

2012

## *Resuscitating Bad Science: Eugenics Past and Present*

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### Recommended Citation

Winfield, A. G. (2012) "Resuscitating Bad Science: Eugenics Past and Present." In *The Assault on Public Education* Watkins, W. H., editor, New York: Teachers College Press.

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# Resuscitating Bad Science

## Eugenics Past and Present

*Ann G. Winfield*

One hundred years ago, the discourse among America's economic, political, and scientific elite focused on "weeding out" the "unfit" people of the nation in order to make way for "well-born," "superior" people to flourish and achieve the so-called "American Dream." Now, in the 21st century, we are witness to a modern version of the same agenda, an agenda that serves to devalue people. The push for privatization and corporate models of education provides structure around the assumption that some people are worth more than others (Kohn, 2004; Woods, 2004). Reformers who wave around international test score comparisons in support of their ever more draconian pursuit of test-driven mandates fail to see the irony: What those comparisons show is not that the United States is behind, but that the United States fails its poor, Black, and Brown children. If we compare American White, middle-class and wealthy students with similar students in other industrialized countries, the test scores are comparable, if not better (Berliner, 2005). Current school reform agendas do not seek to rectify this problem. Rather, these agendas show that profit margins now outweigh humanity in the public sphere (Gould, 1996; Iverson, 2005).

The message we hear today is less caustic than it was a century ago: We no longer talk about forced sterilization of the feebleminded, but the basic ideological rationale that allows us to live in a society that is so rewarding of the wealthy, and so punishing of the poor, remains intact (Winfield, 2007). Nineteenth-century social Darwinism and 20th-century eugenics spell out in stark terms who among us is worthy and who among us is not (Haller, 1963; Hasian, 1996). The difference today is that the language is largely hidden in

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discourses of accountability, choice, and social justice (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Meanwhile, the fundamental assumption embedded in the national identity about terms like *equality* and *freedom* has been sucked out of the fabric of the way our nation operates. Instead, we live in a “brave new world” that enacts an ideological definition of basic human worth. This is evident in many places, none more starkly, or with more dire consequences for the future, than the current corporate school reform agenda.

## IDEOLOGY AND REFORM

Public education is under siege. What we are witnessing is a modern manifestation of the same ideological opposition to the very idea of public education that existed a century ago. Using arbitrary measures of “standards” and “accountability,” the majority of students, those with the least cultural capital, are cast as “at-risk” of failure, defective, and in need of remediation. These are the “unfit” of the modern era and are consistently characterized as lazy, parasitic, promiscuous, uneducable, and in need of surveillance and control. In what can only be described as a direct expression of eugenic ideology, these human beings are regarded not as a mere nuisance; rather, they represent a grave threat to the well-being of the “more deserving” among us. Neoliberal school reform quietly reaffirms the notion of societal worth at the same time as it harnesses this segment of the population to be in service to the capitalist imperative, that is, profit (Lipman, 2004).

The undercurrent of dissent toward the whole notion that all Americans are entitled to a free, quality public education, an undercurrent as old as the nation itself, is rooted in the decades of the early 20th century when the modern school system was being formed within a societal context of dominant eugenic ideology. During this period an ideological battle was waged, hinging on the argument that schools were a form of charity that disrupted natural law and that success in society was an expression of one’s inherent, genetically endowed worth. Given that this battle has taken place at the expense of the well-being of generations of schoolchildren, a deeper understanding of the ideological roots of this hierarchy of human worth is needed.

Public education has seen many changes since the early 19th century when the country first considered the benefits of an educated citizenry. From the establishment of schools for domestic servitude for Black and Hispanic girls, schools for mechanical arts for boys, and boarding schools for Native American children, poor, Black, and Brown children have never been the beneficiaries of education’s high aspirations (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001). In fact,

aside from the challenges to the status quo that occurred during the era of the Civil Rights Movement from 1950 to 1980, there has been little to disrupt to the perpetuation of the oppression, segregation, experimentation, denigration, and disregard faced by all but the elite of American society.

Now we find ourselves, 30 years later, in an era characterized by unprecedented testing and accountability policies. Reformers have co-opted the language of social justice to declare that they will “leave no child behind” while at the same time schools are being closed, teachers fired, and students disregarded and displaced in a relentless subterfuge that has been percolating and building pressure for decades, beating down the hopes and aspirations of countless schoolchildren, their families, and teachers nationwide (Lipman, 2004).

The attack is now morphing into a new kind of “race” where the least powerful among us continue to be pathologized. Success in America is presented as the result of intelligence coupled with hard work and the right attitude. Never mind poverty and its attendant problems. Never mind that the most recent spate of “reforms,” which slither in on gilded-tongue language like No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, transformation, and turnaround, are models that attack schools predominantly populated with poor, Black, and Brown children (Kohn, 2010). Never mind the inconvenient resemblance to past “utopian” visions that sought to sort, classify, and categorize students according to perceived racial purity—using tests as the mechanism to quantify and measure their “data.” Never mind that the legislators and policymakers who dream up and implement these reforms typically choose for their own children to go to private schools where the specter of testing and all the state and federal mandates besieging schools are not required.

In May 2009, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the Obama administration’s intent to close 5,000 “underperforming” schools across the country. We know that this means the draconian firing of every teacher with no professional evaluation attached, continues the attack on communities of non-White, poor, and immigrant people—and we know this is something that would never be tolerated in wealthy, suburban White communities. Current proposed reforms don’t come from the experience and research of professional educators, but are an expression of corporate ideology. In communities where wholesale firings have already taken place, veteran teachers have been replaced with often uncertified, certainly less qualified new teachers who are forced to work longer hours and for much-reduced pay (Ravitch, 2010). These new teachers are compliant; they tend to be fearful of standing up for themselves, are less likely to advocate for their students, and face tremendous pressure not to participate in unions or other forms of organized articulation of an alternative vision.

Twenty-first-century reforms, including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, are not far-removed policy mandates without real-world consequences, nor are they some gimmicky flash-in-the-pan political talking points that will fade away as so many have done before. What we are witnessing is a modern manifestation of ideological opposition to the very idea of public education altogether, founded on the notion that the majority of the students, teachers, and families with the least cultural capital are defective and in need of remediation.

This is nothing less than a form of ideological warfare, chipping away, weakening support over time, until the time to strike is upon us. It is upon us. For generations the majority of poor, Black, Brown, “socially deviant” children and adults have been targeted by policies and practices developed on an ideological foundation informed by eugenics. Just as racial purification was touted as society’s best answer to poverty and disease 100 years ago, policymakers have long used arguments that ring of social justice to justify mandates that are decidedly unjust. This chapter will trace the influence of eugenic ideology for its role in creating a hierarchy of human worth (in schools and elsewhere) in this country and will conclude with implications for the present moment.

### “RACE” TO THE TOP: HISTORIC FOUNDATIONS

It was prolific English scientist and statistician Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911), cousin of Charles Darwin, who developed the term *eugenics* in 1883 to explain his scheme to improve the human race through selective breeding (Black, 2003; Kevles, 1985). Basing his theory of relative human worth on the success of the long lines of wealthy Englishmen on both sides of his ancestral tree, Galton believed that “if a twentieth part of the cost and pains were spent in measures for the improvement of the human race that is spent on the improvement of the breed of horses and cattle, what a galaxy of genius might we not create” (Galton, 1865, cited in Spiro, 2009, p. 121). Indeed, one of the first formal groups in the United States to form a committee on eugenics was the American Breeders Association, which applied its knowledge of horse and cattle breeding to the improvement of “human stock.” For reasons that will become clear, societal improvement through racial purification caught on quickly and it wasn’t long before the phrase *blood tells* was firmly embedded in the common lexicon. Galton’s epiphany that the success of his ancestral line was in his genes and, more important, not in the genes of the other 96% of the human race, served to expand and solidify the narrative of meritocracy and is reflected today in the nation’s wealth distribution.

From this curious beginning at the turn of the 20th century, eugenicists during the 1910s and 1920s successfully pursued their goal of social betterment through forcible sterilization, anti-miscegenation laws, and immigration restriction, along with sorting, testing, and tracking policies implemented in schools across the country. This ideology of human worth was pushed by powerful legislators, philanthropists, social workers, and teachers on the front lines of the movement. Reformers targeted both urban and rural unwed mothers, young boys who masturbated, and anyone whose race, poverty, isolation, language, or habits rendered them unacceptable by “polite” society. These people were deemed mentally “unfit” and those who were not blind, deaf, epileptic, alcoholic, or paupers were labeled with the dubious term *feeble-minded*.

The basic tenets of eugenic ideology have long supplied, either consciously or subconsciously, an explanation for the establishment, evolution, and perpetuation of inequality. One major spokesman for the eugenics movement was eminent psychologist and eugenicist Edward Thorndike. Thorndike, one of the “Fathers of Curriculum,” played a leading role in the establishment and form of our modern system of education. The eugenic explanation for human inequality is captured a *New York Times* article by Thorndike (1927b) that coincided with the release of his book *The Measurement of Intelligence* (1927a). Thorndike (1927b) wrote:

Men are born unequal in intellect, character, and skill. It is impossible and undesirable to make them equal by education. The proper work of education is to improve all men according to their several possibilities, in ways consistent with the welfare of all. (para. 5)

Thorndike reflects a common belief that has persisted into the present, that social inequality is an expression of hereditary worth. This little nugget has served for nearly a century as justification for governmentally sanctioned and perpetuated racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and abuse for countless numbers of people. What today we identify as the racist fury of White supremacist extremists was, for the first 3 decades of the 20th century, the language of the dominant culture in the United States. Newspapers crowed about the winners of “fitter family” contests, and ministers extolled the virtues of eugenically harmonious life far from the crime, dirt, and degeneracy of the poor and immigrant “unfit” populations.

The common consensus was that American culture, defined as middle- and upper class White culture, was under grave threat from the throngs of overly fertile “dysgenic” poor, immigrant, and otherwise undesirable elements of

the population. This consensus was the result of a clarion call of “progressive” rhetoric supplied by America’s best known families, philanthropists, and top scientists, and carried out by the nation’s teachers, social workers, and countless institutions and organizations that believed they were working for the “greater good” of society. Public education, which was largely formed during the height of the eugenics movement, has been a primary arena for the enactment of a publicly embraced hierarchy of human worth (Selden, 1999; Winfield, 2007).

### THE BREEDING GROUND FOR EUGENIC IDEOLOGY

The notion that some humans are more worthy than others is nothing new. In fact, intellectual history has been saturated with it since Plato and Aristotle pontificated over 2,000 years ago, making early-20th-century eugenic ideology a mere blip in the grand scheme of things. Because of the way eugenicists were able to translate the deeply embedded racism that existed immediately prior to the 20th century into the newly minted progressive sentiment in the 1910s and 1920s, eugenic ideology is especially instructive of the way the past manifests itself in the present (Cremin, 1961; Kuhl, 1994; Pickens, 1968).

To understand the context of the times, we must go back to the end of the Civil War, when Charles Darwin introduced his theory of evolution in his magnum opus *On the Origin of Species* (1859). For the next 40 years, many scientists and policymakers used the *survival of the fittest* language of Darwin’s theory to craft decades of oppressive social thought and policy in the form of social Darwinism. It was commonly accepted that those who possessed wealth, power, and influence in America did so because they were more evolved: They were, to use Darwin’s terminology, *fitter*. At the same time as this social Darwinist foundation was becoming entrenched in the public sphere, the industrial revolution was underway, capitalism was idolized, society was enamored with the promise of science, and public sentiment was becoming increasingly progressive. This combination of social phenomena provided a ripe new breeding ground for eugenic ideology to flourish and for the next generation to carry its tenets forward.

As is the case today, the early decades of the 20th century saw an incredible centralization of wealth and power in which a few families controlled the majority of industrial and economic capital. A vast separation between the rich and poor existed, with the rich filling their time with art, music, literature, theatre, education, and science. The modern environmental movement emerged during this period as eugenicists like Madison Grant (author of *The Passing of the Great Race* and longtime head of the Natural History Museum in Washington, DC),

representing the purveyors of so-called “high culture,” emphasized the importance of fresh air, clean water, and space in which to raise their large, vigorous families. These members of the economic and ideological elite were not subject, of course, to the squalid conditions the poor endured where poverty, abusive work conditions, and lack of sanitation led to disease and death.

Politicians and businessman were focused on creating political and economic stability, while the working poor searched for reasoned answers to societal problems and vigorously protested the ravages of industrial working conditions and crowded cities. As Zinn (1980) notes, a fervor was created by a “sudden economic crises leading to high prices and lost jobs, the lack of food and water,” spurned on by the daily reality of “the freezing winters, the hot tenements in the summer, the epidemics of disease, [and the] deaths of children” (p. 215). These uprisings occasionally were directed toward the rich, but just as often this anger was translated into “racial hatred for blacks, religious warfare against Catholics, [and] nativist fury against immigrants” (p. 216). Along both ends of the economic spectrum, racist hostility became an easy substitute for class frustration.

Finally, with these events and attitudes as a foundation, the late 19th century saw enormous economic growth and a level of corporatization that has continued into the present. Standard Oil, U.S. Steel Corporation, J.P. Morgan, Chase Manhattan Bank, and American Telephone and Telegraph all had profits in the millions by 1890. From the 1920s to the present, reformers and policymakers have sought to apply business practices to education, arguing that the efficiency innovations in industry that allowed the profit margins of giant corporate entities to swell also would deal effectively with the task of educating America’s children most efficiently (Rury, 2005). These policies inevitably have led to perpetuation of the perception that some students are defective or not as likely to result in the best product. This ongoing belief and dedication to business practices and the idea of efficiency have had tremendous consequences for generations of children.

The 1930s witnessed profound change as the population, reeling from the 1929 stock market crash and ensuing economic depression, responded with a new questioning of the status quo. Thousands of banks and businesses closed within months and “the economy was stunned, barely moving” (Zinn, 1980, p. 378). Just before laying off 75,000 workers in 1931, Henry Ford explained that the problem was “the average man won’t really do a day’s work unless he is caught and cannot get out of it. There is plenty of work to do if people would just do it” (quoted in Zinn, 1980, p. 378). News clippings of the era provide a glimpse into the continued atmosphere of crisis and fear surrounding the poor and immigrant segments of the population.



*Chicago, April 1, 1932.* Five hundred schoolchildren, most with haggard faces and in tattered clothes, paraded through Chicago's downtown section to the Board of Education offices to demand that the school system provide them with food.

*Boston, June 3, 1932.* Twenty-five hungry children raided a buffet lunch set up for Spanish War veterans during a Boston parade. Two automobile-loads of police were called to drive them away. (Zinn, 1980, pp. 380–381)

Although they promoted the argument that hard work and attitude would lead to success and that America's best feature was that it was fundamentally a meritocracy, the wealthy didn't believe this themselves and needed a way to argue that grinding poverty was an expression of something else besides corporate greed. Enter genetics. The rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's theory of inheritance was prominent in early eugenic rhetoric and continued to have an enormous influence on public willingness to embrace the idea, even though the geneticists rather quickly (1915) disproved the specious claims of eugenics regarding the heritability of various behaviors and social positions (Paul, 1998).

One of the leading proselytizers of eugenic rhetoric in the United States was Charles Benedict Davenport (1866–1944), who is credited with giving form to the eugenics movement for decades (Spiro, 2009). In 1904, 30 miles from New York City on Long Island's North Shore, Charles Davenport set up the Cold Spring Harbor research station dedicated to the study of eugenics. Convinced that the explanation for human difference in society was an expression of heredity, Davenport dedicated his career to the study of inheritance, with a goal of having data on every man, woman, and child in America. Unable to experiment on human beings directly, Davenport set about collecting inheritance data by developing a "family records" form and distributing hundreds of copies to medical, mental, and educational institutions, as well as to individuals, college alumni lists, and scientists (Kevles, 1985).

The family records forms distributed by Davenport, and funded by the wealthy, eventually formed a large repository of data, which provided the basis of Davenport's book *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* (1911). Davenport devoted over half the pages of his book to a discussion of the inheritance of dozens of human characteristics, including mental deficiency, pauperism, feeble-mindedness, sexual deviance, and laziness. Additionally, Eugenics Record Office data served as "the source of bulletins, memoirs, and books, on such topics as sterilization, the exclusion from the United States of inferior germ plasm, and the inheritance of pellagra, multiple sclerosis, tuberculosis, goiter, nomadism, athletic ability, and temperament" (Kevles, 1985, p. 56). Cited by more than one-third of high school biology texts between World War I and World War II (Selden, 1999),

Davenport's book is considered by many to be the era's most important treatise on eugenics (Ludmerer, 1972). From 1920 to 1938, the Eugenics Record Office published the "avidly racist and restrictionist" tract *Eugenical News* (Haller, 1963, p. 149). Financially backed by the Carnegies, the movement mastered dissemination using an army of society's most highly regarded scientists, philanthropists, clergy, academics, social workers, and teachers. In short, the message was everywhere.

## EUGENICS AND TESTING: ROOTED IN THE PAST

When we consider current research on, for example, the disproportion of Black and Hispanic students in special education, race, and graduation rates; race and incarceration rates; and race and college attendance, we see that the present is infused with the past. The reality for poor and non-White children in the United States seems to have been anticipated by Herbert Henry Goddard, the first American psychologist to recognize the potential of intelligence testing for furthering eugenic ideals. Differences in children required different educational responses, Goddard (1912) wrote, and, furthermore, the greatest threat to society was the "high grade," or "moron," type of feeble mind because although those individuals were unfit (but not unable) to reproduce, they nevertheless were able to function in society and thus were a threat to the gene pool.

Here we have a group who, when children in school, cannot learn the things that are given them to learn, because through their mental defect, they are incapable of mastering abstractions. They never learn to read sufficiently well to make reading pleasurable or of practical use to them. Under our present compulsory school system and our present course of study, we compel these children . . . and thus they worry along through a few grades until they are fourteen and then leave school, not having learned anything of value or that can help them to make even a meager living in the world. (Goddard, 1912, p. 16)

This was the central dogma of eugenics, that "poverty and its pathologies, like affluence and its comforts, were in the blood—and not in the environment in which human beings were conceived, born, and developed" (Chase, 1975, p. 149).

The new field of psychology was a Petrie dish of eugenic invective. IQ psychologists were steeped in eugenic ideology and to a large extent it shaped their science (Gersh, 1981). The most prestigious psychology department was led by G. Stanley Hall at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Hall, long

considered to be one of the “Fathers of Curriculum” (along with John Franklin Bobbitt, E. L. Thorndike, and James Cattell), is credited with developing one of the first applied forms of psychology known as scientific pedagogy. This is well documented in educational history—what is not documented is the extent to which Hall and his compatriots were steeped in eugenic ideology. Hall (1924) felt strongly that class divisions were inherited, writing that each child:

will be not only tested from childhood on, but assigned his grade, and be assured the place that allows the freest scope for doing the best that is in him . . . some are born to be hewers of wood and drawers of water . . . and are fortunate if they can be made self-supporting; practical slavery under one name or another must always be their lot. . . . Ranks and classes are inherent in human nature . . . and each must accept the rating that consigns him his true and just place in the hierarchy of the world's work. (p. 465)

Hall trained a generation of educational psychologists who, it might be noted, were a very close group, often attending the same schools and joining the same organizations, and who were to become the nation's testers.

Psychologists, many of whom were part of the economic and cultural elite, were motivated to produce a measurement tool that would “prove” the intellectual superiority of Whites. Such superiority was, for them, evidenced by history; the “failure” of Reconstruction and the obvious “backwardness” of Africa, Asia, and Latin America showed that, beyond a doubt, Nordics were the only race capable of governing themselves (Gossett, 1963). The quest for a “normal distribution” infused decades of educational psychology research. The mission was twofold: to provide the public with a scientific understanding of heredity and to develop a test that would “prove” hierarchical inequity.

America had long clung to its meritocratic narrative, so it was a fairly easy task for prominent educational psychologists to convince the public that education and the nation's welfare would best be served by subjecting students to tests that would determine their rightful place in society. The motivation went beyond achieving the “natural order,” however; elite Americans were afraid. Goddard reflected the national sentiment in a series of lectures at Princeton, where he explained that “the disturbing fear is that the masses—the seventy or even the eighty-six million [of 105 million U.S. population]—will take matters into their own hands” (quoted in Gersh, 1981, p. 49 n. 5). The solution, it was thought, according to Terman in his classic book *The Measurement of Intelligence* (1916), was that students ought to be “segregated in special classes [and] given instruction that is concrete and practical,” because although they cannot master abstractions, “they can often be made efficient workers” (p. 92).

Here we begin to see the direct connection to present circumstances. In addition to the determination to test every child, Terman and other reformers often invoked monetary thrift in their rhetoric about education, explaining, for example, that “between a third and a half of the school children fail to progress,” and that the United States is spending more than 10% of the \$400 million education budget for instruction that is “devoted to re-teaching children what they have already been taught but have failed to learn” (Terman, 1916, p. 3). Much was made of the “waste” of energy and money put into teaching unteachable students and, in particular, students who were termed “high-grade defectives,” meaning they could function (and procreate) but otherwise were destined for “practical slavery.”

In light of the general consensus regarding the “unteachability” of so many schoolchildren, the field of psychology and the general public who read Terman’s book must have been very relieved when they read the following:

It is safe to predict that in the near future intelligence tests will bring tens of thousands of these high-grade defectives under the surveillance and protection of society. This will ultimately result in curtailing the reproduction of feeble-mindedness and in the elimination of an enormous amount of crime, pauperism, and industrial inefficiency. It is hardly necessary to emphasize that the high-grade cases, the type now so frequently overlooked, are precisely the ones whose guardianship it is most important for the State to assume. (p. 7)

In light of the present widespread use of testing to sort and categorize students, not to mention the demographic makeup of the prison industrial complex, the dropout rate, and the nation’s wealth distribution, it seems as if Terman and the eugenicists got their wish.

## EUGENIC IDEOLOGY AND PRESENT-DAY SCHOOL REFORM

The story we tell ourselves is the reflection we want to see and is framed largely by the collective memory of the generations that preceded us. Take, for example, the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, KS*, which targeted legal segregation in schools. This was, there is no doubt, a monumental moment in our nation’s history, but to focus solely on this moment is to lose the avalanche of additional information that is needed to understand the present. From post-World War II racist housing and banking policies that led to present-day demographic segregation (Rury, 2005) and

wealth disparity, to the most restrictive and punishing educational reforms being aimed at urban schools (Lipman, 2004), there is no shortage of ways to trace ideological power in American life. However, the historical dividing line that marks the starting point for the present era, few would argue, is the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980.

During the 1980 presidential election cycle, the nation was close to bursting with pent-up racist hostility and resentment in response to civil rights gains of the previous decades (Rury, 2005). The discontent was global and launched what is now referred to as the “conservative restoration” orchestrated by Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Harvey, 2005). The consequences were, and continue to be, dire for education, representing a substantially qualitative shift in the arenas of policy and reform. Starting with the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report on the state of public education issued by a Reagan-appointed presidential commission, it effectively was communicated to the public that the reforms (put in place for poor, non-White, immigrant and disabled children) of the past 2 decades had weakened us as a country and that we needed to be fearful of a *rising tide of mediocrity* (echoing the *rising tide of feeble-mindedness* of earlier decades). All this led to generations of labeling “at-risk” children and ever-thickening layers of so-called standards and accountability in education purportedly set up to achieve equity. School reform ever since has been consumed by the business of tracking, testing, and sorting students just as before, yet with a new veneer of the language of social justice.

The re-establishment of a nearly impermeable funnel (schools) for poor and non-White children to be kept in what eugenicists called their rightful place, on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder, has been effective. Since 1980 we have seen the re-establishment of the pre-Keynesian wealth distribution charts of the 1920s and 1930s, where the top 5% of the population control over 50% of the wealth and the bottom 50% of the population control less than 3% of the wealth (Harvey, 2005). During the 1960s and 1970s, wealth distribution actually evened out some, and we know that even the slightest elevation in socioeconomic status can have a tremendous positive effect on the lives of millions and is reflected in school “success” (Berliner, 2005). And of course, we continue to fund schools primarily through property tax, as we have done since the early 1800s, which in itself is a built-in system of inequity.

Almost everything we recognize about public schools today was developed and conceived by educational psychologists, scientists, and legislators who were wholly wedded to the idea that society could be made better by defining, identifying, and controlling who was worthy (Selden, 1999; Winfield,

2007). In other words, eugenic ideology is ubiquitous in American public education. Although the infusion has been there all along, and saw tremendous challenge between 1950 and 1980, reforms of the post-1980 era have served to institutionalize stratified society in ways previously unseen in America. It is possible to find the effects in multiple places, many of which have already been mentioned, but it is within testing and the curriculum (both hidden and overt) that the social philosophy of biological determinism (i.e., eugenics) is most evident.

A survey of current trends reveals that testing requires of practitioners the same emphasis on “efficiency” that characterized the application of eugenic ideology to school reform during the 1920s and 1930s. Teaching is reduced to piecemeal curriculum, bite-sized chunks of decontextualized information delivered in a fashion most suitable for memorization and regurgitation (Gould, 1995). When we think of the transformative possibilities inherent in more progressive, student-centered approaches to the craft, we can see that the kind of curriculum required by testing is perfect for maintaining the status quo. Students who are perceived as failures, and who too often internalize that message, are less likely to be a threat to the current system.

The deep mistrust embedded in current reform agendas for students, their families, and communities has been expressed by an increasingly Panoptic model of surveillance in schools (Kohl, 2009). From cameras in every hallway and classroom, to practices that require elementary students to march from place to place in school with their wrists behind them as if they have handcuffs on, school administrators are expressing their unexamined fear and contempt in ever more controlling and suggestive ways. Besides that fact that they can’t touch one another or “fool around,” students are lined up this way because “it’s also good education for their future,” according to a school principal (cited in Kohl, 2009, p. 1). Couched in a liberal desire to “help,” to address the needs of “at-risk” youth, there is an abiding blindness to the extent to which we create what we expect to see.

Embedded eugenic ideology exists, too, in the scripted, proscriptive, curriculum encased in slick packaging by textbook monopolies like McGraw Hill (Kohn, 2002). Teachers in “failing schools,” and, by default, their students, are subject to manuals that dictate what they say, and when and to whom they say it, all timed and monitored by emissaries from the front office with little variation in form, severity, or implementation. Underlying contempt for public education, and educational theory altogether, is expressed as well in the dramatic rise in slipshod teacher certification programs. Presumably, the

thinking is: Since teachers are told what to do, timed to the second, and surveilled anyway, who needs teachers who think, or who have a grasp of the historical, sociological, and philosophical realities of their chosen profession? Over half a century has passed since the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and yet we have created a school system that is more segregated than it was during the 1950s when the *Brown* decision was handed down (Kozol, 2005).

The human hierarchy created by eugenic ideology is evident in the very solutions we seek to dismantle seemingly intractable problems like the impact of poverty. Take, for example, the Ruby Payne phenomenon as an example of both corporate profit-mongering and pathologization. Despite decades of research that has discredited the “deficit approach” to explaining opportunity and access in education, Ruby Payne is indoctrinating a generation of teachers with a series of books that contain “a stream of stereotypes, providing perfect illustrations for how deficit-model scholars frame poverty” (Gorski, 2006, p. 8). District superintendents intent on solving the “poverty problem” in their schools are paying millions of dollars to Payne’s company, Aha!, Inc., for textbooks and workshop trainings for thousands of teachers nationwide.

Payne’s overall message is that poor people are slow processors, that they can’t be made to think critically, and that the best way to teach them is to know their “culture,” which she presents as the most stereotyped imaginable, steeped in historic drivel. Payne sounds like a eugenicist right out of the 1920s as she explains that “the typical pattern in poverty for discipline is to verbally chastise the child, or physically beat the child, then forgive and feed him/her . . . individuals in poverty are seldom going to call the police. . . . [because] the police may be looking for them” (quoted in Gorski, 2006, p. 37). Poverty in this conception, a conception that is being delivered en masse to teachers today, is a problem that needs to be fixed not systemically or through social policy, but by fixing the people themselves.

This ability to avert the gaze of the public from systemic analysis and instead to emphasize personal weakness or lack of gratitude as an explanation for school failure has been a hallmark of educational reform for over a century. It is entwined within the stories we tell ourselves as a nation: Our national identity narratives are rife with rags-to-riches stories—the implication always being that anyone can succeed, one only has to work hard, avoid making excuses of any kind, and follow the rules (Kohn, 2010). This is a formula that has worked very well to institutionalize deterministic/status-confirming policies in education and elsewhere.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT WE ARE UP AGAINST

Governmental uses of eugenically rooted ideology have imposed on the underclass what Nancy Ordoover (2003) has called the “technofix,” wherein policies and practices routinely have served to protect elite interests and prevent mobility for everyone else. Indeed, as the current economic meltdown reveals, the same arguments that focus on moral failings are brought to bear, while the unadulterated greed and exploitation practiced by the economic elite continue despite publicly expressed outrage (and even, in the case of the so-called “Tea Party” activists, because of it). The ruse of unprecedented testing, national standards, student control, and surveillance in our nation’s schools, which has been foisted on the American public using the language of social justice, must be revealed for the ideological Trojan Horse that it is.

Systemic inequality may be inherently at odds with democracy but it nevertheless has co-opted the public sphere (Iverson, 2005). The elite in society are reliant on the status quo, including the underlying assumptions that define eugenic ideology, and they effectively have defined, regulated, and enforced access in society for generations. They have done this by institutionalizing the notion that fairness and equity are found through the opportunity to prove one’s worth—in other words, that we are a meritocracy. As we have seen, a look at the history that is left out of the official narrative reveals that meritocracy is a myth that has resulted in direct harm to generations of American people.

The current assault on public education is a push toward a larger ideological agenda that will serve to substantially deepen the degree to which capital gain outweighs human solidarity (Lipman, 2004). The assumption that some are more worthy than others, or that access to wealth and privilege is indicative of moral stature, is a premise that needs to be immediately exposed and resoundingly rejected. We are witness to a profound qualitative reordering of American society, the genesis of which is occurring in American schools. Present reform agendas are not about making schools better, nor are they about tidying things up and becoming more efficient at what we do. Make no mistake; what is happening now is about institutionalizing human worth.

The pathologization and corporatization of humanity go on. A profound co-optation of public knowledge is in operation not just about people, institutions, and corporations, but also about representations of the past, harnessed by a deeply rooted racialized scientism known as eugenics. Eugenic ideology is insidiously intertwined in fabric of the nation, yet the thread is invisible. Progressives on the left opine about whether the pre-eminent issue is race or capitalism,



while the ideology of the empire, which is firmly rooted in both, chugs on. Eugenic ideology hasn't re-emerged; it never left, and it should be considered as the foundational root for much of the current school reform agenda and the deepening corporatization of the public sphere.

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