

History Books Need a Re-Write

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### Abstract

This paper goes in depth on what I've learned thus far in this course about some of the false ideals and philosophies concerning Black people. By citing researchers and adding my own insight, I explain why racism and our history are the reasons so many issues exist in urban education and for Black communities at large. The importance of purpose and motivation in teachers is also examined, as well as ways in which we can begin to change how we view urban education and can begin the path to truly allow for equality in education.

*Keywords:* urban education, history, racism

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News is rarely ever a word I think of in a positive connotation, probably due to all the stupidity it spits out. It seems like the news has especially been full of headlines similar to Teachers Protest Low Wages! and Chicago Public Schools: Another Day, Another Riot! in the past decade. While everyone seems to know about the supposed “horrors” every public school in this entire universe seems to hold, very rarely do we ever learn *why* urban education is so different from a suburban one in the schools it actually is different in (note: not all city schools are worse than suburban ones!). History classes take the biggest blame for this, sugarcoating white supremacists into being feminist, liberal, rainbows-and-puppy-loving men who just want equality for all while in actuality much of the history of education centers around those same men excluding certain groups of people from it. When we take a look at the true history of our country and the ideas that shape it, we get a true sense of why so many issues exist in urban education – and what we can do to help them.

Perhaps the most frightening thing of all is how little I really knew about urban education before coming in to this class. It’s scary that from the hundreds of articles and books I’ve read and bookmarked the past year, I can’t think of even one centering around the issues of urban education and the truth in why it suffers so much. I *do* seek out information. I *do* seek out research and organizations and people who can educate me. But even being someone who actively seeks information out due to an undying love of reading, I have never in my eighteen years of life learned the roots of urban education before entering this class, which has educated me in an irreversible way. And I took and excelled in AP U.S. History! Mary Rhodes Hoover, a professor of San Francisco State University, explains a few philosophies that are fundamental in understanding urban education. She explains about the deficiency policy, which “supports the

view that the genes, language, history, and/or cultures of Black and most other people of color are deficient in some way [...]”. Hoover goes in depth about all the ways that this philosophy has really, really badly impacted education. One example she gives is of this philosophy ruining motivation – why should any teacher feel motivated to put effort in teaching Black kids when we’ve been proven that they can never be taught, because they’re apparently born with a *gene* that, um, *makes it impossible for them to learn*? It doesn’t seem too believable, does it? Especially when she is clear to note that this philosophy doesn’t refer to a learning disability – oh no, this is a special *Black* deficiency. But people who believe this aren’t racist, right? Of course not! After all, it’s *proven* that Black kids do worse in school. Or so we think as Hoover goes on to disprove that swiftly: actually, it’s because of the lack of motivation from teachers and administration as well as a lack of proper funding and resources to city schools that lead to poor performance, not the other way around. She also notes, “These views of Black cognitive deficiency were used to justify the total segregation of the races in the South [...]”. Creating an excuse for why Blacks shouldn’t be allowed to mix with White kids made the deficiency philosophy the perfect scapegoat to justify racism on, which is why it was encouraged so heavily. Hoover then goes on to explain cultural deprivation, which is a “theory that held that the alleged culture of the “deprived”, “disadvantaged” child – that is, homes with no books for enlightenment, not enough food, and little or no intellectual stimulations – was responsible for the failure of the schools to teach children literacy.” This theory was also applied to Native Americans, as shown to us by Hoover’s historical example of the Bureau of Indian Affairs using this to justify mistreatment, claiming that these issues “have their roots in the basic cultural differences between White and Indian”, which makes painfully clear to the reader that all minorities, as seen through the perfect white society’s eyes, are just simply inferior to those of

white skin. When ideologies like this are allowed to persist through multiple generations, it becomes increasingly more difficult to unwind those false assumptions and thoughts that Americans grow up being taught since day one. Even people who wouldn't ever classify themselves as racist – including me or you – sometimes fall to victim to believing these ideas, because they're all we're taught.

Joanna Durham-Barnes of Indiana University Southeast, in her study of five female urban school teachers, backs Hoover up by also citing motivation and purpose as an extremely crucial part of teaching in cities where schools are often not given the same opportunities as those in suburbs are, such as money or the support given to teachers by the administration or parents. She states, "Having a sense of purpose and efficacy was an essential feature for the participants of this study." Continuing on, she clarifies, "When asked about the purpose of their work and the mission of their jobs, it was quite simply to teach children [...]." It's clear that motivation is the foundation of a good teacher; remove the desire to invest themselves into the lives of students, and you've got a person lecturing about algebra instead of a teacher.

The article I found the most eye-opening was Chapter 2: Liberty and Literacy (The Jeffersonian Ideal). I was shocked to learn that from the very beginning of the United States history it was *clearly* defined that women were to run the house, slaves were to do the work, and only the white man was to be free to pursue an education. Like legal slavery, it is heartbreaking, each and every time, to learn how publicly racism was displayed – and how readily it was accepted. Education, founded as primarily as it was by Jefferson in the 1700s, was *created* to exclude anyone but a white male. How, then, can we say that the deficiency is in Black culture or Black genes? If Jefferson as president of the United States during his time in office is okay with

something, it's pretty hard for anyone else to find reason to refute it. After all, it's legal! You are now allowed to partake in this horrible belief guilt-free.

I was blown away when I learned the true roots of our history because somehow, no matter how much you know about our country's history, it just hits you so hard to learn fresh ways it finds to blend racism into our everyday lives. But I also felt that it all made sense because really, I think a part of me always knew there had to be some correlation of slavery to Black communities still struggling – that is *not* to say at all that if you're Black you cannot be successful, because that's undeniably false. Instead, I think it just explains why, like Hoover says, maybe some homes in Black communities don't have books in them – well, if their parents didn't get proper educations or read regularly, and if their parents' parents didn't, either, and so on, of course there will be some exceptions. I mean, the system was *built* excluding them! By giving the deficiency philosophy a name, Hoover allows us to accept the issue and tackle it. I fully agree that purpose is so important in teaching because teaching is a very personal job since you're directly educating future leaders. Mainly I'm learning so much about *how* our systems are built in ways that force lingering racism to exist and allow for all these issues in urban education. If we worked harder to get rid of the deficiency policy by calling people out on it, we'd have more motivated teachers willing to stay in urban schools for extended periods of time. If we offered more resources and help to families of minorities at the grade school level to become more involved in their kids' schoolings, we could have both kids and teachers surrounded with support they both desperately need (for different reasons, but still). If our history classes explained the realities of our educational institutions, the stigma surrounding urban education would be greatly decreased and possibly wealthier families would start to support them and let their kids attend those schools. If we held all students to the standards we too often hold White or

wealthy kids to, kids of all races would begin to feel like they can and will succeed. We should offer specific resources to underprivileged kids who may not have access to those, but we should not stereotype so heavily as to assume that just because *some* families of Black descent may still struggle because they were born into poverty that stems way back from slavery, all Black people do. We must accept and acknowledge what the past has done, but we also need to move forward and push away from it in a way where we don't neglect the struggles the United States of America has put on Black people but simultaneously keep in mind that Black people are as intelligent, hard-working, and capable as those of any other skin color so we have no right to treat them as though they aren't. We, collectively as a society, need to learn how to empathize but not sympathize or pity Black students to a point where our misconceptions are hindering their growth. It's a fine balance to master, and one that we'll only accomplish by remembering the truth about our history and working as hard as we can to avoid repeating its mistakes.

Maybe one day history textbooks will finally get the re-writes that we deserve to see, but until then we're lucky to have researchers willing to break down the hidden ideals that lead to stigmas and issues in urban education today. It amazes me to learn that everything today is what it is because of something that happened yesterday, and it's a reminder to never stop working to change our tomorrow – because those same kids in urban schools right now will eventually be the adults of our future, working and existing in society alongside you and I.

## References

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