounter in their "good" schools. In many cases, their white peers are more affluent, and many of them make dehumanizing comments that draw on harmful racial stereotypes about the intelligence, morals, and honesty of their African American and Latino counterparts. I am reminded of the strong need for cross-cultural education and respect when I read in magazines about six-year-old girls, not much younger than Mr. Obama's two lovely daughters, enduring taunts from their white classmates about the color of

their brown skin and the texture of their kinky hair—which contrasts greatly to the white aesthetic about skin and hair beauty; or when I walk the halls of an elite suburban public high school and encounter the long face of an African American sophomore who laments the fact that, when a white peer's iPod is missing, the presumption is that one of the black or Latino students from the voluntary desegregation program stole it. I hear the voices of high school students in South Africa, where I also study the efforts of desegregation and integration, imploring me to relay to American citizens, who are not exposed to much world history and culture beyond Europe, that Africa is a large continent encompassing hundreds of languages and cultures, dozens of nations, beautiful terrain, and modernized societies and economies, and that the images of the television classics such as Tarzan or contemporary blockbuster films featuring certain places in Africa are not representative of all its peoples and places.

I recognize that more work is required when I read that—just as the Obama campaign assembled the largest and most racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, and generationally diverse mobilization in the history of presidential politics—the everyday connections between and interactions among young people remain tenuous, at best. They do not interact socially across racial lines in schools that do not integrate holistically—a perfect condition for the endurance of racial boundaries and the fomenting of racial distrust and stereotypes. Not only do students require qualified teachers and well-outfitted physical plants, they need to be able to feel that they are being actively incorporated into every facet of the school's life. The mandates of the *Brown* decision still remain incomplete. That is, an attendant issue emerges in education when spatial proximity and the sharing of academic resources are the foci, but where the amelioration of symbolic and ideological structures in these schools is hardly paid any attention.

When Barack Obama gave his now-famous "A More Perfect Union" speech on race relations in March 2008, I beamed at the brilliance of its content and delivery. Part damage control and part sociology lesson, the speech straddled the racial divide, verbally bridging the social chasm in this two-nation society. Teaching and empathizing throughout his speech, he demonstrated an understanding of the profound scar—still tender and unhealed—that this nation's racial genesis produced. As I listened to him, the words of another black male echoed through my mind. This one remains unknown, and at the time he was only fifteen years old. "If you want to get rid of the achievement gap," declared Judah Henderson,[5] an African American male attending North Village High School, an affluent suburban school that participates in a voluntary desegregation program in a northeastern state, "then you first have to get rid of the empathy gap."

If there is one thing that I have learned in my decade of interviewing adolescents about their social and cultural experiences in school, it is that they wield incisive commentary. Both Mr. Obama and Judah, separated by more

than a generation, understand one critical point, a point I would declare as a social fact: we cannot fully rectify the systematic racial and ethnic inequalities affronting our nation and our schools without paying attention to *both* equity in resources and heightened consciousness and care for one another across myriad social lines.

"Equity entails, above all else and as in friendship, a habit of attention by which citizens are attuned to the balances and imbalances in what citizens are giving up for each other," writes political theorist Danielle Allen (2004, p. 134). Equity necessitates that citizens develop what Allen refers to as "political friendships" and consider the good of others to be part of their own self-interest. Closing the empathy gap that Judah mentioned entails massive departures from an ethos of self-involvement; it is not merely about increasing the civility of one social group toward another. We must stop looking after only our own interests and disregarding our participation in the reproduction of inequality. As a nation, are we capable of stepping up to the plate and of purging the "American dilemma" by doing this work with one another? The diverse coalition that put our first African American president into office was just a first step. While it signifies that our nation has the capability to move beyond race, for now the Obama election mainly symbolizes what is possible. The next move is to go deeper.

Education is the ideal site for social change, but teaching students to practice citizenship more fully—at both national and global levels—is not a job for schools alone. It is also important to remember that what goes on outside of schools (in the economy, government, courts, neighborhoods, and families) must support the fundamental educational goal of producing engaged critical thinkers and doers.

I want to believe that Obama's campaign slogan—"Yes we can!"—was more than simply a mantra used to win an election. I want to believe it was also a declaration of our national intentions. Only time will tell.

Notes

1. In fact, a recent study reported in the *New York Times* already suggests an "Obama effect" on the black-white test score gap. After the acceptance of the Democratic Party's nomination, and then after the election, black students participating in an experiment performed equally as well as white students on a test given by researchers. Before, the researchers found a test-score gap (Dillon, 2009). While it remains to be seen whether these researchers' results are replicable, and whether such patterns will emerge on a wider scale in schools and communities around the country, the preliminary results are encouraging.
2. Meanwhile, the female-male ratio of college attendance among African Americans, especially, swells. Some colleges and universities face two-to-one ratios, while others report an even larger imbalance ("Black Women Students," 2006). The implications for both economic productivity and the black family structure are great. From college dorms to dining and lecture halls, discussions about the marriageable black male population emerge, and the morale among heterosexual, upwardly mobile, and professional

black women wanes as their desires to be "educated in romance" (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990) remain unmet.

3. "PICS" is an abbreviation of "Parents Involved in Community Schools" and refers collectively to the cases brought by parent plaintiffs in Seattle, Washington, and Louisville, Kentucky, and presented before the Supreme Court in 2007.

4. Jennifer Hochschild (1984) wrote about a white middle-class majority expressing rancor and distress at busing mandates that would send their children outside of their neighborhoods into schools with black and brown children for the purposes of desegregation.

5. I use a pseudonym here to protect the privacy and confidentiality of this student and his school.

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