**Black Lives, Too, Matter in Schools:**

**An Exploration of Symbolic Violence in the Era of Trayvon Martin**

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Abstract

Urban educators often focus their attention on the violence of inner city neighborhoods causing them to ignore the urban school as a violent institution—positioning it as a safe haven, both physically and emotionally. However, to build ways to effectively respond to violence in schools, urban educators must begin to reflect on the history of these institutions and the current ways in which they subjugate and marginalize Black children. Through in depth, semi-structured interviews with Black, high school students, the author investigated the presence of symbolic violence in their schooling experiences and the impact it has on their social and academic identities. The author uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the guiding theoretical and methodological framework. Highlighting the gentle and imperceptible nature of symbolic violence, it was discovered that their schooling experiences are laced with undertones of invisible, yet violent attacks.

*Keywords:* teacher education, critical race theory, symbolic violence

**Background**

Educational institutions in the United States of America have long challenged the abilities of Black students in relation to their achievement due to theories of intelligence rooted in racism argued by both social and natural science. While these theories have proven to be false (Anderson & Nickerson, 2005; Smedley & Smedley, 2005), claims to Black inferiority are still deeply embedded in the ways many in society view Black Americans, including how some Black Americans internalize attitudes of inferiority (Jones, 2000). Members of the Galton Society, such as Dr. Carl Brigham helped to legitimize the belief in the different levels of intelligence between Anglo and African Americans in the 1920s (Selden, 1999). Theories of Black inferiority continued and picked up throughout the 1960s, where scholars identified cultural deficit theories to suggest that children of color were victims of pathological lifestyles that hindered their ability to benefit from schooling (Ladson Billings, 2006). These cultural deficit theories are rooted in racism operating in a white supremacist context. According to Stanfield (1985), white supremacy can be outlined as the history of the white race "significantly dominating other groups for hundreds of years" resulting in "the ways of the dominant group (its epistemologies, its ontologies, its axiologies) not only to become the dominant ways of American civilization, but also for these ways to become so deeply embedded that they typically are seen as "natural" or appropriate norms rather than as historically evolved constructions (as cited by Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 7). Lorde (1992) defined racism as, "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (p.115). Over time, notions of Black inferiority and low levels of academic achievement became expected in the minds of white citizens and therefore white teachers as well. Indeed, under the existence of white supremacy,

Black inferiority and white superiority became constructed as natural and appropriate. When teachers and other school officials believe these deficit theories they often treat African American students' behavior as deficient (Flores, 2007; Richman, Bovelsky, Kroovand, Vacca, & West, 1997; Villegas, 2007) and do whatever they can to control the behavior, which negatively impacts the psyche of the Black child.

It is important to note that in many cases, actions of racism are not always committed consciously (Richeson & Ambady, 2002). However, whether the negative treatment of Black students is conscious or not, teachers come to rationalize the treatment as valid. Efforts to control behavior viewed as deficient has moved beyond teacher dispositions to also infiltrating school policies and curriculum, causing deficit views of Black children to become normalized in all aspects of American schooling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). For example, the overrepresentation of African American students in the use of exclusionary and punitive consequences is of major concern in schools (Skiba et al., 2002). Since school policies, curriculum, and teachers have the potential to impact the experiences of Black students in harmful ways, educators must confront this fact. For true equity to be reached, teachers must recognize the intentional, violent subjugation of Black students in American schooling. The goal in doing this is not to send a hopeless message to educators or students, but to confront an educational reality that has long been ignored and work toward solutions. Echoing Wynne (1999), silence can be dangerous and avoiding the issue of racism is concerning because of its consequences on children. As educators think about "the disproportionate numbers of African American males in prisons, the disproportionate numbers of children of color living below the poverty level, the numbers of children of color doomed to failure in our public schools, the numbers of inner-city ghettos"

(Wynne, 1992, p. 6), it must be understood that the time to confront the violence enacted by schools is now and we will only begin to address the damages committed by schools if we begin to talk about the root of those damages—racism and white supremacy, which produce violence.

### Statement of Problem

To situate the problem that frames this research study, I build on Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade's work on the need for Teacher Education programs to prepare students to respond to the environments of urban students. Duncan-Andrade (2011) explained that there are "four major sources of traumatic stress in students' lives that educators must be prepared to address: (1) institutional violence; (2) physical violence; (3) root shock; and (4) wealth inequality" (p. 313). Duncan-Andrade (2011) further purported that educators must address these four sources of trauma for youth of color to "take on the seemingly intractable forms of inequity facing our society" (p. 309). Labeling the sources of trauma as toxins, his argument is for teacher education to move toward a focus that "aims to develop educators better equipped to respond to the 'socially toxic environments' that emerge from racism, poverty, and other forms of oppression," that disproportionately impact students of color (Duncan-Andrade, 2011, p. 310). Considering that an overwhelming majority of teachers and teacher educators are white (Juárez, Smith & Hayes, 2008), I agree with Duncan-Andrade, and purport that it is high time for teachers to be explicitly taught to understand and interact with the toxic environments society often creates for Black children. However, I ask, can a social institution that produces social toxins and thusly induces trauma—one that is a major source of stress for certain populations (Anderman & Kimweli, 1997)—respond to students' larger societal toxic environments? It must be made clear that schools act as key players in maintaining the aforementioned systems of oppression. While schools can work to respond to students' experiences out of school, they must first place their efforts of help inward. I argue that, as violent institutions—institutions

of power with a documented history of oppression, capable of inducing trauma to youth of color—schools and teacher education programs cannot respond to the trauma their students face, unless they first begin to see themselves as environments that are inherently toxic and facilitators of traumatic experiences. As noted by Decuir and Dixson (2004), due to the legacy of racism, schooling is often a negative space for African American students. In this article, I aim to engage in foundational work that begins to explore the role violence plays in the schooling of African American students.

Although schools are often characterized as safe oases in the violence of inner-city neighborhoods, Herr and Anderson (2010) explained, "this view is due to an under theorization of violence and a misperception of apparently orderly schools and classrooms as violence free" (p. 416). The categories of institutional violence, physical violence, root shock, and wealth inequality, outlined by Duncan-Andrade exaggerate claims surrounding particular forms of violence, allowing other manifestations of violence to remain virtually invisible (Herr & Anderson, 2010). The emphasis on the more widely held interpretations of violence is what allows educators to not see how schools are socially toxic environments. This under theorization of violence has gone on far too long and by not seeing schools as violent sites, but rather as trauma free oases, we invalidate every Black child's schooling experience that is inherently hostile (Bell, 2004).

Teachers and institutions must understand that Black children are victimized in schools, just as they are in society. While positioning Black youth as victims can be viewed as a deficit framing, I posit here that in this context it is not. In fact, in many instances, Black youth are not deemed worthy of being victims even when it is clear that youth of other races would be immediately given that label if they were in a similar circumstance. For example, with the recent attention on the numerous unarmed Black teens being killed by police officers

and vigilante citizens, the media has often positioned them in ways that make it seem as if

they were responsible for their own death (Wing, 2014). These Black individuals were not

allowed to be victims; in many incidents, their humanity is denied, which makes it easier for

society not to address the issues. By avoiding the ways our educational institutions victimize

Black children (i.e. overrepresentation in special education, disproportionate suspension

rates, etc.), we also deny their humanity and right to a quality education. By attempting to

exempt schools from the oppressive system of racism, whether consciously or

subconsciously, we signal to students that any failure or problem they face is a result of a

lack of preparation or diligence on their part, because everything is provided in abundance at

the violence free schoolhouse that will set them up for success. Students are told when they

leave their communities all they need to do is work hard. Building from the literature of

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), Herr and Anderson (2010) described two ways of getting and

keeping a lasting hold over someone: overt (physical or economic) violence as referenced by

Duncan-Andrade or symbolic violence – censored, euphemized, unrecognized violence.

### Symbolic Violence

Radical Schooling Theory purports that "educational institutions are organized around

and reflect the interests of dominant groups in the society; that the function of school is to

reproduce the current inequities of our social, political, and economic system" (Ferguson,

2000,p. 50). Moreover, it upholds that schools reproduce social inequality through a "hidden

curriculum," which reflects the "cultural hegemony" of white Americans. This "hidden

curriculum" in schools works to exacerbate inequality opposed to diminish it (Ferguson, 2000).

Iadicola (1981) explained, "The school's role in sorting and placing students with the "correct"

cultural disposition to perpetuate the social and cultural order is central to its role as an agency

of social control" (p. 362). Indeed, schools reward the cultural capital of the dominant class

(MacLeod, 2009). This "cultural production in education refers to the ways in which schools and teachers reproduce social inequalities through the promotion of certain forms of cultural knowledge" (Jennings & Lynn, 2005, p. 19). Cultural reproduction takes a micro analytical look into the ways school norms contribute to the systemic exclusion of ethnic minorities for the educational system (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). Furthermore, "cultural capital is a form of symbolic wealth that one acquires through membership and participation in the dominant or middle-class culture" (p. 19). Schools embodying the dominant cultural capital or symbolic wealth as superior inflict symbolic violence—the painful, damaging, mortal wounds inflicted by the wielding of words, symbols, and standards—against students not belonging to the white race (Ferguson, 2000). Ferguson's analysis of Bourdieu and Passeron's symbolic violence revealed that not only are African American youth violently attacked in society, but that this vicious routine is perpetuated by the schools that aim to educate them. The wielding of words, symbols, and standards Ferguson refers to that embody white cultural capital is how schools promote white supremacy and as a result, promote anti-Blackness. Similar to the experiences African American youth face outside of school, (i.e. being called thugs, being followed in stores, and being overrepresented in the penal system) they also face similar experiences in school.

Pierre Bourdieu (2001) explained symbolic violence as "a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted through the most part by the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling" (p. 1). Considering common understandings of violence, it may be difficult to grasp the concept of a violence that is gentle, yet Scott (2012) mentioned that to fully understand the theory of symbolic violence and eventually work to recognize it in action, the words *gentle* and *violence* both must be kept in mind. To be clear, the gentle nature of Bourdieu's theory does not by any

means negate the damages done by this invisible action. In fact, it speaks to the danger of such a gentle force; one that appears to pose zero to minimal threat upon first encountering it and then without warning a symbolic assault occurs. The danger presents itself in the unknowing. The assault has gone unnoticed due to the belief that the force could not possibly pose a threat and more so that the force—educational institutions—would never seek to harm. Symbolic violence is perplexing for the simple fact that it is not a form of overt coercion, typical violence; and for this reason alone, it is damaging for all of those on the receiving end (Scott, 2012). How can an individual or a group of individuals understand or recognize symbolic violence being enacted against them in social practice if is gentle to the point of invisibility? Invisible tactics, those incapable of being seen stop efforts of resistance in their tracks before they even materialize. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) further elaborated, "Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations" (p. 4). Again, the act of concealing the power relations, which essentially seal the exertion of power, contributes to the lack of awareness those subjected to symbolic violence have in regards to liberating themselves from the oppressive impacts of the violence.

Applying this to schooling, it can be deduced that "inequitable social relations are maintained not simply through bad teaching, as current school reform efforts assume, but through the everyday 'pedagogic actions' of 'world class', dedicated and caring teachers" (Herr and Anderson, 2010, p. 419). Pedagogic actions in schools serve as one of the main extensions of symbolic violence. The mundane action of knowledge being passed on to a student from a teacher is an act of symbolic violence by nature of schools and the particular knowledge teachers' share and value from their students is rooted in systems of power. Schools and the

teachers housed there impose meaning on students, rarely stopping to consider how various student populations may make sense of the knowledge being imposed upon them differently. In some cases, the difference of meanings constructed due to the varying epistemologies of students that may not directly align with the schools can be so drastic that harm is done to students who cannot understand or connect with the meaning imposed by the cultural arbitrary.

## Methodology

A Critical Race theoretical perspective and a Critical Race Theory (CRT) methodology informed the development and design of this study. According to CRT, "given the insidious and often subtle way in which race and racism operate, it is imperative that educational researchers explore the role of race when examining the educational experiences of African American students" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 26). Due to the subtle and diffuse ways symbolic violence permeates U.S. educational institutions, the use of CRT, which seeks to directly expose these subtleties is not only important, but also necessary. CRT is currently in a ripe stage for serious utilization in disciplines beyond legal studies due to decades of foundational research that has solidified and affirmed it as necessary and fruitful practice. "Today, many in field of education consider themselves critical race theorists who use CRT's ideas to understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, affirmative action, high stakes testing, controversies over curriculum and history, and alternative and charter schools" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012, p. 6). In alignment with school hierarchies and controversies, the work I outline here on symbolic violence is not only timely for a CRT discussion in education, but also highly appropriate.

### Data and Results

Data for this research paper is derived from a larger study I conducted at a summer enrichment program, Education Trailblazers, for high achieving students at a large university in the Midwestern United States. The program has an explicit focus on education, particularly

around issues of social justice and the schooling experiences of students from marginalized populations. During the program, I interviewed four rising high school seniors, who all self-identified as Black/African American. The research presented here focuses on a female student who I will refer to as Shayla. Each student participated in semi-structured interviews, completed an open-ended questionnaire, and participated in a focus group with other participants. This data was coded using the constant comparative method to develop thematic relationships between the students and across the three points of data collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As students who were identified by their schools as high achieving, had an interest in education, possessed mostly positive feelings towards school, it was clear that they probably would not consider themselves ideal targets for symbolic violence due to their "successful" navigation of their respective school settings. Due to the positive images students had about their academic selves and how this affected their ability to recognize damages done to them by symbolic violence at times, critical incidents allowed me to better expose the subtleties present in the data during the analysis.

Angeledis (2001) explained, critical incidents "are not necessarily sensational events involving a lot of tension. Rather they may be minor incidents, small everyday events that happen in every school and in every classroom. Their criticality is based on the justification, the significance, and the meaning given to them" (p. 431). Symbolic violence is so difficult to be cognizant of that I must note that I take responsibility in naming certain experiences explained by Shayla as critical incidents that expose symbolic violence. During the interviews, the term symbolic violence was not discussed, rather students were asked to answer questions related to their everyday schooling experiences, including but not limited to: descriptions of their school environment, interactions between teachers and students, school demographics, and school policies.

**Shayla**

At the onset of our initial conversation, Shayla explained that her father was in real estate, which caused them to move around often within the region. In the account below, she explained that while in middle school she attended a predominately white school in Oaktown and then transferred to a school serving predominately Black students in Springwood. After learning about Shayla's moving patterns, I asked her how did her previous school differ from her current experience, she provided the following details:

> When I was out in Oaktown they were moving fast and I was trying to understand like, I never seen this before and the curriculum was so much higher. Especially like when I came back out to Springwood. When I came back out to Springwood I was like, I did this stuff in seventh grade, why is it that when I'm in ninth grade no actually it was tenth, why is it that I am in tenth grade... doing the same thing again? Why is it that their [Oaktown] seventh graders can do what our [Springwood] tenth graders are still learning how to do? I never understood that.

As detailed above, when Shayla arrived to Springwood, she was doing things in tenth grade that she already learned in seventh grade at the predominantly white Oaktown. Without realizing it, Shayla was unveiling a critical incident in her discussion of difference in curriculum. Her account teetered on the line between the familiar and the unjust (Scott, 2012). For students who did not have the opportunity to attend Oaktown or any other similarly situated school, they would not necessarily know that students at other schools are learning what they are being taught in tenth grade during their early middle school years. However, Shayla was able to get a glimpse behind the institutional curtain and question why the instruction between schools was drastically different. The everyday teaching of students, the mundane, suddenly became prickly and problematic (Scott, 2012). How are all students

expected to reach similar levels of success when many schools, particularly those serving

Black and Brown children, are teaching their students three to four years below grade level?

The violence in this instance shows up in the form of a continual and slow violence. Shayla is

aware that something is wrong about the instructional differences, but she feels as if she has no

agency to question or challenge the practices. Like many students, she continues to work to the

best of her abilities while accepting her schooling conditions as they are.

As our conversation developed, I inquired whether Shayla felt she was receiving an

adequate education.

> I know there's better out there, like I've experienced it. I've seen it how the other kids are
>
> like in other districts are ahead of us but I don't know why that is, maybe its because...no,
>
> no I don't think its because of our location or anything. I just think that...maybe it's the
>
> way our district is set up, so that we don't...we set our expectations lower for them I think
>
> that's what it is, because we live in a certain area they set their expectations for us lower
>
> because of the fact that we are Black I guess. Like that we can't comprehend as fast.
>
> Because I notice its weird though because the ACT scores at the white schools are higher
>
> than ours, but we should all be like...if we were all learning the same things why is there
>
> this gigantic gap in our scores like that?

This is a clear example of a student exposing cracks in the legitimacy of an educational

institution. Why are ACT scores so different between Shayla's school and the white schools in

the immediate area? Opposed to my beliefs, according to Hernstein and Murray (1994), genetic

differences between whites and Blacks would be the reason why Black students do not do as

well academically. Unfortunately, much past and present research documents Black culture as

deficient. Ideas of cultural deficiency in an educational context have provided whites with a

wealth of educational opportunities, while providing Blacks with inferior and less desired

options. "African Americans were believed to belong to a race that was culturally hundreds of years behind the White race" and education reformers "sought to teach African Americans that their position was not a result of oppression but the natural process of cultural evolution" (Walker & Archung, 2003, p. 24). However, data from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights Civil Rights Data Collection (2014) report suggested otherwise. For example, the report revealed that "a quarter of high schools with the highest percentage of Black and Latino students do not offer Algebra II; a third of these schools do not offer chemistry" (CRDC, 2014). Symbolic violence operates in a way that causes individuals of marginalized groups to believe in and accept their marginal status. If a group of individuals were told repeatedly that they are inferior and the outcomes of things such as standardized tests or dropout rates align with these sentiments, what else would these individuals believe? Symbolic violence works to maintain white supremacy and privilege in this country because it is self-sustaining; Black students do the work of marginalizing themselves after being made to believe their inferior status. Black students like Shayla may see that gaps between her classmates and her white counterparts are alarming, but as expressed, they may believe there is nothing they can do about it. The bewildered undertone implicit in Shayla's thought process is all too common for Black students across the U.S. Students must be taught that they can do something about it, but first they must be made aware of the symbolic violence they experience daily just by virtue of showing up to school.

**Conclusion**

The development of "critical educational spaces are essential once symbolic violence has been named" (Goldstein, 2005, p. 535). For true educational equity to occur, schools must acknowledge and have critical conversations on issues in their school stemming from racism. To stop the damage to students brought on by symbolic violence, schools must foster environments that allow for students to become critical of the system in which they are educated. Although it

has been documented widely that schools are sites of inequality there is little, if any, research

that attempts to study how students understand and internalize the bi-directionality of inequality

between school and society, particularly in the frame of violence as outlined here. It is urgent for

schools to address the way violence gets enacted throughout classrooms, pedagogic actions, and

policies. There is a considerable amount of room for more research on the impact symbolic

violence has on a student's academic and social success and what actions, if any, students can

take to contest these institutional and individual practices of violence.

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