



Closing Commentary: New Strategies for Racial Equity in Education: Interest Convergence and Movement Building

Mark R. Warren

To cite this article: Mark R. Warren (2017) Closing Commentary: New Strategies for Racial Equity in Education: Interest Convergence and Movement Building, Peabody Journal of Education, 92:3, 425-431, DOI: [10.1080/0161956X.2017.1324666](https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1324666)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1324666>



Published online: 12 Jun 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 476



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



Closing Commentary: New Strategies for Racial Equity in Education: Interest Convergence and Movement Building

Mark R. Warren

University of Massachusetts Boston

The purpose of this issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* is to revisit interest-convergence theory and explore new strategies for pursuing racial equity and justice in education. This issue could not come at a more important time. We are facing a moment of great opportunity and great danger for those who are concerned with racial equity in public education as well in our larger society. Once again, race is at the center of political cross-currents. The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement is only the most visible part of a broad and growing movement that has been seeking renewed attention to issues of racial equity and justice (Taylor, 2016). The Black Lives Matter movement has confronted mainstream America with the extent and depth of racism and racial violence in the United States. It has demanded a militant confrontation and real change. Concepts such as systemic racism and implicit bias previously restricted to academic discourse now are featured in public discourse, like in the Presidential campaign of 2016. The presence of public conversations on race provides new opportunities for racial equity initiatives in education and beyond.

At the same time, a backlash has emerged to this movement and, more broadly, to the changing demographics that make the United States a “majority minority” country where white Americans are losing their majority status (Frey, 2014). Many white Americans who have been left behind in the new global economy are turning their anger and frustration against the “other”: people of color, Muslims, and immigrants. This phenomenon is not new; rather white backlash against gains in racial justice has deep historical roots going back at least to the Reconstruction/post-Reconstruction era (Du Bois, 1997). The Trump candidacy and victory has created a space for white nationalism and racism to emerge with the potential to set back whatever gains in racial justice have been won.

INTEREST CONVERGENCE AND WHITE ANTIRACISM

Derrick Bell was concerned with precisely this kind of backlash. Bell developed the concept of interest convergence as part of a larger critical race theory that sought to expose the systemic nature of oppression faced by African Americans in the United States and offer a

Correspondence should be sent to Mark R. Warren, Department of Public Policy and Public Affairs, University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA 02125. E-mail: mark.warren@umb.edu

framework to advance the fight for racial justice. His early work came at a time when color blindness was on the rise (Brown et al., 2003) and race was—at least for the most part—decidedly off the public agenda. Critical race theory constituted both a scholarly and political intervention. Its emphasis on the deep-seated, historically rooted, and pervasive nature of racism challenged the too-easy assumptions that America has become a “postracial” society— even before that term was so readily used. Bell argued that racism was a permanent feature of American society (Bell, 1993).

According to interest-convergence theory, the only time when black demands for racial justice have been won was when it just so happened that the dominant white society saw these demands to be in its own interest (Bell, 1980). For example, according to Bell, the demands of the civil rights movement for school desegregation were met when dominant white elites realized that continued segregation provoked international condemnation and was a threat to the United States’ standing as the dominant world power. This argument challenges naive claims that white morality will see the justice of the antiracist cause and act altruistically. In fact, there is a large body of evidence that shows how white and African American perceptions of and positions on race and racial issues diverge widely (Bobo, 2011). The present Trumpian moment shows how readily many whites can be racially mobilized to identify themselves in opposition to Muslims, immigrants, and people of color.

Despite its strengths, the problem with interest-convergence theory is that it seems to imply that white Americans can (or will) never see common cause with the struggles for racial justice—that whites and blacks are locked in a win/lose situation. It also suggests that movements for racial justice have no impact on white attitudes or practices. Neither is true historically. Significant numbers of white Americans have supported racial justice struggles throughout American history, with significant white participation in the abolitionist and civil rights movements among others (Aptheker, 1992). These movements did change some deep-seated, racialized attitudes held by whites and made them more supportive of black demands. For example, in the wake of the civil rights movement, white attitudes on a range of racial issues and public policies shifted significantly in a supportive direction (Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1997).

In my own study of white Americans who became supporters and activists for racial justice (Warren, 2010), I found very few who came to that position because their interests conveniently aligned with African American demands. Rather, they began a journey toward racial justice through direct experiences where they saw the values they believed in violated through racist treatment of people of color. As they became active in multiracial efforts, they built relationships with people of color and came to understand the experience of racism and came to care more deeply about it because it affected people they knew. They struggled with white privilege to overcome historically shaped racial hierarchies in order to build collaborative and mutually respectful multiracial relationships. In the end, these white Americans came to embrace the cause of racial justice as their own because they saw a racially just and humane society to be in everyone’s shared fate. Rather than working *for* people of color, white activists worked *with* them on a journey to create what Martin Luther King called the beloved community (Marsh, 2005). Calculations of shared interest are part of this sense of common cause, but the notion of interest does not fully capture the interplay of morality, relationships, and values that constitute a strong sense of shared fate.

THE NEED FOR RACIAL AND EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

Attitudes change, and policies and practices regarding deep-seated systems of injustice shift in response to community organizing and social movements (Morris, 1984; Warren, Mapp, & Community Organizing and School Reform Project, 2011). Indeed, I would argue that the only times that there has been substantial progress in addressing racial equity and improving the quality of education offered to African Americans has been a result of sustained racial justice movements.

In the 1960s and 1970s, in large part as the result of the civil rights movement, the nation invested heavily in public education as it created new social programs and broke down barriers to education and employment for African Americans, Latinos, and other groups. By the mid-'70s, as Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) has recently argued, urban schools spent as much as suburban schools, while childhood poverty rates fell dramatically—to below the levels of today. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), this comprehensive and well-resourced approach worked. The “achievement gap” in reading scores between black and white students was cut in half and was also reduced substantially in math; for a short time, black college attendance rates were comparable to white rates. With the retrenchment in both social programs and affirmative action that began in the 1980s, however, progress in educational improvement for black and Latino children largely stalled and the “achievement gap” actually grew again in the 1980s. Since then, any progress that has been made on race-based disparities has been swamped by the growth of the socioeconomic class gap (Reardon, 2011).

The seeds of new racial and educational justice movements are growing today, directly confronting racial inequities in our educational system. Within the field of education itself, possibly the most prominent movement that has emerged is the effort to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline in which harsh discipline practices push children—especially black and brown boys—out of school and into the criminal justice system (Bahena, Cooc, Currie-Rubin, Kuttner, & Ng, 2012; Warren, 2014). This movement has made racial inequities in school discipline the centerpiece of its critique and demand for change, consistently highlighting the fact that black children are three times more likely than white children to be suspended from school (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). The movement has pushed the federal government to issue new guidelines on school discipline, dramatically shifted public discourse and educational consensus away from zero tolerance, and changed policies at local and state levels to limit suspensions and encourage positive and restorative approaches to school climate issues (Mediratta, 2012).

As a result of the criminalization of black and brown people, we now spend enormous amounts of public funds on policing and prisons, money that could fund public education and antipoverty strategies. Beyond the \$80 billion alone spent on prisons, a recent study estimates the broader cost of mass incarceration to be nearly \$1 trillion (Pettus-Davis, Brown, Veeh, & Renn, 2016). Increasingly education activists are calling for “justice reinvestment” (Sentencing Project, 2015) and launching campaigns at state and local levels to shift funds away from systems of incarceration and toward investment in public education and community development.

Movements such as those against the school-to-prison pipeline are working to combine strong local organizing with broad national reach, reflected in national coalitions of locally based groups such as the Dignity in Schools Campaign and the Alliance for Educational Justice (Mediratta,

2012). They are striving to achieve what successful movements have done in the past. Effective social movements engage the participation and leadership of those most affected at their core—in this case, parents, young people, and other members of low-income communities of color. They also reach out and succeed in forming broader alliances with other stakeholders who bring resources and support and help achieve a broader consensus for change, among, in this case, teachers, civil rights advocates, labor unions, nonprofit organizations, private foundations, and education officials at multiple levels (Warren, 2014).

TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE AND RACIAL EQUITY

Building a movement for transformative change in education requires organizing and intervention at multiple levels. The articles in this volume all offer important insights and lessons for new strategies to address racial equity and justice through transformative change. Ishimaru and Takahashi address the interpersonal or relational side of transformative change. Racial hierarchies often characterize the relationships between a predominantly white teacher population and parents of color whose voices are often silenced. Through organizing efforts, parents can build the power to be heard in schools and create new kinds of relationships with teachers. In essence, these are struggles to humanize relationships soured by privileges historically benefiting whites and undermined by dysfunctional institutions. This kind of school-based change work, especially if connected to larger movements, can help build a broader base of participation and leadership by parents of color and provide the micro foundations for larger, macro-level racial equity transformation (Warren, Mapp, & Community Organizing and School Reform Project, 2011).

Garces and Gordon da Cruz speak to the human side of the struggle for racial justice at the policy level. They highlight the need to address a system that is deeply flawed by racialized systems of oppression. Educational justice requires more than the “improvement” of educational outcomes for children of color in a system that Carter G. Woodson (1990) long ago critiqued as designed to keep black people in their place. Rather, as Garces and Gordon da Cruz call for in discussing the tenets of their proposed racial equity framework, we need to create educational systems that respect and indeed empower youth of color to pursue their development individually and collectively.

In his historical study of bilingual education, Sung shows that community activists see education as a means to address poverty and improve the economic well-being of Latinos, but he also exposes the limitations of working within a system that fails to address broader power dynamics. African American activists have historically understood the connection between education and socioeconomic conditions—in both directions. The denial of free public education during slavery and beyond constituted a key strategy to keep African Americans poor and powerless. Conversely, the demand for education constitutes a demand for economic and political power (Payne & Strickland, 2008).

Tieken’s article deepens our appreciation for the connection between educational inequality and social inequality as spatially structured. What this teaches us is that the struggle for racial equity in education cannot be “siloeed” off from the broader struggle for social, economic, and political change (Tate, 2012). If the poverty and racism that affects low-income children of color in their home and community are inextricably linked to the education they receive, then a racial equity strategy that fails to meaningfully address this relationship will fail.

Perhaps more broadly, we need to directly confront questions of inequality in resource distribution in our society. Funding education primarily through property taxes structures racial inequity into our education system (Kozol, 1991), disadvantaging poor rural and urban communities alike in many states. In fact, we need to find ways to connect the movement for racial equity in education to the struggle for a living wage, for community development, for community safety, and against racist policing and environmental racism (Warren, 2014).

Taylor brings our attention to the possibilities of a global antiracist movement in education. She rejects the nationalist competitive approach that the Obama administration (and others) have fostered and calls for a collaborative engagement to improve education for marginalized communities across the globe. One important concept that can unite efforts across countries is a human rights framework, which is enshrined in a number of international treaties. Although community organizing groups working for educational justice in the United States have not historically embraced a human rights approach, this has been changing more recently. The Dignity in Schools Campaign—a coalition of over one hundred grassroots organizing and advocacy groups formed to combat the school-to-prison pipeline—has articulated just such a human rights framework (Dignity in Schools Campaign, 2016). This brings us back to our starting point: that the movement for educational justice is a movement to humanize education and indeed our whole society.

The articles in this volume make important contributions to the construction of new strategies for racial equity, but many big questions remain. These include how we build the political will to significantly shift resources from mass incarceration to education and community well-being and how we actually implement new practices, like restorative justice, at the ground level in schools where it really matters to children and families. Many calls have been made for education research to be more relevant to practice and to advance social justice concerns in particular (Coburn & Stein, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). An important new direction for addressing these and other critical issues comes from efforts by scholars to work collaboratively with education activists in the kind of critical community engaged scholarship that Gordon da Cruz describes. The author reminds us of the importance of placing justice concerns and racial equity frames at the center of these academic–community partnerships if they are to reveal structural inequities and lead to meaningful policy change. As they take a more critical approach, these new collaborations incorporate the experiences and understandings of communities of color on the ground and make research more relevant to advancing struggles for racial equity. Many important action–research initiatives, such as the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC, 2016), and new networks, such as the Urban Research Based Action Network (URBAN, 2016), position scholars and activists as allies in a larger movement as cocreators of knowledge and action for racial equity and justice.

The struggle for educational justice has the potential to provide the keystone to a broader liberation movement. After all, what we refer to today as the civil rights movement was actually called the freedom movement by African Americans at the time. Like this freedom movement that reinvigorated and expanded U.S. democracy in the past, an educational justice movement focused squarely on racial equity promises to galvanize racial and democratic transformation. In that sense, education is not just one of many racial justice concerns. It lies at the heart of the promise of American democracy and of the struggle of peoples to free themselves.

AUTHOR BIO

Mark R. Warren is Professor of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts Boston. He studies and works with community and youth organizing groups to promote equity and justice in education, community development, and American democratic life. He is the author of several books, including *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

REFERENCES

- Aptheker, H. (1992). *Anti-racism in U.S. history: The first two hundred years*. New York, NY: Greenwood Press.
- Bahena, S., Cooc, N., Currie-Rubin, R., Kuttner, P., & Ng, M. (Eds.). (2012). *Disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review.
- Bell, D. (1980). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518–533.
- Bell, D. (1993). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bobo, L. D. (2011). Somewhere between Jim Crow & post-racialism: Reflections on the racial divide in America today. *Daedalus*, 140(2), 11–36.
- Brown, M. K., Carnoy, M., Currie, E., Duster, T., Oppenheimer, D. B., Shultz, M. M., & Wellman, D. (2003). *White-washing race: The myth of a color-blind society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Coburn, C. E., & Stein, M. K. (2010). *Research and practice in education: Building alliances, bridging the divide*. Lanhan, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dignity in Schools Campaign. (2016). Human Rights Approach. Retrieved from <http://www.dignityinschools.org/human-rights-approach>
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1997). *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- FLDC. (2016). Family Leadership Design Collaborative. Retrieved from <http://familydesigncollab.org/>
- Frey, W. H. (2014). *Diversity explosion: How new racial demographics are remaking America*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York, NY: Crown.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (2006). *Education research in the public interest: Social justice, action, and policy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Marsh, C. (2005). *The beloved community: How faith shapes social justice, from the civil rights movement to today*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Mediratta, K. (2012). Grassroots organizing and the school-to-prison pipeline: The emerging national movement to roll back zero tolerance discipline policies in U.S. public schools. In S. Bahena, N. Cooc, R. Currie-Rubin, P. Kuttner, & M. Ng (Eds.), *Disrupting the school to prison pipeline* (pp. 211–236). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review.
- Morris, A. D. (1984). *The origins of the civil rights movement: Black communities organizing for change*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Payne, C. M., & Strickland, C. S. (2008). *Teach freedom: Education for liberation in the African-American tradition*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Pettus-Davis, C., Brown, D., Veeh, C., & Renn, T. (2016). *The economic burden of incarceration in the U.S.* Retrieved from <https://advancingjustice.wustl.edu/SiteCollectionDocuments/The%20Economic%20Burden%20of%20Incarceration%20in%20the%20US.pdf>
- Reardon, S. (2011). The widening academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor: New evidence and possible explanations. In G. J. Duncan & R. J. Murnane (Eds.), *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation Press.

- Schuman, H., Steeh, C., & Bobo, L. (1997). *Racial attitudes in America: Trends and interpretations* (Rev. ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sentencing Project. (2015). *Ending mass incarceration: Charting a new justice reinvestment*. Retrieved from <http://sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Ending-Mass-Incarceration-Charting-a-New-Justice-Reinvestment.pdf>
- Tate, W. F. (Ed.). (2012). *Research on schools, neighborhoods and communities: Toward civic responsibility*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Taylor, K. Y. (2016). *From #BlackLivesMatter to black liberation*. Boston, MA: Haymarket Books.
- URBAN. (2016). Urban Research Based Action Network. Retrieved from <http://urbanresearchnetwork.org/>
- U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2014). *Data snapshot: School discipline*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Warren, M. R. (2010). *Fire in the heart: How white activists embrace racial justice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Warren, M. R. (2014). Transforming public education: The need for an educational justice movement. *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 26(1), Article 11.
- Warren, M. R., Mapp, K. L., & Community Organizing and School Reform Project. (2011). *A match on dry grass: Community organizing as a catalyst for school reform*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Woodson, C. G. (1990). *The mis-education of the Negro*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.