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A Retrospective Examination of Urban Education

From *Brown* to the Resegregation of African Americans in Special Education—It Is Time to “Go for Broke”

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Despite the fact that African American and other students of color, students labeled as having disabilities, and poor students in urban schools are indisputably linked in terms of the quality of schooling they have experienced, few attempts have been made to examine the relationship between special education and urban education. Both students placed in special education and those who attend urban schools have a long history of being miseducated, undereducated, and treated inequitably by the American educational system, with the American educational system at times excluding these students altogether from receiving a free and appropriate public education. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide (a) a historical analysis of special education and the treatment of students with disabilities prior to the *Brown* decision; (b) an analysis of the challenges that students with disabilities, African American and students of color, poor students in urban schools, and students affected by all three have historically experienced in their quest to receive a free and appropriate education in the American educational system; (c) a discussion that illustrates that special education is the new tool for the resegregation of African American and other students of color in special education; (d) a discussion of who the real beneficiaries of failed urban schools are and why they resist providing an equitable education to all children; and (e) specific examples of what it means to go for broke in calling out educational inequities and advocating for African American and other students of color, poor students, students with disabilities, students in urban settings, and students affected by all of these factors and issues.

Keywords: *race; special education; urban education; disproportionate representation; educational equity*

Any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to “go for broke.” Or put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classrooms but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won’t happen.

—James Baldwin (1963, cited in Ayers, Ladson-Billings, Michie, & Noguera, 2008, p. XIII)

Fifty-plus years removed from the historic *Brown* decision, literally thousands of students labeled as having disabilities, African American students, other students of color, and poor students in urban schools are still not receiving the equitable education in the American educational system promised to them. As a consequence, those of us who consider ourselves responsible must, as Baldwin (Ayers et al., 2008) asserts, be willing to literally “go for broke” to undercover and shine the brightest of lights on these educational inequities. More important, those of us who consider ourselves responsible must have the moral courage to insist that “years of bad faith and cruelty” (p. XIII) operating in our classrooms and society are enough and we cannot continue to tolerate it. Despite the fact that African American and other students of color, students labeled as having disabilities, and poor students in urban schools are indisputably linked in terms of the quality of schooling they have experienced, few attempts have been made to examine the relationship between special education and urban education. Both students placed in special education and those who attend urban schools have a long history of being miseducated, undereducated, and treated inequitably by the American educational system, with the American educational system at times excluding these students altogether from receiving a free and appropriate public education. Notwithstanding these similarities, little attention has been given to exploring why students with disabilities, students of color, and poor students in urban settings have had similar experiences in the American educational system, as well as comparable struggles to hold the American educational system accountable for educating all of its students. In addition, few urban educators have acknowledged the experiences of students of color labeled as having disabilities as they have addressed some of the most significant issues and challenges facing students in urban settings, a disproportionate percentage of whom are poor, African American, and Hispanic. Similarly, when discussing inequities experienced by African American and other students of color placed

in special education and the disproportionate placement of these students in special education, few special educators have addressed issues that are pertinent to students in urban settings. As a consequence, the debate about the quality of education that these students have historically received has rarely been contextualized using a critical lens that places their collective experience within the context of oppression and marginalization in both the educational system and society as a whole. More important, the fact that the historic *Brown* decision gave birth to special education is not only paradoxical, but it also illustrates the relationship between the treatment of students with disabilities, African American and students of color, and poor students in urban schools in the American educational system.

Hence, the purpose of this article is fivefold: (a) provide a historical analysis of special education and the treatment of students with disabilities prior to the *Brown* decision; (b) provide an analysis of the challenges that students with disabilities, African American and students of color, poor students in urban schools, and students affected by all three have historically experienced in their quest to receive a free and appropriate education in the American educational system; (c) provide a discussion that illustrates that special education is the new tool for the resegregation of African American and other students of color in special education; (d) provide a discussion of who the real beneficiaries of failed urban schools are and why they resist providing an equitable education to all children; and (e) provide specific examples of what it means to go for broke in calling out educational inequities and advocating for African American and other students of color, poor students, students with disabilities, students in urban settings, and students affected by all of these factors and issues.

A Historical Analysis of *Brown's* Relationship to and Effect on Special Education

The *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision transformed American public education, not just for African American students, as some would have us believe (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). In addition to prohibiting racial segregation in public education, the *Brown* decision was especially important in securing appropriate educational services and opportunities for students with disabilities. Before the *Brown* litigation and subsequent decision, African American students and students with disabilities had similar experiences in the American educational system. Both were treated as second-class citizens. Moreover, African American students with

disabilities have experienced double jeopardy in the American educational system. Although few would have predicted that the *Brown v. the Board of Education* case would have any implications for special education and students with disabilities in particular, this decision laid the foundation for challenging the constitutionality of excluding children with disabilities from public schooling opportunities (Blanchett et al., 2005).

The decision in the *Brown v. the Board of Education* case laid the foundation for litigation to challenge the constitutionality of "separate but equal" as it related to public schooling opportunities for students with disabilities (Blanchett et al., 2005). Because the Supreme Court in its decision in this case established that forcing African American students to attend segregated or Black-only public schools denied them equal protection under the law as guaranteed by the 14th amendment, advocates and parents of students with disabilities were able to use this decision to argue against the segregation of students with disabilities on the basis of disability.

Prior to the *Brown* decision and even in the 16 years after the decision, public schools were not obligated to educate students with disabilities. As a consequence, excluding them from public education and/or educating them in segregated settings with little or no exposure to their nondisabled peers was perfectly legal. Losen and Orfield (2002) estimate that nearly 2 million of the nation's 4 million children with disabilities were not served at all or were inadequately served in public schools during this time period. When students with disabilities were served, they were often educated in "ghetto-like" isolated and "run-down" classrooms within buildings that housed students without disabilities or in separate facilities altogether. Such terms as ghetto-like and run-down have often been used to describe the physical environments of some of the segregated schools that African American students attended prior to *Brown* regardless of the presence or absence of a disability (Losen & Orfield, 2002). The *Brown* decision provided advocates and parents of students with disabilities a legal precedent for challenging the educational inequities that children with disabilities experienced. Prior to court order desegregation, African American students with disabilities, in particular those with mild disabilities, often attended segregated Black schools with their brothers, sisters, and neighbors without disabilities. Advocates of special education fought to develop special education programs because general education was often not inclusive of students with disabilities and, as such, was not meeting their educational needs. The challenges to the existing segregated educational system came on the heels of the *Brown* decision in the form of several well-known court cases including *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, and *Mills v. the District of*

Columbia. The rulings in these cases established separate schools for students with disabilities as unconstitutional and paved the way for the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

PARC v. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972) guaranteed special education services to children and youth with mental retardation (Smith, 2004). However, the decision in this case did not address educational provisions for children with disabilities other than mental retardation. In 1973, *Mills v. the District of Columbia* extended the provisions of *PARC* to all children with disabilities (Smith, 2004). The victories in these cases set the stage for the principle of normalization for individuals with disabilities, now known as the disability rights movement. The concept of normalization was based on the idea that individuals with disabilities have the right to participate in all aspects and facets of life, including the right to be educated in public schools, to have access to their peers without disabilities, to live in their communities versus institutions, and to develop the skills needed to work and engage in recreational activities. The disability rights movement, using much of the language and many of the tactics of the civil rights movement, was able to spin this philosophy of normalization into legislation that protected the rights of individuals with disabilities with regard to education and participation in public and private entities and prohibited discrimination on the basis of disabilities.

Three legislative actions have been credited with significantly changing the way American society views, treats, and responds to the needs of individuals with disabilities (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005). These include Section 504 of The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 currently known as IDEA, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA; Smith, 2004). Section 504 has been hailed as the first major legislative step toward securing and protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities because it was the first piece of legislation to define a disability, to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in the public sector, and to provide educational services to students with disabilities. The ADA has been credited with extending civil rights protection to individuals with disabilities and mandating appropriate accommodations and modifications in both the private and public sectors. Although all of these legislations have brought about great positive changes for individuals with disabilities, IDEA is acknowledged as the single most important education legislation for students with disabilities because it guarantees the students' right to (a) a free and appropriate public education; (b) the least restrictive environment or placement; (c) an individualized education

program; (d) appropriate and nondiscriminatory evaluations; (e) parental and student participation in decision making; and (f) procedural safeguards (Smith, 2004).

The Original Intent of Special Education in Theory and Practice

Although the field of special education has undergone several philosophical changes over the past couple of decades, it is a fairly new field and is still evolving. In theory, special education was conceived to provide support and training for students who were perceived as a challenge for the general education system, including African American students, students with disabilities, and African American students with disabilities. Students who were eligible received specialized services such as individualized instruction, tutoring, and other forms of intervention to assist them in reaching their potential. Once students' needs were met and/or appropriate strategies or modifications implemented, they would return to general education settings (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005).

As special education theory evolved and resulted in actual educational practice, it became very clear that many students with disabilities were being educated in segregated self-contained settings with little to no exposure or access to their nondisabled peers (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005). More important, these students did not have access to the same curricula content as their nondisabled peers. As a result, many were not living up to their potential and often exited public schools with insufficient skills to gain meaningful employment and to participate in all aspects of adult life. These revelations led to the initiation of several longitudinal studies to examine the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities and to compare their post-school outcomes with their in-school experiences and learning opportunities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). The findings of these studies suggested that special education theory and practice was not robust enough to prepare individuals with disabilities for life after school. Specifically, these studies revealed that students with disabilities often lack the social skills, life skills, basic academic skills, and employment training to participate in all aspects of adult life (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). To prevent students with disabilities from continuing to experience such dismal post-school outcomes, disability rights advocates called for the reform of special education to address these shortcomings.

Although the 1980s gave birth to many special education reform ideas, the most radical of the special education reform ideas was the theory of

inclusion. Full inclusion called for providing all special education services to students with disabilities in the general education context without removing students from the classroom. Advocates of inclusion have been very successful in arguing that incorporating these students is consistent with the concept of normalization, the disability rights movement, the major tenets of the civil rights movement, and the promise of *Brown* (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005). Moreover, research suggests that the benefits of inclusion are significant for all students. Students with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms have higher levels of social skills, are more accepted by their nondisabled peers, and have greater exposure to the general education curriculum. According to the *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report to Congress* (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), the majority of students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms for some portion of their school day. This represents a significant increase in their access to general education and integrated classrooms and is a radical shift from early special education theory and practice.

The field of special education has evolved considerably since its inception. For the past 50 years, the field has been in the midst of change, most of which is directed at humanizing educational interventions and practices and obtaining better results. The calls for accountability in general education have been amplified due in part to the assertion in the report from the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education that "children placed in special education were general education students first" (*President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education Report*, 2002). This represents a shift from simply advocating for and providing access to physical facilities to including such students in state and district assessments and working to ensure access to the general education curriculum. The field is currently entrenched in debate over the legitimacy of placing students with disabilities in self-contained settings, the level of access to the general education curriculum afforded to students in those settings, and what constitutes a highly qualified special education teacher.

The Reality of Special Education in Practice for African American Students

In its original and subsequent conceptualization, special education was not conceived as a place or location but, rather, a service delivery structure (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005). However, for many African American students,

"placement in special education has too often been a vehicle for segregating minority students" (Losen, 2007). African American students with disabilities have had a number of experiences in the American special education system that raise concerns. Among the concerns most frequently cited by researchers are (a) the persistent problem of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, (b) the trend of placing African American students with disabilities into segregated instead of inclusive or general education settings, (c) the lack of culturally responsive interventions and instructional practices in both general and special education classrooms, and (d) the significant shortage of fully credentialed special education teachers including teachers of color. Disproportionality exists when a specific group's representation in special education as a whole and/or in specific disability categories exceeds their representation in the general school population or in the special education program (Harry & Anderson, 1995). During the 2000-2001 school year, African American students accounted for 14.8% of all school-aged children between the ages of 6 and 21; however, they represented 19.8% of those receiving special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In recent years, disproportionality has been determined using risk indexes. Although students served under IDEA are representative of all racial/ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, African American and other students of color are disproportionately represented and at risk for being labeled in the high-incidence disability categories of mild mental retardation, specific learning disabilities, and emotional/behavioral disabilities categories. For example, in 2003, of the percentage receiving special education services, American Indian/Alaska Native students had the largest risk index at 13.8%, followed by African American students at 12.4%, White at 8.7%, and Hispanic students at 8.2% (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). When we examine the risk index for specific disability categories by race/ethnicity, we find that African American students are 3.0 times more likely to be labeled as having mental retardation and 2.3 times more likely to receive special education services with a label of emotional disturbance (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). These realities have made some researchers and educators (e.g., Artiles & Trent, 1994; Patton, 1998) question the identification and placement practices that have resulted in so many children of color in special education and some (Blanchett, 2006) have even asserted that racism and White privilege are indeed at work here.

The passage of IDEA has remarkably improved the educational benefits for students with disabilities. Currently, more than 6 million children enjoy

a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment with a number of legal and procedural safeguards including due process, parental involvement, and individualized education plans (Blanchett et al., 2005). Although we have not fully arrived at being responsive to the educational needs of students with disabilities, today, more are educated in general education classrooms with their nondisabled peers and attend post-secondary school than at any other point in American history. In addition, they are living in communities and participating in competitive employment at much higher rates. For many, in particular parents in the African American community, the passage of IDEA meant that their children were finally going to get access to both integrated schools that were inclusive and reflective of our larger society in terms of race/ethnicity and their children with disabilities were going to be afforded a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

Despite these remarkable benefits and opportunities afforded many students with disabilities, the benefits of special education have not been equitably distributed on the basis of race and social class (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Although few would argue against the significant changes in special education service delivery brought about as a result of the passage of IDEA, the benefits of special education have not been equitably distributed (Losen & Orfield, 2002). African American children with disabilities have not received schooling opportunities comparable with those experienced by their White peers. Segregation on the basis of race, poverty, disability/perceived disability, the intersection of race with disability/perceived disability and poverty, and the intersection of race and poverty is still a pervasive problem in our American educational system as a whole and in special education programs in particular. What African American parents did not know but history would later prove is that segregation would not end with either the decision in the *Brown* case or the passage of IDEA. Their children would not attend integrated schools and those with disabilities would not have the access to the general education curriculum and their peers without disabilities that they had hoped for.

It is surprising that even though IDEA has made it possible for students with disabilities to be educated in general education classroom settings, African American students are still more likely than any other group of students to be segregated and not placed in general education classrooms to the extent of their peers labeled as having disabilities. For instance, in 2003, 93% of all students with disabilities were educated in general education

classrooms for some portion of their day with 50% of them being outside of the general education classroom for less than 21% of their day. However (U.S. Department of Education, 2005),

compared to students with disabilities from other racial/ethnic groups, black students with disabilities were the least likely to be educated in the regular classroom for most of the school day (38.6 percent). White students were the most likely to be educated in the regular classroom for most of the school day (54.7 percent). (p. 48)

Similarly, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2005),

Black students with disabilities were more likely than students with disabilities from other racial/ethnic groups to be educated *outside the regular classroom more than 60 percent of the day* (28.1 percent). . . . They were also more likely to be educated in *separate environments* (5.2 percent). (p. 48)

These placement trends highlight the equities associated with special education placements on the basis of race, as well as the need for educators making placement decisions to work hard to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to be educated in the general education setting and with their nondisabled peers. Students in urban settings, a disproportionate number of whom are students of color and poor students, regardless of their race would not have access to the same quality of schooling as their peers in suburban areas and/or those from middle-class and upper class social economic levels. For the past decade or so, researchers (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Lee, 2003) have documented the resegregation of African American students in urban schools as well as across the south and of Hispanic students across the country regardless of where they attend school. Segregation would raise its ugly head again but this time under the guise of urban education and special education.

From *Brown* to the Legal Resegregation of African American Students Through Special Education Placement

Shortly after the courts ordered schools to desegregate and begin enforcing desegregation plans in the years following the *Brown* decision, it became apparent that significant percentages of African American children

and Mexican American students in New York and California, respectively, were being labeled as mildly mentally retarded and placed in segregated classrooms (Dunn, 1968; Mercer, 1973). In their work with poor inner-city students in New York, Dunn noted that African American students' representation in programs for students identified as having mild mental retardation exceeded rates that would be expected given their relative size in the general population of school-aged children. They called attention to the fact that African American children were labeled as mildly mentally retarded and their White peers not labeled at all, even when White children evidenced more visibly obvious disabilities than the African American students. Mercer (1973) noted similar patterns in California among Mexican American students who were new immigrants and English language nonspeakers or learners. The work of these researchers and others helped to end the use of intelligence tests as the sole basis for determining special education eligibility and played a role in securing some of the safeguards guaranteed by IDEA. In addition, this research provided the legal basis for parents and advocates to challenge special education referral, evaluation, and placement decision making and prompt the establishment of several national committees to study this issue. Although these efforts have resulted in the Harvard Civil Rights Project playing a major role in studying this issue, in the convening of two National Academy of Science commissioned studies, and in a lengthy list of recommendations for addressing the problem, overrepresentation and disproportionality have persisted for more than 35 years and seem resistant to change, as illustrated in the previous section in the discussion of the risk index for disability labels on the basis of race/ethnicity.

Contrary to what some believe, the struggle to desegregate schools is much larger than simply wanting Black and White children to sit next to each other and to be educated in the same environment. Although it makes sense that we would expect our public schools to be reflective of the diversity that exists in our society and for children to be educated in racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse settings, integrated schools offer the potential for other opportunities as well. For many poor parents of color and some middle-class parents as well, especially those in urban settings, integrated schools are their only hope for their children receiving high-quality educational opportunities. In fact, research has illustrated that schools attended primarily by African American and/or Latino students are often schools that are deemed high poverty and have high turnover of the teaching and instructional staff, a high number of uncertified or provisionally licensed teachers, limited access to technology, few educational specialists (e.g., math and reading specialists) and resources

(e.g., accelerated curriculum for all students), limited extracurricular opportunities, and dilapidated physical environments. Moreover, in recent years with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2000 (NCLB), the school described above is more likely to be identified as a "failing school" despite the obvious lack of financial, human, and educational resources.

On the other hand, schools that have a majority White student body are often viewed as just the opposite of those attended by majority African American and/or Latino students. They are often located in suburban or rural areas and are touted and labeled as "high performance" schools. Many of their teachers and instructional staff hold graduate degrees, receive higher salaries, and have access to state-of-the-art technology and science labs, and the schools have accelerated, honors, and/or Advanced Placement curriculum, newer or renovated physical structures, and a waiting list of teachers who would like to become employed with the school. Despite numerous calls for local, state, and federal policy makers to be responsive to the fiscal needs of students in large metropolitan areas, a large percentage of whom live in poverty and are students of color, the funding in many of these schools continues to be insufficient. Middle-class parents, a disproportionate percentage of whom are White, have actively opposed tax increases and other funding proposals to increase funding of urban schools. These actions are the result of an effort to ensure the success of majority White schools often attended by their children and ultimately to maintain educational privilege (Brantlinger, 2003). Many researchers (Kozol, 1992; Losen & Orfield, 2002) have cited the overt underfunding of urban schools and the lack of societal ownership and responsibility for the success of these students as the new form of structural racism and discrimination. More important, the failure to provide students in urban settings, a disproportionate number of whom are poor, and students of color with a high-quality equitable education has been identified as a major contributing factor to the overrepresentation of students of color in special education.

Who Are the Real Beneficiaries of Failed Urban Schools and Resegregation?

Although the literature is replete with examples of "failed urban school districts" and "failed urban schools," along with examples of students portrayed as "lazy" and poor parents of color as parents who "don't care," the dialogue rarely shifts to who are the real beneficiaries of the American

educational system's failure to equitably educate children in urban settings. A lot of the blame for the current state of urban education has been placed on failed urban school districts, and although I believe that some of it is justified, I caution us to remember that urban school districts and systems do not operate in a vacuum and are in fact often a microcosm of the larger American society. By this, I mean that like special education, urban school districts too have been used by our society to resegregate African American and other students of color and poor children in general. In his analysis of the educational inequities that are rampant in urban schools attended primarily by students of color, Haberman (2003a) asserts,

The growth and maintenance of 120 failed urban school districts mis-educating diverse children in poverty for over a half century is a predictable, explainable, phenomenon not a series of accidental, unfortunate, chance events. . . . The larger society provides the institutional and cultural setting which protects, preserves and enhances these failing urban school systems for the purpose of providing a broad spectrum of constituencies with a priceless set of unearned privileges. The most valuable of these is access to economically and ethnically segregated forms of schooling for middle-class whites which is effective and does lead to careers, higher education and improved life opportunities. (p. 1)

As Blanchett et al. (2005) noted, the discussion of urban school failure usually emphasizes individual schools or students themselves as the primary problem. This ground-level line of thought absolves institutionalized systemic structures, policies, and practices that create and perpetuate the context for a failing urban school system. As illustrated above, all too often, people of color and other marginalized groups are the ones who bear the brunt of the criticism and suffer the most in these situations. English (2002) writes,

The low success rate of minority students in our schools has too often been portrayed as individual failures of students instead of instructional failures of the system based on false notions of objectivity shrouded in the mantle of impartial tests of "ability." (p. 307)

Kincheloe (1999) concurs, noting that existing hierarchies of power work to "undermine the educational progress and economic mobility of nonwhite and poor students" (p. 221). "Not surprisingly, this unnatural, selective school crisis is a crisis of the poor, of the cities, of Latino and African American communities. All the structures of privilege and oppression apparent in the larger society are mirrored in our schools" (Ayers & Ford, 1996, p. 88). Thus, proper emphasis must be placed on systems that undermine

student success and covertly collude in creating the environment for continued failure of marginalized children and families—not just the symptoms. As illustrated previously, not only do urban poor students of color suffer in general education, but they also face significant challenges when identified as having disabilities and placed in special education. The disproportionate placement of African American and other children of color in special education as well as achievement within urban school districts are only symptoms of a larger problem with urban districts: the unfinished dream of integration. Not only are districts and schools culpable, but our society as a whole has also bought into and maintains this culture of failure, because while students of color are being uneducated, undereducated, and miseducated, others (most notably their White peers and parents) are clearly the beneficiaries. What is even more saddening than the reality itself is the unwillingness of many educators and researchers to acknowledge and shine a bright light on the beneficiaries of these inequities.

It seems that almost everyone benefits from the failure to sufficiently educate poor children of color in urban schools but the children themselves and their parents. In her book titled *Dividing Classes: How the Middle Class Negotiates and Rationalizes School Advantage*, Brantlinger (2003) does a remarkable job of illustrating the lengths that middle-class parents, many of whom are White, will go to in order to advocate for privileged educational placements of their children while rationalizing it as something they have earned or are entitled to receive. Equally as important, Brantlinger provides an in-depth discussion of how middle-class mothers justified and rationalized their privilege and prejudice toward low-income parents and children. When she asked middle-class parents to try to see schooling opportunities through the eyes of low-income parents, several middle-class parents indicated that instead of having low-income children attend integrated schools with their middle-class children, they "felt that they [low-income students] would be more comfortable with their own kind" (p. 56). As Martina, a former teacher and now a homemaker, said,

It is an advantage to have schools that are largely low-income. If low-income children are a minority in a school, then their opportunities are limited. If they don't feel different—like when they're in a low-income school—they will explore more and participate more in activities. (p. 56)

It is clear that her own privilege, and need to hold on to it, allowed Martina to rationalize the often substandard schooling opportunities afforded low-income families. Because being asked to try to see education from the

perspective of low-income parents was “unsettling” to the middle-class parents, Brantlinger concludes that these mothers were probably experiencing at least some level of unconsciousness with regard to the inequities that low-income parents and children experience while they (the middle class) are the beneficiaries of these very inequities. Unlike my friend Brantlinger, I, on the other hand, am a little less willing to accept that middle-class parents who benefit from the inequities experienced by poor children and parents in urban settings (a disproportionate percentage of whom are African American and of color) are unconscious of these inequities. Instead, I believe that they are quite aware and conscious of them, do not care, and fight like the dickens both to keep them hidden and to rationalize them not as a privilege but as an entitlement that they believe they have earned, even though they did nothing to earn them.

Middle-class parents, a disproportionate percentage of whom are White, are not the only beneficiaries of the educational inequities experienced by poor children and families in urban schools; many others also benefit. As was reported in Blanchett et al. (2005), Haberman (2003b) identified at least 22 beneficiaries of failing urban school districts. Some of these beneficiaries include (in no particular order) (a) employees of central offices, (b) students outside of the urban districts competing for college admission and the world of work, (c) consultants, (d) federal, state, and elected officials, (e) the media, and (f) universities. Haberman (2003b) asserts, “Central office functionaries’ primary goal is to protect the present distribution of financial rewards, power, status and unearned privileges for themselves and their constituents who benefit from maintaining the present failed systems” (p. 2). Students outside of the urban districts, as illustrated in Brantlinger’s research, also benefit by being unfairly compared with their less fortunate and undereducated counterparts. Consultants make lucrative agreements with large urban districts promising to solve tough problems; in reality, many consultants end up leaving and taking large sums of the district’s money with them. It is evident that certain constituencies have much to gain from the plight of urban schools. Political candidates clearly understand that people are concerned about their children and that votes are connected to those who can offer solutions to the problems of failed urban school districts. The media conveniently scapegoats urban schools and spreads negative press to people surrounding urban areas, perpetuating and reinforcing preconceived notions and prejudice (Chideya, 1995). Universities benefit because these districts provide fertile ground for research, there are large amounts of grant monies available to conduct such research in these areas, and these institutions have teacher/administrator certification responsibilities with a lack of accountability for the failure of their

products. In addition, universities have developed numerous university/school partnerships aimed at supposedly placing the resources of the university at the disposal of urban schools and "closing the achievement gap," but often universities continue to operate as if it is business as usual while "pimping" urban schools and leaving many of their challenges completely intact long after the partnership has concluded.

What Does It Mean to "Go for Broke" for all Children in Urban Schools?

"Going for broke" means doing whatever it takes to shine the brightest lights on educational inequities experienced by poor children, African American and other children of color, children identified with disabilities, and children affected by the intersection of all of these issues. To make it really plain, we would not have the progress that we have had to date in uncovering the educational inequities discussed throughout this article had not a few brave scholars been willing to go for broke and break ranks with the masses who contended that the longstanding difficulties that African American students have experienced in their quest for an equitable education are due to their intellectual inferiority, rather than being attributed to the systemic racism, discrimination, and White privilege that these students are subjected to daily in America. Racism, discrimination, and White privilege have been combined in current practice to form a deadly cocktail consisting of the Black/White achievement gap, accountability, high-stakes testing, inadequately prepared teachers, culturally unresponsive curriculum, and No Child Left Behind. In their attempt to go for broke, several scholars (Bell, Ladson-Billings, Haberman, Ayers) have been the lone voices crying in the wilderness to put a stop to these practices that, if not by design, have certainly resulted in even greater educational inequities for African American and other poor children in urban schools.

Although the problem of disproportionality still exists today, it is important to note that without the research of Dunn, Mercer, and more recently others (e.g., Artiles & Trent; Patton), we would likely not have the policy safeguards in IDEA 2004 that are designed (at least legislatively if not in practice yet) to protect ethnically/racially diverse students and families affected by poverty from discrimination in the special education referral, evaluation, and placement process. It is still early in the implementation process of these new regulations, so only time will truly tell their effect, but

they are clearly a step in the right direction. As stated previously, we have seen courageous educators and researchers step up to the plate and go for broke for children and families in urban settings, but they are the exception rather than the norm. It is now time for the American society and educational system working in concert to go for broke in the service of these marginalized children and families by both breaking down barriers that have caused and continue to maintain educational inequities and truly refusing to accept “two parallel systems—one privileged, adequate, successful, and largely White, and the other disadvantaged in countless ways, disabled, starving, failing, and predominately African American” (Ayers & Ford, 1996, p. 88). If we took this Going for Broke challenge seriously, we would do the following:

1. Acknowledge and respond to the funding inequities that have created two parallel systems by sufficiently funding and resourcing urban school districts/schools to give them the financial and human resources needed to truly effectively teach and serve all children well.
2. Ensure that all educators in urban schools are indeed fully credentialed and hold a valid teaching certification for the content areas in which they teach. Equally as important, we need to ensure that all educators working in urban schools have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions along with the commitment to teach for social justice and to employ culturally responsive pedagogy.
3. Hold general education responsible for educating all of its children and stop them from using special education as a dumping ground for difficult or hard to teach children who do not really have disabilities, but instead simply suffer from a condition known as “ain’t been taught.”
4. Hold special education accountable for providing culturally responsive practice to all students identified as having disabilities and who receive special education services.
5. Hold special education responsible for ensuring that all children (not just White middle-class students) are placed in the general education classroom for the majority of their school day as a component of our commitment to inclusive education.

In conclusion, going for broke as an American society and educational system to address educational inequities is simply providing an equitable high-quality education to all children regardless of race, social class, disability, or the intersection of all of these circumstances. It means truly leaving absolutely no child behind in theory, policy, and practice.

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