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The Testing and Militarization of K-12 Education: Eugenic Assault on Urban School Populations

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## **The Testing and Militarization of K-12 Education: Eugenic Assault on Urban School Populations**

### *Introduction: Statement of the Problem and Background*

Many Disabilities Studies scholars can tell you how alive and well eugenics still is in the United States (and elsewhere), right down to sterilization and selective abortion. These scholars will point out that the people who are labeled with a variety of disabilities face being perceived as, at best “unintelligent,” at worst “inferior.” This paper and seminar session focuses on the contemporary legacies of the eugenics movement in education.<sup>3</sup> There is no question that race and membership in American history and all of American schooling have been touched and influenced by eugenics.

This paper attempts to discuss eugenics in education and how this eugenic legacy continues to haunt American schooling and nonwhite students (*c.f.* Hartlep, 2010; Winfield, 2007). Eugenic praxes and pedagogy continue to proliferate inside the American school systems—teachers may be unaware that they are teaching in such a way that maintains this ethos. This seminar session’s objectives are to achieve the following:

1. Point out eugenic praxes that continue to proliferate within K-12 school settings;
2. Challenge conferees to reflect on their own educational theorizing and praxes;
3. Design an anti-eugenic pedagogy that will dovetail with the existing pedagogies conferees already use in their classrooms and university courses;
4. Provide resources that will subvert eugenic praxes and liberate teachers and teacher educators from promulgating them; allowing for a reclamation of teaching for social justice and toward an anti-eugenic pedagogy; and

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<sup>3</sup>Throughout this paper I will use “education” and “urban education” interchangeably. While this paper is written for an urban education audience, its assertions and claims can be extrapolated to non-urban or suburban contexts.

5. Challenge the eugenic proselytization of teachers in our nation's K-12 schools and universities—of the educational status quo—that renders eugenic praxes invisible and allows them to go unquestioned and unchallenged.

*American Schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Proliferation  
of Eugenic-laden Praxes and Policies*

American schools and nonwhite students are in trouble and have always been in trouble. This paper will use the Galton's (1883) definition of eugenics: "the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which [...] takes cognizance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had" (p. 24).

As I have defined it:

Eugenics, simply summarized, is a racist and antipathetical attempt to create a perfect—Nordic—race. Eugenics is propelled by a scientism-nature insofar as it is predicated upon the notion that, with selective breeding, sorting, labeling, and categorizing, the world can reach utopia. This utopia is predicated upon the creation of a superior race. While attempting to create a superior race may appear absurd in the 21st-century, eugenic tendencies continue to pervade education. (Hartlep, 2010, para 1)

Eugenics has percolated from the university all the way down to kindergarten. Kindergarten may have started in Germany, but *not* eugenics. As Leung (2004) observes, "Eugenics is usually associated with Nazi Germany, but in fact, *it started in America*. Not only that, it continued here long after Hitler's Germany was in ruins" (para 1 [Italics added]). This is inimical to the presumption of many that evil Germans created eugenics. In fact, United States colleges trained many eugenicists in the early-20th century, when eugenics was in vogue, as can be seen in college and university syllabi. The University of Pittsburgh (among many colleges and

universities) had course syllabi covering eugenics. One Biology University of Pittsburgh syllabus (American Philosophical Society, 1918) stated the following:

This is a course in the “agencies under social control that may improve or impair the social qualities of future generations, either physically or mentally”. The scope of the course includes the action of the several factors in evolution in primitive man and the modification of the action of these factors by advancing social organization, the causes of differing birth, marriage, and death rates and their significance. Range of characteristics of such a nature is to require restricted reproduction, various methods of control, possible improvement of the action of sexual relation; the production of an increased birth rate from the superior. The eugenic aspect of various reform movements, such as, prohibition, women’s rights, socialism, immigration, rehabilitation, vocational guidance, mothers’ pensions, etc. (para 2 [sic])

Vocational (mis)guidance is still used contemporarily in K-12 schools. The academic “tracking” of students is a Eugenic practice that many guidance counselors, administrators, and teachers make use of. The latter, begin this Eugenic practice as early as when they establish reading groups for guided reading. Teachers group students by “reading ability/level,” never asking themselves questions like, “Why are all the black kids ‘Crows’ (read: lower level)?” or “Why are all the white children ‘Eagles’ (read: higher level)?” There is a symbolism in this practice, right? Crows are black colored, and the black and brown students are put into this group. Eagles are “high fliers” and “high achievers.” The Bald Eagle is representative of American patriotism and citizenship. Thus, the white students are Americanized and belong, while black and brown students are otherized, and therefore are outsiders that do not belong.

Eugenic practices do not stop at the university level or at academic tracking of students in our public and private schools. Mentally retarded students are tracked for “life-skills” over “academic skills.” At an Anti-Biased Anti-Oppressive Conference held at University of Chicago at Illinois, I attended a session where the conferee presenter argued that SEN/SPED students are not taught reproductive classes that mainstream students are—this parallels eugenics (deeming certain people unworthy of procreating). This presenter also has mentioned that discouraging

students of color from taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes is also clearly an example of eugenics.

There are other surprising ways that the fruits of eugenics may be observed on U.S. campuses: School architecture and movement is illustrative of militarization and a eugenic educational belief system. Many urban schools lack the green-space that suburban schools have. Therefore, fencing and gates are used to close off children from leaving school grounds. Fences act as monitors of the movement of children. Similar to prisons and jails, schools are infatuated with a love of surveillance of students. What makes matters worse, the Federal Government is complicit in the militarization of American schools. Bill Bigelow, in the foreword of *Camouflaged: Investigating How the Military Affects You and Your Community*, captures this fact: “[...] part of the reason that the military can still recruit young people is because our schools fail to equip students with the knowledge to question U.S. wars and military life” (p. vii). Bigelow goes on to write about how the U.S. Federal Government allows for this predatory practice: “Federal law requires that all public secondary schools allow military recruiters access to students” (Bigelow, p. vii, *Camouflaged*).

It is necessary to buzz-in to gain entry at many urban schools. Lanyards around the necks of schoolchildren with identification cards (IDs) operate under the guise that “school officials are only protecting the safety of schools and the children contained within them.” Log-books require visitors to “sign-in” and “sign-out.” Like jail logbooks, prison- and school-officials need to know who comes and who goes. Many schools utilize video camera surveillance to monitor the whereabouts and social conduct of students. Metal detectors are placed strategically at school entry points. Some schools require students to dress in official school uniforms. By making school uniforms mandatory, school administrators institutionalize students and the learning

process. Uniforms strip students of their uniqueness and individuality. This is supposed to be for the sake of student safety and learning uniform supporters jeer. However, uniforms come at a price: students become less individual and more homogenized. The Army has a similar belief system. Military boot camps serve to break soldiers down in order to build them back up. This is perverted logic to me.

I have witnessed, as an urban educator, teachers who require students to perform push-ups as punishment (read: for misbehavior). Public humiliation is a practice that the Army uses openly—teachers unfortunately have adopted this practice. Teachers and some teacher educators are so fanatically obsessed with “classroom management” that many colleges of education dedicate huge amounts of instructional time on “managing students’ behaviors.”

As insidious as Eugenic practices are, one that overshadows even the harshness of militarized schooling is one that occurs in many schools. Withholding of students’ recess (or physical education) as a form of punishment is tragic and needs to be eliminated from teachers’ repertoires. The practice of “taking away of privileges” is reminiscent to military, prison, and jail practices—taking away children’s opportunities for movement and exercise has damaging effects to students’ learning and physical development.

Military and prison-like influences can also be found in how teachers are obsessed with the movement of students. Requiring students to line-up perfectly by their teachers is similar to Army boot camp protocol. Also, schools’ exterior architecture is reminiscent of prison architecture (see Figures 1-4; see also Appendix A). School has proven to be an effective Eugenic device since it is compulsory and students are penalized for not attending.



**Figure 1. Prison Fencing**



**Figure 2. Prison Surveillance**



**Figure 3. School Fencing (Elementary School)**



**Figure 4. School Surveillance (High School)**



**Figure 5. More School Surveillance (High School)**

The following are but a small sample of current educational practices, policies, behaviors, and attitudes that illustrate neo-eugenic influences:

- Mess halls are synonymous with the school cafeteria (guards monitor children);
- The use of colonial teaching materials (such as the Mercator Projection Maps in lieu of Arno Peters Projection Maps);
- Higher “dropout” and “push-out” rates of nonwhite students;
- Higher “suspension” rates for nonwhite students;
- Disproportionate racial representation in Special Education;
- Lack of teachers/administrators of color;
- NCLB and the movement toward standardized testing (“High-stakes” testing);
- Recitation of pledge of allegiance (allegiance to what?). This is a political issue: In 1954, Congress added the words “Under God” to the Pledge as a way to distinguish the United States from “godless communists” during McCarthyism (*viz.* Red Scare) (Robinson, 2010, para 1); and
- Severe regimentation or “block” scheduling (“block” in jail).



Suspension rates are the highest for black students. Children Defense Fund (1975) reports that “[a]lthough black children accounted for 27.1 percent of the enrollment in the districts reporting to OCR, they constituted 42.3 percent of the racially identified suspensions” (p. 12). Milwaukee Public Schools, an urban school district, serves students that are 56.6 percent African American and 80.9 percent low-income (Milwaukee Public Schools, 2010). The MPS District was instructed not to suspend so many students (Borsuk, 2008a, 2008b). A team from the Council of Great City Schools, a coalition of 66 urban districts including MPS, investigated MPS’s high suspension rates (Borsuk, 2008a) and found that “[t]he number of suspensions is higher in the MPS than it is in any other urban district that the Council has visited” (Borsuk, 2008a, p. 2).

The reason why teachers must pay attention to the disproportional suspension rates of blacks and other minorities is because suspending students has a hidden eugenic principle behind it. Suspending students is predicated on a “culture of exclusion” (*c.f.* Freeman, 2009). Freeman (2009) documents how a “culture of exclusion” is based on the academic tracking, suspending, and expelling of students. In fact, placing students in lower academic tracks is a form of “internal expulsion” (Bridges, 1994; Freeman, 2009; Searle, 1994). When students are suspended, expelled, or tracked in low academic tracks, their livelihoods and futures are all jeopardized.

### ***Toward an Anti-Eugenic Pedagogy***

Every teacher and teacher-educator must realize that the pedagogy s/he uses is political—all pedagogies are political in some way. Culturally relevant pedagogy is no different; it is political. Working toward an anti-eugenic pedagogy requires an unorthodox way of viewing students, school colleagues, and curricula. Removing the scales from one’s eyes is challenging,

mostly because it requires teachers to a) know history and b) know how their own life history impacts their perceptions and performance in the classroom.

### *Labels*

Teachers use labels incessantly. Special education is rife with the practice of labeling students. A few codified labels are the following: at-risk, LD, EBD, ADHD, ADD, etc. We must come to grips with how labels impact teacher attitudes and ultimately the school performance of the children in our stead. The self-fulfilling prophecy (Pygmalion Effect) is real and impacts both teacher and learner. In urban schools particularly, the curricula formula is “If it bleeds it leads.” Unfortunately this means an approach to curricula and programming that focuses solely on school “failure” and school “fighting,” and not enough on where schools are effectively and efficaciously educationally reaching urban children and youth. We need to move away from such practices.

Noted black education teacher and teacher-researcher Lee (2009) observes:

As a society, we have come to equate poverty and race with ability and assume that ability is largely innate and measurable as stable. Research on teacher expectations and the abundant use of the term at ‘at-risk’ in both the educational and public policy literature often associate low expectations and being ‘at-risk’ with living in poverty, being a speaker of a first language other than English or a nonmainstream dialect of English (such as African American Vernacular English). Both because of the historical legacy of racism from the African Holocaust of enslavement as well as the fact that African Americans are represented in large numbers in the ranks of the poor and of speakers of nonstandard dialects as well as languages other than English (i.e., the large numbers of Black people of Hispanic heritage, first generation Haitian Americans, Ethiopian Americans, Cape Verdean Americans, to name a few), ‘at-risk’ is routinely associated with African Americans. (p. 107)

Establishing an anti-eugenic pedagogy requires us to “think of a school that never was” since schools have always directly, if not tacitly endorsed eugenic-type thinking and practices. In essence this is a meaningful educational and curricula change since an anti-eugenic pedagogy does not use labels. Here are but a few examples of codified terms educators use:

1. “low-income”;
2. “culturally diverse”;
3. “achievement gap”;
4. “dropouts”;
5. “housing projects”;
6. “ghetto”; and
7. “poor neighborhoods”;

Schools and teachers are adept at using 1-7 as proxies—but these coded terms are fallacious because they mean nonwhite children, youth, and families. As King (2005) states, “[B]y conceptualizing Black students as ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘at risk,’ can have the colonizing effect of ‘othering’ these students by placing them outside a normative standard” (p. 7).

***Tools: What is in your toolkit?***

Teaching toward and using anti-eugenic pedagogy requires using the correct tools and curricula. Ecumenical (liberal) curricula and tools will not suffice; proselytizing (radical) curricula and tools are needed. In the documentary film *Arno Peters: Radical Map, Remarkable Man*, viewers understand quickly how Dr. Peters literally (re)imagined the world upside-down. This requires a paradigm-break and a complete divorce from the Eurocentric establishment. However, this should provoke thoughts, not people—Freire’s “ruptura” in teachers’ actions and curricula. Freire (1990) says, “In fact, however, there is no creativity without *ruptura*, without a break from the old, without conflict in which you have to make a decision. I would say there is no human existence without *ruptura*” (p. 38).

According to Stovall (personal communication, 2010) the *Facing History and Ourselves* textbook called “Race and Membership In American History: The Eugenics Movement” gives

teachers all the ammunition to draw the parallels and show how eugenics is alive and well in our K-12 schools in the United States of America. Another University of Illinois at Chicago Professor, Watkins (2009) reminds us that “[f]or nearly four centuries, people of color in our country have either been falsely pathologized or pronounced intellectually unfit. While contemporary standardized test scores indicate an achievement gap, the reasons have absolutely nothing to do with genetics and everything to do with access” (p. 118). Teachers are beholden to and handcuffed by the emphasis on “high-stakes” testing. Understandably they and the districts in which they teach must prepare their students to face these tests and do well on them; however, the processes by which educators and schools “prep” their student body needs to be critically examined. Teachers have toolkits that contain anti-eugenic pedagogy and teaching practices (*c.f.* 10 vital principles of anti-eugenic pedagogy in subsequent section).

### **Concluding Remarks**

#### ***Eugenics Feeding the Monster***

Dr. Carter G. Woodson wrote in *The Miseducation of the Negro* that “[w]hen you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his ‘proper place’ and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.” Education is necessary for jobs. Standardized testing does both: it creates jobs for psychometricians and the whole testing cast as well as creating a “school-to-prison pipeline” (FairTest, 2010)—and of course prisons create jobs for prison-guards. Some prisons now charge inmates rent! Angela Davis (1998) calls this the “prison industrial complex”; some schools are feeders. Davis (1998) notes that “the deterioration of public education, including prioritizing discipline and security over learning in

public schools located in poor communities, is directly related to the prison ‘solution’” (p. 14). “Prison-track” schools (Staples, 2004) are the social manifestation of a eugenic solution; not the solution teacher-activists desire.

Dr. Joyce E. King (2005) is worth citing regarding dismantling; she notes: “To attack the roots of our (mis)education, cultural annihilation, and economic subordination, we must undo the entrenched system of thought that has justified our predicament” (epigraph, p. xxi). This requires an unorthodox kind of thinking by scholar- and teacher-activists.

Creating an anti-eugenic pedagogy does not come from a “tips and tricks” book. Nor does it come from prescriptive learning: reading lists to know facts, figures, and formulae for teaching anti-oppressively. This is a scintillating thought, is it not? How do we work toward anti-eugenics practices that are so desperately needed in resource-starved schools? The answer begins with the teachers themselves. Teachers must daily ask themselves 10 key questions about vital principles of anti-eugenic pedagogy and teaching:

1. What biases have I had in my teaching preparation?;
2. What children am I most comfortable instructing and more importantly why?;
3. What history do I know, what history do I not know?;
4. What organizations and colleagues provide me with the support I need and desire?;
5. How am I staying current with research and literature that will allow me to teach against the establishment?;
6. How does my race impact how I impart lessons and instruction in my classroom?;
7. Do I reflect enough on my own practice and have other allies observe me and my teaching so that I can receive constructive feedback?;
8. What do I believe the purpose of education to be?;

9. Am I growing as an educator?; and
10. How do I know if I am not perpetuating “best practices”?

Teaching and using anti-eugenic principles may well be similar to what Frederick Douglass said: “We are struggling to learn so that we can learn to struggle.” Teachers’ inadequate preparation by colleges of education and their own (mis)education and lack of consciousness make it difficult initially to (re)learn how to teach; however, the rewards will be a more humane education for all if they strive to do so. Teachers who wish to teach against eugenics must not forget the words of Max De Pree, an American writer, who once said: “We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are.”

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**Appendix A**

**Assortment of Images Taken at Schools (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)**



**Picture 1. A video camera and a buzz-in device are necessary.**



**Picture 2. Securing the entry and access to the school facility.**



**Picture 3. Windows are covered with metal.**



**Picture 4. With a fenced perimeter no one can escape!**