

Null Means Numb: Teaching Black Lives Don't Matter

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Abstract

Race has returned to the forefront of discussion in the United States given the nation's current social and political climate, causing educational institutions to face calls to re-examine, redefine, and recreate educational policies and practices that have long been considered oppressive to traditionally marginalized racial groups. Currently, one of trending issues of curriculum instruction and reform centers on null curriculum and the omission and/or oversimplification of Black history and contribution to the advancement of civilization. Despite the creation of Ethnic Studies and other disciplines such as Black Studies, African American Studies, Africana Studies and Black Diaspora Studies, there have been little to no effort in the Education Policy sphere to integrate the content from these disciplines into the standard curriculum required at the state and national level. By limiting the study of Black theory, history and culture to an optional supplement to the curriculum, educational institutions reinforce their historical stance of treating Black people as separate and unequal since Slavery began in the United States.

By reinforcing the ideology that Black lives do not matter through the omission of African American contributions and scholarship, educational institutions hinder the development of a strong racial identity for African American students, which has been shown to have a correlation with academic achievement. By using Eisner's (1985) definition of null curriculum, I will review the value (or lack thereof) that the United States educational system has placed in the education of African Americans since 1619. To show this, I will highlight four periods of history (No Education from 1619-1865, Miseducation from 1865-1968, Counter-Education from 1968-1990a and Bordered Education from 1990s- present). Following the timeline, I will present

suggestions for implications that can be made to create not only curricula but an educational system that affirms that Black lives do matter.

Keywords: Black lives matter, null curriculum, ethnic studies, multicultural education, teacher education, racial identity development

Introduction

Race has returned to the forefront of discussion in the United States given the nation's current social and political climate. With various activists and social movements emerging, particularly the Black Lives Matter Movement, educational institutions are facing calls to re-examine, redefine, and recreate educational policies and practices that have long been considered oppressive to traditionally marginalized racial groups. Specifically, focus has been placed on curriculum reform and race in a way that hasn't been seen since the conception of Ethnic Studies in the late 1960s. Currently, one of trending issues of curriculum instruction and reform centers on null curriculum and the omission and/or oversimplification of Black history and contribution to the advancement of civilization. The topic has gained much momentum across the country but specifically in urban settings, primarily due to the vast and detailed complexity of the nature of urban environments and the diverse populations that exists in these spaces (Milner, 2010).

Despite the creation of Ethnic Studies and other disciplines such as Black Studies, African American Studies, Africana Studies and Black Diaspora Studies, there have been little to no effort in the Education Policy sphere to integrate the content from these disciplines into the standard curriculum required at the state and national level. As a result, education policymakers and curriculum developers support curriculum standards that require teaching White culture only while making Black history and culture an elective at best. By limiting the study of Black theory, history and culture to an optional supplement to the curriculum, educational institutions reinforce

their historical stance of treating Black people as separate and unequal since Slavery began in the United States.

By reinforcing the ideology that Black lives do not matter through the omission of African American contributions and scholarship, educational institutions hinder the development of a strong racial identity for African American students, which has been shown to have a correlation with academic achievement. By using Eisner's (1985) definition of null curriculum, I will review the value (or lack thereof) that the United States educational system has placed in the education of African Americans since 1619. To show this, I will highlight four periods of history (No Education from 1619-1865, Miseducation from 1865-1968, Counter-Education from 1968-1990a and Bordered Education from 1990s- present). Following the timeline, I will present suggestions for implications that can be made to create not only curricula but an educational system that affirms that Black lives matter.

Defining Null Curriculum

Eisner (1985) defines null curriculum as simply what has been left out, but not all scholars believe it is that simple. Flinders, Noddings and Thorntonargue (1986) believe that null curriculum can often be a difficult term to define. They argue that null curriculum can only be identified in relation to what is believed to be educationally significant. Null curriculum can also be defined by the omission of entire disciplines at certain educational levels like the omission of sociology in middle school or pieces of a discipline like the omission of the history of mathematics in history courses (Eisner, 1985). For the purposes of this capstone I will be defining null curriculum as the omission of Black contributions and achievements from school curriculum.

By using Eisner's (1985) definition of null curriculum, I will review the way in which the United States has consistently and intentionally prevented African Americans from receiving a comprehensive education for their advancement in society in order to maintain White Supremacy. To prove this claim, I will highlight four periods of history (No Education from 1619-1865, Miseducation from 1865-1968, Counter-Education from 1968-1990a and Bordered Education from 1990s- present). Following the timeline, I will present suggestions for implications that can be made to create not only curricula but an educational system that affirms that Black lives matter.

No Education: The White Man Created the Black Hole

In order to understand why educational structures do not include Black history, literary thought or culture in curricula, we must first examine the history of the relationship of Blacks and the United States. The genesis of null curriculum for African Americans can be traced to Slavery, which I refer to as the creation of the Black Hole. Africans were brought as slaves to the North American continent in 1619 to the Virginia colony. Fearful that the slaves would unite and start revolts, slave owners and captors stripped the Africans of everything. They were isolated from members of the same tribe, forbidden to speak their native languages, answer to their birth names (masters assigned them new names in English) and were also forbidden to worship their own religions.

Slave owners went a step further by forbidding slaves to educate themselves by making it illegal for a slave to read or write. Slaves who were caught attempting to be educated faced brutal punishment, including sometimes death. To ensure that Blacks remained barred from education, legislation was passed that made it illegal for any person to teach a Black person, free or enslaved. Simkin (1997, 2015) cites two examples of these laws as written below:

(1) Law passed by South Carolina in 1740.

Whereas, the having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money.

(2) Law passed by Virginia in 1819.

That all meetings or assemblages of slaves, or free negroes or mulattoes mixing and associating with such slaves at any meeting-house or houses, etc., in the night; or at any school or schools for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered an unlawful assembly; and any justice of a county, etc., wherein such assemblage shall be, either from his own knowledge or the information of others, of such unlawful assemblage, etc., may issue his warrant, directed to any sworn officer or officers, authorizing him or them to enter the house or houses where such unlawful assemblages, etc, may be, for the purpose of apprehending or dispersing such slaves, and to inflict corporal punishment on the offender or offenders, at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding twenty lashes.

Since the first African arrived in Virginia as a slave, the forefathers of this nation sought to remove any and all knowledge they had of their culture and history. Over the course of the next 246 years, a black hole was created. Millions of African Americans knew nothing of their history

other than being the descendants of slaves and their current subjugation to their White counterparts, just as their slave masters had intended.

It is important to note, however, that while slave owners forbade slaves to read or write for their personal development, they were taught information that served the slave owners. In the following excerpt of 1863 work "Fifty Years of Slavery," Francis Fredric recalls a time where his former owner teaches him a new phrase to make him more useful:

My mistress took a fancy to me, and began to teach me some English words and phrases, for I only knew how to say "dis" and "dat," "den" and "dere," and a few such monosyllables. It is a saying among the masters, the bigger fool the better nigger. Hence all knowledge, except what pertains to work, is systematically kept from the field-slaves.

My mistress made me stand before her to learn from her how I was to take a message. "Now, Francis," she said, "I want to make you quite a ladies' man. You must always be very polite to the ladies. You must say, 'I will go and tell the ladies.'" I repeated some hundreds of times, "I will go and tell the ladies." After some days' training, she thought she had made me sufficiently perfect to deliver a message.

Slavery is the genesis of what I define as the black hole that made null curriculum possible. Whites intentionally stripped African slaves of their history and culture while simultaneously forcing them to accept new practices and customs that would make them easier to control. By the eve of 1865, there were over four million African Americans with no knowledge of their native culture or what their ancestors accomplished beyond the limited scope of Slavery. Any knowledge African Americans had was greatly controlled by their White slave masters for their

own benefit. With the news of emancipation of all the slaves spreading, African Americans hoped their conditions would change particularly with the opportunity of education.

Miseducation: Filling the Black Hole with White Plaster

Immediately following their emancipation in 1865, African Americans eagerly sought after what had long been denied them- education. The establishment of the Freedman's Bureau led to the building of several Black schools and universities in the South. African Americans could seek education; however, the quality, levels and content of their education was vastly limited and within a White framework (Banks, 1993). African Americans could learn to read and write, but the scholars, inventors, leaders and scientists they read about were all White men. Woodson (1933) explains the futility of African Americans being educated by institutions following the end of chattel Slavery as the following:

He [African Americans] was spending his [their] time studying about the things which had been or might be, but he was learning little to help him to do better the tasks at hand...The freedmen who were to be enlightened were given little thought, for the best friends of the race, ill-taught themselves, followed the traditional curricula of the times which did not take the Negro into consideration except to condemn or pity him (1933).

Even when African Americans attended elite institutions of higher education and earned doctoral degrees, they still received no access to any scholastic contributions of other Black people in academia. Education was dominated by White males; therefore, the proof of whether one was well-educated (no matter the race or ethnicity) was how well one knew White Westernized thought. Any other ways of thought or culture was not valued in academic spaces.

Woodson is known for being a prominent scholar who worked extensively to address the null curriculum as it pertained to African American history and societal contributions. In 1933

with the release of “The Miseducation of the Negro,” Woodson addresses several of his critiques with the educational system and its failure to adequately educate and uplift African Americans by saying simply, “Their [White northern missionaries] aim was to transform the Negroes, not to develop them.” African Americans found themselves once again only receiving education that would make them convenient for their oppressors, but would not help them uplift themselves to their oppressors’ status of power and liberty as opposed to second class citizens. To counter what he saw as the miseducation of African Americans, Woodson dedicated his scholarship towards pushing for African American history and culture to be included in school curricula. His work birthed what was initially known as Negro History Week and later African American History Month (commonly referred to as Black History Month). Despite this accomplishment however, Woodson and several scholars like DuBois fervently believed that African Americans needed a curriculum and learning environment where their culture is welcomed and valued to experience advancement and social uplift (DuBois, 1935; Woodson, 1933)

Counter-education: Alternative Views to the White Frame

Some of Woodson and DuBois’ suggestions started to materialize with the birth of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University in 1968, in part as a response to demands by African American students to be taught of their history and culture as an academic framework and the beyond the myopic cameos provided in the required White curriculum. As Woodson, DuBois and many of their contemporaries and predecessors suspected, Ethnic Studies has been shown to help students of color (particularly African Americans) develop a positive racial identity when executed properly. Chavous et. al (2003) surveyed over 600 African American students from four predominantly Black high schools during their senior year of high school and again two years later. Data collected from the study shows that the students most likely to graduate and go

on to higher education “expressed high awareness of race and racism and a high regard for being Black” (Chavous et. al, 2003). Using these results, there is a positive correlation between having a positive racial identity and academic achievement. The study found the reciprocal to also be true. Students who were least likely to complete school expressed low awareness of race and racism, low personal regard for being Black, and a perception that Black people are not valued by other groups (see also Miller & MacIntosh, 1999; Sanders, 1997).

Bordered Education: Keeping the Black Hole in a White World

Although Ethnic Studies has data to prove that facilitating classroom discourse on race/racism helps foster a positive racial identity for Black students which is correlated to academic achievement, it is still not welcomed in mainstream curricula in its robust sense. Though the location of Ethnic Studies can be traced to San Francisco State University in 1968, the discipline stems from the concept of Multiculturalism. I submit five reasons for this occurrence that can be grouped into two categories: the roots of Ethnic Studies and White fear.

The first reason Ethnic Studies is not welcomed into mainstream curricula is because it was originally desired by students to exist as courses and programs outside of the mainstream curriculum when it first emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. This demand by students could possibly be attributed to the need and desire to protect the new discipline from opponents and/or function as a safe space to learn without restriction. This is not to say that there was no push for an integral curriculum; the push for an integral curriculum did not gain strong momentum until the 1980s and 90s (Blassingame, 1971; Ford, 1973; Robinson, Foster, & Ogilvie, 1969). The pitfall here is that because Ethnic Studies started on the margins, it was easier for critics and opponents of Ethnic Studies and Multiculturalism to question the legitimacy of the discipline, its ideology, pedagogy and relevance within the institution of education (Sleeter, 2011; Banks,

1993). To this day, Ethnic Studies often finds itself on the margins of mainstream curricula as electives in secondary and post-secondary education and virtually non-existent in k-8 education.

The second reason carries into the last three. Part of the reason why Ethnic Studies has not been integrated into mainstream curriculum to address the null curriculum of African American contributions in the American education system is because of its roots in Multiculturalism. Experts in this field cite the aim of a Multicultural education as the practice of reforming “the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality” (Banks 1993). Since its conception until now, there is still not a full consensus as to what exactly constitutes as being Multicultural Education (Baker, 1983; Banks, 1988a; Bennett, 1990; Garcia, 1991; Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). What all scholars do agree upon is that a curriculum grounded in multiculturalism focuses on the education of people of color (Sleeter & Grant, 1987). Both scholars and educators carry different views of multiculturalism in terms of its theoretical framework and practice. Some believe that a multicultural education is only the integration of people of color into curricula (Banks 1993) while others believe that content integration plus discourse on race and racism is the only the first phase (Gibson, 1976; Sleeter & Grant 1987; Banks, 1993).

This lack of consensus stems from how multiculturalism originated. Multiculturalism finds its roots in Intergroup Education, which was mainly composed of White, liberal educators and scholars. Intergroup Education advocates believed that curriculum that an inclusive curriculum should focus more on the sameness of others as opposed to their differences (Banks, 1993). Though it appears to be a noble goal, this is a colorblind approach to education. The colorblind rhetoric of intergroup education movement carried into multiculturalism, which is in part why there is not a consensus about what a Multicultural Education really is. Some education

believe that the mere inclusion of African Americans into academic content such as speeches from Martin Luther King, Jr. and W.E.B. DuBois are enough to be considered practicing multicultural education without providing students with the opportunity to engage with the context of the content with regards to past and present race relations. Scholars, educators, school administrators and education policymakers who hold this view of multicultural education believe that Ethnic Studies and Multicultural Education in its robust form (including racial discourse) is divisive and dangerous.

Claims of Ethnic Studies being divisive is the third reason why it is treated as an elective rather than integrated into the required, mainstream curriculum. These claims are made by individuals and institutions who desire to avoid any conversation of race, thus protecting and perpetuating the framework of White Supremacy that has dominated the institution of education in the United States since its conception. As Hu-DeHart (2004) explains:

As long as ethnic studies and multicultural education in general remain within the confines of 'sensitivity training' and 'celebrating diversity,' it is safe and uncontested. But the minute ethnic studies and multicultural educators take seriously the edict that education's highest purpose is to liberate and empower (as opposed to socialize), then it becomes controversial and, frankly, threatening to the status quo.

In other words, Ethnic Studies and Multiculturalism are welcomed by the dominant curriculum and its supporters as long they stay within the confines originally supported by the Intergroup Education advocates. Once either Ethnic Studies or Multiculturalism steps outside of the boundaries of celebrating diversity while focusing on sameness (and the sameness usually

pinpointing to White standards) and crosses into critically examining the White framework our society operates in, they will be dismissed by mainstream curriculum and its supporters.

The fourth reason there is opposition to bringing Ethnic Studies into the dominant curriculum in an effort to embrace an integral, multicultural curriculum is the belief from teachers and parents that students are too young to discuss race and racism in the classroom. Research proves that this is not the case. Scholars have known for decades that children develop racial attitudes and perceptions before they even enter elementary school. A series of studies by Clark and Clark (1939a, 1939b, 1940, 1947) found that children actually develop racial attitudes that mirror adults while they are in preschool. As a result, allowing students to have the opportunity to critically examine the content they are learning to engage in dialogue on race relations at age appropriate depths could actually create positive racial identities and attitudes for students.

Finally, institutionalized standards and testing are the fifth reason for opposition towards a more diversified curriculum with opportunities for racial dialogue. Many teachers believe that taking time to incorporate Ethnic Studies content or a robust multiculturalist pedagogy to their practice will take away from their valuable teaching time needed to cover material required at the state and national levels. Particularly the case for lower income African American students, teachers and school administrators alike often believe that the key to academic success for them is to dedicate all teaching time covering what is mandated by the standards. Again, there is literature to refute these claims. Through in-depth interviews with groups of high academic performing African American adolescents conducted by Carter (2008) and O'Connor (1997), both researchers found that students who had a critical consciousness of race and racism used it to help them develop an achievement ideology to navigate a racially hostile environment. In fact,

these researchers state that a strong Black identity contributed to their sense of agency.

O'Connor (1997) takes the data a little further by noting that the students who identified little with their racial identity tended to achieve poorly. The research shows that developing a strong and positive racial identity in African Americans correlates to their academic achievement. If educators and policymakers are genuinely interested in closing the so-called achievement gap, why has there been little effort to require a robust curriculum that infuses content and pedagogy from Ethnic Studies and multiculturalism? The four phases I presented begin to answer this question; the United States, as a nation and institution, simply does not want to do it. The origin of the relationship between this nation and African Americans was built on African Americans being barred from education to withhold power and maintain White Supremacy. Now that African Americans are no longer barred from being educated, the goal of White Supremacy is to mis-educate and delegitimize any attempts at a counter-education.

Re-Education: Racial Identity Development in Teacher Education

While there is an institutionalized operation in education that delegitimizes the critical role of a robust multicultural education in the lives of African American students, there are ways to counter it. Teacher education is one item to address. Teachers who have not been exposed to a robust multicultural education in their own k-16 education or in their teacher education programs will recreate the null curriculum and its effects on racial identity development and academic achievement for African Americans. This is particularly true for White teachers in urban areas. When I use the term urban, I understand that an area with urban characteristics can be broadly defined as Milner (2012) points out. Similar to Tatum and Muhammad (2012), I define urban to describe the location and population of students inherent to my review of the literature in regards

to null curriculum as it pertains to the contributions, history and culture of African Americans in the United States.

In order for teachers to be equipped to create a robust multicultural curriculum and space in general, teacher education needs to include racial discourse for teachers to develop their own racial identity (Milner, 2003). If a teacher identifies very little with their own racial identity, they are less likely to be willing to engage students on any discussion of race. I equate the need for teachers to have a developed racial identity they identify with to pedagogical knowledge content. Pedagogical knowledge content means that a teacher knows the content they are teaching and are confident in their ability to teach the subject/topic. If a teacher is not familiar or comfortable with the content or subject area, it will show in the way they will teach the material. Racial identity works in the same manner. If race is going to be a part of the mainstream curriculum and examined critically, teachers have to be prepared with a strong racial identity of their own to help foster and facilitate discussion.

By helping teachers develop their own racial identity through a robust multicultural education, teachers will also begin to understand why the null curriculum is so important when it comes to issues centered on race and racism in education. As Sleeter (2011) addresses, when the focus shifted from multiculturalism to curriculum standards and accountability, White scholars and educators began to think that the issue was handled. This is why many White pre-service and current teachers do not understand the criticality of topic my capstone addresses and the push for racial dialogue in classrooms.

Research proves quite the opposite. While some stories of African Americans have been added the White, Euro-American framework that has always guided American education has remained the same (Byrne 2001, Clawson 2002, Feiner and Morgan 1987, Foster 1999, Gordy

and Pritchard 1995, Loewen 1995, Marquez 1994, O'Neil 1987, Powell and Garcia 1988, Reyhner 1986, Romanowski 1996, Sanchez 2007, Sleeter and Grant 1991). When African Americans are mentioned, it is usually within the context of Slavery and Jim Crow. Also, any content about race and race relations are confined explicitly to the parameters of the past (usually the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 60s) instead of addressing contemporary issues of race and race relations. These actions have allowed teachers to believe that racial dialogue and a multicultural curriculum and education are not needed. These actions have also produced a colorblind ideology of a post-racial society, despite current events that prove otherwise. Even today, text by and large "continue to disconnect racism in the past from racism today, and to frame perpetrators of racism as a few bad individuals rather than a system of oppression, and challenges to racism as actions of heroic individuals rather than organized struggle (Aldridge 2006, Brown and Brown 2010, Sleeter 2011). These sanitized, whitewashed and omitted truths actually preserve notions of White Supremacy rather than counter them.

Conclusion and Reflection

It is important to address my subjectivity and positionality in terms of the selection of my capstone topic. I identify as an African American woman. I attended private schools that were predominately Black for my primary education, predominately White for secondary education and a public undergraduate university that is predominately White but has several diverse populations. In none of the settings I have mentioned was I exposed to African American history and culture beyond the scope of Slavery and Jim Crow. As I matriculated through my undergraduate program I had friends taking courses in African American Studies and started to share information I never knew. I realized that despite attending some of the best schools, I knew very little about my own culture. Because of my background, I focused exclusively on null

curriculum from the African American perspective. Null curriculum can be examined critically with any race, ethnicity, gender or religion. For example, one could explore null curriculum with Native American using the four phase framework I created. The dates and details would change, but the framework would still support the analysis. I acknowledge that Black lives (specifically African Americans) are not the only ethnicity who is omitted from curricula. My subjectivity, positionality, as well as the current Black Lives Movement are the lenses through which I crafted my capstone.

I also acknowledge that White people are not the only ones who harbor anti-blackness towards Black people. A robust curriculum is needed because every ethnicity can have negative racial attitudes towards Black people. Moreover, a robust multicultural education will be beneficial to all students regardless of race and ethnicity; the benefits will manifest differently depending on the race and ethnicity, however. Sleeter (2011) has already examined the benefits for students of color and White students who take robust Ethnic Studies courses. Future research can expand this work; perhaps follow pre-service teachers from their teacher education programs into their first three years of teaching. I recognize, however, that the latter will be dependent on identifying teacher education programs that provide pre-service teachers with exposure to racial discourse to help develop their racial identity before entering the classroom as first year teachers. I plan to continue researching the null curriculum and its relation to the Black Lives Matter movement as a doctoral student at Purdue University in the American Studies program. My concentration is Activism, and Resistance in Social Movements Studies, which I believe will be a great fit for this work. I'm still debating exactly what my angle will be, but this capstone has given me a good start.

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