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EMBRACING RACE

Why We Need Race-Conscious Education Policy

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and Deb Holloway, friends and colleagues whose wit, imagination, and deep commitment to social change never cease to inspire me. Very special thanks also go to Maria Moses and Lois Bell, whose generous help and support made it truly possible for me to think and write with a clear head and heart in the early stages of this work. I am deeply appreciative of my grandmother, Helen Moses, for her unwavering encouragement every day and for sharing her amazing life experiences with me. I am indebted also to my *abuelita*, Maria Antonieta Boyán, who, without realizing it, taught me profound lessons about culture, immigration, and home, all of which are reflected in my ideas. My mother, Maria Teresa Moses, taught me what courage means, how important educational opportunities can be, and the endless possibility life holds. My father, John Moses, my first and most important advisor, helped me always to keep perspective and believed in my capabilities even when I did not. Finally, a most important thank you goes to Gabriela and Natalie Bell, who blessed me with their patience and spirit and deepened my commitment to possibility and justice.

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Introduction

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Hope. Possibility. Justice. Education holds the promise evoked by these three words. The problem is that for far too many students—students of color, poor and working-class students, and female students of all kinds—the educational system in the United States is failing grossly to fulfill its promise. As Kenneth Howe (1997) points out, the effort toward equality of educational opportunity has largely failed. Rather than nurturing hope, education causes despair. Instead of creating a sense of possibility, it constrains students' choices. In lieu of fostering social justice, it perpetuates oppression. History has shown us that important social changes are not often achieved in the United States without the force of law to compel them. In order for our educational system to fulfill its promise, we need to have education policies that are explicitly concerned with social justice.

A law professor at the University of Texas at Austin has said that students of color are unable to compete with white students at selective universities because within their cultures educational success is not held in high regard and academic "failure is not looked upon with disgrace" (Lino Graglia quoted in Mangan, 1997, p. 1). Perhaps it comes as no surprise that during this time of rightist resurgence, people in the United States might hold such opinions. But that such a comment can be made by a professor, at a press conference no less, shows that something is profoundly amiss within our educational institutions. W. E. B. DuBois anticipated that the main problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line. Similarly, Manning Marable (1995) prophesizes that the main problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of a

"multicultural democracy:" whether or not American political institutions and society can and will be radically restructured to recognize the genius and energy, the labor and aspirations of millions of people of color—Latinos, Asian Americans, American Indians, Arab Americans, African Americans, and others. (p. 117)

Indeed, issues of race and ethnicity comprise today, and will continue to comprise, some of the most controversial, thorny, value-laden, and passion-filled ethical and political debates in the United States. What is more, they are central to our country's history and identity (House, 1999). Their relationship to education in general and education policy in particular has resulted in no small amount of scholarship from within the educational research community as well as from a variety of other disciplines (e.g., Altbach & Lomotey, 1991; Appiah & Gutmann, 1996; Fullinwider, 1996). According to Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (1996), "racial injustice may be the most morally and intellectually vexing problem in the public life of this country" (p. 107). Through this book, I hope to make a unique contribution to the important debate surrounding that problem.

Research and experience remind us that students of color and poor students are losing out within our public educational system (Anyon, 1997; Della Piana, 1999; hooks, 1994; House, 1999; K. Howe, 1997; Kozol, 1991; Weis & Fine, 1993). At all levels, they are forced to assimilate, left out of the curriculum, steered away from pursuing higher education. Since the celebrated *Brown v. Board of Education of the City of Topeka* (1954) decision, the federal government and some state and local governments have voiced a commitment to equality of educational opportunity. Mere rhetoric would never erase inequalities, so measures designed to promote greater access and equitable outcomes were put into place by educators and policymakers during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The most substantive and far-reaching initiatives have included *bilingual education*, *multicultural curricula*, *affirmative action in higher education admissions*, and *remedial education*.¹

This book provides a philosophical defense of these four race-conscious education policies. What must the educational system do to promote social justice for students of color and poor students? What is required to help these students develop self-determination? Where and how do race-conscious education policies fit into this? These are the general questions addressed herein. I should note that I am using the term *race-conscious* not because I see race as a signifier for some kind of immutable biological or genetic difference between humans, but because of the socially constructed place that "race" has in our society. Marable (1995) makes a relevant point:

Race only becomes "real" as a social force when individuals or groups behave toward each other in ways which either reflect or perpetuate the hegemonic ideology of subordination and the patterns of inequality in daily life. These are, in turn, justified and explained by assumed differences in

physical and biological characteristics, or in theories of cultural deprivation or intellectual inferiority. (p. 186)

I chose these four policies because I believe that it is important to consider them together, where each in its own way serves to foster the development of self-determination and, subsequently, social justice. They have most often been examined separately, a practice that neglects the importance of the role each one plays within education for social change. John White (1991) posits that a "*justifiable* government policy is one which seeks to promote the autonomy of all its citizens and does not favor some at the expense of others" (p. 22). This is a crucial point, for it can be argued that race-conscious policies sometimes do favor some people at the expense of others. Critics of race-conscious policies point out that members of the dominant culture end up losing out when, for example, available monies are spent on things that do not benefit them directly, such as bilingual programs or the recruitment of students of color. The question, then, is whether or not those policies are still somehow justifiable. I contend that race-conscious education policies are defensible because they play a central role in the development of self-determination of students who otherwise are left with a deficient education.

To support my contention, I briefly trace the histories of each policy, identify underlying principles and assumptions, and examine relevant empirical research. I then measure these against a contemporary liberal framework. Here, the use of the term *liberal* draws on the tradition of liberal theory within political philosophy; this should be distinguished from common uses of *liberal* in reference to specific politicians or ideas. The main argument in *Embracing Race* hinges on the premise that self-determination (i.e., personal autonomy²) is required for justice. Race-conscious education policies are thus critical because they systematically foster the ideal of self-determination through the support of authenticity and favorable "contexts of choice" (Kymlicka, 1991, p. 166). It is important to point out that I see this ideal of self-determination as a moral one. I mean this in the sense that Charles Taylor (1991) outlines, that a moral ideal serves as a "picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where 'better' or 'higher' are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire" (p. 16). I embarked upon this task because my early research on multicultural education indicated that race-conscious policies often lack solid footing (Moses, 1997). In this time of political backlash against most race-conscious education policies, it is critical to be able to provide educators and policymakers with a principled and nuanced foundation, a foundation that

is clearly and thoughtfully articulated, not taken for granted. Often the real aims of these policies get lost within the turbulent political debates. While I am aware that these analyses involve complex sets of issues and that very difficult moral choices must be made, my aim is to show that these policies, though by no means perfect and perhaps outdated in some forms, in general promote greater self-determination for students of color and, consequently, social justice. The argument from self-determination provides a new perspective that goes beyond previous arguments for race-conscious policies. Although these policies have been defended on righteous and political grounds, the defenses have been vulnerable to charges of political correctness and identity politics. I want to appeal instead to the central importance of self-development for students of color, because all persons deserve a meaningful opportunity to become self-determining.

K. Howe (1992) observes that in discussing complex issues, the goal should be to "devise philosophically defensible interpretations that have some chance of winning broad acceptance" (p. 458). My hope is that this investigation of bilingual education, multicultural curricula, affirmative action, and remedial education as importantly related to the development of self-determination will win that type of acceptance.

OVERVIEW OF ARGUMENTS AND CHAPTERS

The debates over bilingual education, multicultural curricula, affirmative action, and remedial education policy are passionate and complicated. People take these issues very personally and end up having deeply entrenched opinions regarding them. However, missing from these discussions is an analysis of the policies that takes into account students' vastly different social contexts of choice. Oppressive societal structures may constrain individuals' contexts of choice and thus limit individuals' *real* choices in such a way that their *nominal* choices do not reflect their potential talents, abilities, and aspirations. For example, Jonathan Kozol (1991) describes the experiences of students of color who attend woefully underfunded and inadequate public schools. For many of these students, schooling does not lead to any opportunities, much less to ones that have meaning. It is no wonder that dropping out of school sometimes seems like the best available option. As Kozol (1991) has shown, schools in neighborhoods of different race and class makeup provide their students with quite disparate educations.

Simone de Beauvoir (1952) makes a relevant distinction between a life of immanence and one of transcendence. A life of immanence is characterized by a passive acceptance of the roles into which we are

socialized. By contrast, a life of transcendence is characterized by the active and free pursuit of one's possibilities in order to redefine one's future. Supporters of race-conscious education policy emphasize that the persistence of institutionalized racism in the U.S. educational system and the country as a whole halts the ability of marginalized students to lead lives of transcendence. They argue that measures taking racial and ethnic factors into account in the distribution of opportunities are some times warranted and justifiable in the interests of social justice (Gutmann, 1987). Hence abolishing race-consciousness in education policy will likely result in a return to a more unequal, pre-*Brown* state of affairs; students of color would be able to achieve only the inauthentic life of immanence that de Beauvoir describes.

Now, self-determination, like the concept of autonomy, can be seen as being at odds with a concern for persons' social and cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, the ideal of self-determination as I conceptualize it is actually centrally concerned with social and cultural contexts and authenticity. I rely heavily on the work of philosopher Charles Taylor (1991, 1994) in making this important connection. We must first understand that human life is fundamentally dialogical, relational in character. It is through our acquisition of what Taylor (1991) calls "rich languages of expression" that we become fully human actors, capable of understanding ourselves and defining our identities. The only way to learn these languages is in relation and exchange with others, especially those who are most significant in our lives, who matter to us. The idea here is that one's identity and sense of oneself are not formed just through self-reflection, as strict individualism might have us believe; they are formed through relationships with important forces in one's life: family, community, peers, teachers, and the like.

So, authentic identities are defined in dialogue with (whether in harmony or struggle) the identities our family and community want to recognize in us. Even as we grow and develop, these defining relationships last a lifetime. Thus one's schooling can serve to enhance or it can serve to harm one's developing sense of oneself and consequently one's ability to imagine options and possibilities for one's life. When it serves to enhance one's development of self-determination, the end result is threefold: Self-determining persons can make unforced and meaningful choices about their lives without having to sacrifice their secure sense of personal and cultural identity; they can make these choices from among good options; and they can act with the knowledge that who they are is worthy of public respect and recognition.

To go along with all of this, readers have to accept the following controversial points. First, education *ought to* play a central role in di-

minishing oppression. To do this, one must reject the notion that education is not (at least partially) responsible for combating social problems. In doing nothing, it actually serves to perpetuate the injustices; hence, it should certainly strive to combat them. Second, self-determination is a valid aim of education. One must therefore reject the criticism that self-determination is too individualistic a notion to do any good for marginalized students. And third, these arguments can actually matter. To accept this, one must believe in the power of thought to provoke action.

Both those who support race-conscious policies and those who oppose them tend to agree on the value of the ideals of equality, freedom, and justice. Because of this, a defense of race-conscious policy based on self-determination as a fundamental aim of a good education hopefully will resonate with those on both sides of the debate. This type of principled defense can add to the conversation by speaking to both liberals and conservatives. Those left of center still may protest that the principle of self-determination is too individualistic, while those on the right may take issue with how I apply it. My challenge, then, is to show that personal autonomy as self-determination is indeed a key aim of an education that supports justice and democracy, and that race-conscious policies are the best way to help oppressed students to become self-determining in a meaningful way. These are the main aims of this book. In the next chapter, I concentrate on the first aim. Subsequent chapters focus on the second aim.

The book is made up of seven chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 focuses on self-determination as a crucial underpinning of an education for justice and democracy. The ideal of an education that fosters social justice is largely rooted in hope—hope that the social and structural situation into which a student is born will not predetermine her or his aspirations and possibilities in life. A good education should help students to develop in ways not necessarily imagined by dominant society. With this in mind, Chapter 2 examines the concept of personal autonomy within political philosophy. I begin by establishing that in liberal political theory there is a strand of liberalism that recognizes the critical importance of not only the individual, but of the individual within her or his community context. It is important to distinguish this contemporary liberalism from the more traditional strands of liberalism in order for it to adequately support race-consciousness in policy efforts. This type of liberalism has its roots in the philosophy of John Dewey (1927, 1930), and is now supported by scholars like Taylor (1991) and Joseph Raz (1986). It embraces a perfectionist stance on the good, rather than a neutral one. This is significant because a perfectionist liberal tradition allows for a focus on an ideal such as self-determination as a specific constituent of the good life.

There are two main conditions associated with self-determination. The first condition of self-determination is that persons have a favorable social context within which to make the significant choices about their lives. This affects the character of people's choices; even if a choice is not directly coerced, it cannot properly be thought of as a meaningful choice if it is made within an impoverished context. The second condition is that persons maintain or develop an authentic cultural identity. The identity that individuals subscribe to is one that they want to have, not one that they internalize due to oppression or one that is forced upon them. This enables people to avoid having to sacrifice their authentic personal and cultural identity in order to attain success as defined by mainstream culture. Thus, they can be true to themselves and become self-determining. Education policies must play a part in this process.

The next four chapters focus on the application of the contemporary liberal framework developed in Chapter 2 to race-conscious education policies. I investigate how each one is related in different and complex ways to the framework. For each policy has its own connection to the development of self-determination, and some connections are more direct than others. Each of the policies and practices I examine leads directly to the creation of a favorable context of choice, whereas they have both direct and indirect relationships with the development of authentic cultural identities. In addition, these policies affect both K-12 and higher education. Rather than maintaining a strict separation between K-12 and higher education, the analyses underscore the important linkages between them in the struggle for social justice.

Chapter 3 examines bilingual education policy in light of Arizona's Proposition 203 and California's Proposition 227, its farthest reaching challenges to date. I defend bilingual education policy as an important way of ensuring that English language learners (who are primarily Latino and Asian American) receive an education that improves their contexts of choice and supports the worth of their cultural identities. When English language learners are able to learn English while at the same time progress academically in all other subjects, they have the best chance to achieve academically and to have meaningful educational opportunities. Bilingual education thus helps English language learners to become self-determining by publicly recognizing their particular cultures and by expanding their range of options for choice.

In Chapter 4, I explore the controversy surrounding multicultural curricula at both the public school and college levels. I view multicultural education as an educational approach that teaches students what they need to know in order to grow and succeed within a multicultural democracy. Students are taught that there exists a mainstream culture, but that it is not superior to other cultures, and that different cultures are

worthy of public recognition and respect. The main points of argument I use to defend a broad policy of multicultural education are that it contributes to an equal respect for different cultures and to a substantial reduction of oppression. Students of color and white students alike learn about multiple perspectives and thus can begin to question dominant societal structures. The nature of the school curriculum has a deep impact on the quality of students' social contexts of choice. It also affects how students feel about their own cultures and those of others. This is why it is so important for students to receive an education that is multicultural. A monocultural curriculum serves to stunt the students' sense of self and their ideas of what is possible in life. If, to take an obvious example, a history class shares only the stories of white leaders and heroes, or a literature class highlights only white male authors, students collaterally learn that Latinos and African Americans, among others, contributed little to our nation's history or to the canon of literature. Multicultural curricula provide one avenue for the educational system to ensure that it does not perpetuate an exclusive and oppressive status quo.

In Chapter 5, I look at perhaps the most controversial race-conscious education policy of all, affirmative action. The discussion is limited to affirmative action in higher education admissions. There have been many challenges to affirmative action policy, including California's Proposition 209, which abolished affirmative action in that state, and court cases against the University of Texas Law School, the University of Washington Law School, and the University of Michigan. These challenges have not adequately taken into account the crucial role that affirmative action policy plays in fostering the self-determination of students of color. In this chapter, I undertake a thorough review of the most common arguments against affirmative action: it amounts to reverse discrimination; it causes unqualified students to be admitted to college; it harms more than helps students of color in the long run; it overlooks those students who need it most; and it perpetuates a society that is far too race-conscious already. After responding to each argument, I then fashion my own positive argument for affirmative action, relying in part on Gutmann's (1987) claim that affirmative action is just inasmuch as race, ethnicity, and sex constitute relevant qualifications for admission to colleges and universities. I bolster the qualifications argument with the contention that affirmative action is required because it contributes greatly to the development of self-determination of students of color, primarily by vastly improving their social contexts of choice.

Chapter 6 focuses on the debate over remedial education policy. I am concerned with remedial education at the college level, most specifically the types of courses that are offered at 4-year institutions in order

to help students rise to college level in basic subjects. There has been little philosophical attention to the remedial education controversy.³ Of course, that fact in itself is not a justification for the need for such research. The remedial education debate is important both for its own sake, in terms of how the availability of remedial courses affects college opportunities, and how it fits into the larger debates over race-conscious education policies discussed in this book. The debate about remedial courses centers on the question of whether or not remediation belongs at prestigious four-year institutions, and concomitantly, whether or not students who may need such courses merit admission. Remedial education opponents argue that remediation should take place at lower level and lower status institutions. In examining the controversy, I aim to defend the place of remediation at 4-year colleges. I argue that remedial education, like the other race-conscious policies I discuss, plays a meaningful role in creating more favorable contexts of choice for oppressed students. It supports students after they have gained admission to college so that they may succeed.

Ultimately, if we do nothing and we say nothing to protest the move away from race-conscious education policies, then we will be left with nothing but the empty and meaningless rhetoric of democracy and opportunity. This work is my attempt to say something worthwhile in defense of bilingual education, multicultural curricula, affirmative action, and remedial education. These initiatives are linked in important ways in their ability to foster self-determination among students of color and thus contribute to educational and social justice.

Let us now begin unraveling just how this is so.

NOTES

1. Not all of the four policies and practices I will examine are federally mandated; while bilingual education and affirmative action are federal policies, multicultural curriculum policy and remedial education policy are local ones that are generally established by individual schools and colleges.

2. Herein I will be using *self-determination* and *autonomy* interchangeably. The type of personal autonomy for which I argue will be fleshed out in Chapter 2 as self-determination. Briefly, it is characterized by the positive freedom to rule one's own life, which is a more robust notion than merely the absence of coercion (negative freedom).

3. I have seen only one piece within political philosophy and none within the philosophy of education (see Fullinwider, 1999).