

COMMENTARY

Er’body Talkin’ ‘bout Social Justice Ain’t Goin’ There

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The title of this commentary¹ is inspired by the Negro Spiritual *Everybody Talkin’ ‘bout Heaven*. The song is most often sung a cappella; the lyrics are as follows:

Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’ there
Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’
Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’ there
Oh my Lord

Well I read about the streets of gold
And I read about the throne
Not everybody callin’ “Lord, Lord”
Is gonna see that heavenly home

Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’ there
Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’
Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’ there
Oh my Lord

The Spirituals were born out of an oppressive condition, which we know as chattel slavery. Thus, the songs are often referred to as the *Sorrow Songs*. Yet as W. E. B. DuBois (1903/1995) reminds us, “through all the sorrow of the *Sorrow Songs* there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things” (p. 274).

Here, I replace the word *heaven* with the words *social justice* as I focus on the Black experience in America and the experiences of Black children in our nation’s schools. While linking social justice with religion is not new, the use of the term has become prevalent in education, in general, and mathematics education,

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specifically. While there are several definitions of teaching for social justice (Wager & Stinson, 2012), I define teaching mathematics for social justice as the following:

Holding specific social-justice-related perspectives and actions that provide all students with opportunities to learn rigorous mathematics in culturally specific and meaningful ways that seek to improve the economic and social conditions of marginalized individuals and groups, and that work toward the reduction (if not the complete elimination) of deficit-oriented beliefs and dispositions. (Leonard & Evans, 2012, p. 100)

Ideally, “the bottom line is...enhancing students’ learning and their life chances by challenging inequities of school and society” in order to “redistribute educational opportunity” (Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow & Mitescu, 2008, p. 270). The operationalization of this definition implies a K–16 commitment that results in a long-term investment which has the potential to redistribute economic wealth for poor students and students of color. Thus, teaching for social justice is teaching for empowerment and liberation. If not, then it’s merely talk. In other words, *er’body talkin’ ‘bout social justice ain’t goin’ there.*

Through the Spirituals, Blacks indicted the hypocrisy of the day. Likewise, I intend to highlight the educational dilemma for Black children in this decade. What educational policies intend to do and what they actually do are in conflict. Teacher education programs that claim to have a social justice mission and to focus on teacher dispositions need to do more than list their mission and goals on the program website.

To further illustrate this principle, I share an experience that I had in the Western United States about a week ago. I was invited to attend a luncheon and a ribbon-cutting ceremony. My mother was visiting me at the time, and we were the only African Americans attending the luncheon. As we mingled, something happened that reinforced for me what it is like to be Black in America. Before the luncheon, I was introduced as the Director of the Science and Mathematics Teaching Center at the University of Wyoming to a retired U.S. Senator. In response to the introduction, the beloved ex-senator responded: “You people have come a long way since you were 3/5ths of a person.” Needless to say, I was speechless.

Intentional or unintentional, these words invoked prejudice, bigotry, and racism. How can a former U.S. Senator who took an oath to uphold the *Constitution* make such a statement? “You people” implies that Blacks are alien and outside of what is considered normal. Despite changing demographics in the United States, Whiteness remains the norm. “You... have come a long way” gives some credit to effort. Blacks have come a long way, and there is a growing Black middle class. However, this part of the statement seemed to have an element of sur-

prise in terms of expectations. In other words, I did not expect you to get *this* far. Finally, the crux of the statement, “since you were $3/5$ ths of a person,” employed mathematical terms to remind me of slavery and to place me in a category that was less than human. In this case, mathematics was used to disempower me, rob me of my satisfaction, and minimize my accomplishments—that is, if I let it. That experience did not have to overshadow the occasion or detract from the good will of others who greeted me warmly. The reoccurrence of daily situations such as this one in the lives of Black folks was the purpose of the Spirituals. They were written to uplift the *Souls of Black Folk* who understood that what someone called you did not define you.

Benjamin Banneker, renowned mathematician and scientist, illustrated this point in his letter to Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson:

One Universal Father hath given being to us all, and that He hath not only made us all of one flesh, but that He hath also, without partiality, afforded us all the same sensations, and endued us all with the same faculties; and that, however variable we may be in Society and Religion, however diversified in situation and color, we are all of the same family, and stand in the same relation to Him.²

Therefore, I choose to use my experience to “flip the script” and use the encounter with the senator as a springboard to talk about social justice from a mathematical perspective that empowers rather than disempowers and liberates rather than demoralizes Black children and other children of color. To do this, I use the $3/5$ ths rule as a metaphor to discuss Black students’ mathematics experiences in American schools. I conclude with a second experience that reveals the power of one and how the unit of one in both mathematical and social justice terms can empower and liberate Black Americans to reach their full potential.

The $3/5$ ths Rule

To understand the Black experience in America, it is important to understand the context of the ex-senator’s statement about the $3/5$ ths rule, and how this law has impacted educational policy in relation to Black children. The Articles and Provisions in the Constitution as it relates to the $3/5$ ths rule states:

Article I, Section 2 [Slaves count as $3/5$ persons]

Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including

² As quoted in *Benjamin Banneker’s Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia Almanack and ephemeris for the year of our Lord 1792*. Baltimore: William Goddard and James Angel, 1792.

those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, **three fifths of all other Persons [i.e., slaves].**

Article I, Section 9 – Clause 1 [No power to ban slavery until 1808 and tax levied on the import of slaves]

The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person.

Article IV, Section 2 [Free states cannot protect slaves]

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.

Article V [No Constitutional Amendment to Ban Slavery until 1808]

...No Amendment which may be made prior to the Year One thousand eight hundred and eight shall in any Manner affect the first and fourth Clauses in the Ninth Section of the first Article.

While some believe the Constitution is the greatest document ever written, these articles reveal that the founding fathers actually “wrote both the institution and the benefits of slavery into [the] Constitution” (Harding, 1981, p. 46). But before the Revolutionary War (1775–1783), political leaders met in Philadelphia in 1774 for the First Continental Congress. There, they proclaimed:

We will neither import nor purchase any slave imported after the first day in December next, after which time we will wholly discontinue the slave trade and will neither be concerned in it ourselves nor will we hire our vessels nor sell our commodities or manufactures to those who are concerned in it. (Harding, 1981, p. 45)

Nonetheless, what they proclaimed and what they did were very different. As shown in the articles, the founding fathers crafted laws in 1787 that prohibited the ban of slavery until 1808 and levied taxes on the import of slaves. Such laws not only instituted slavery into American life but also provided revenue for the federal government. Ten dollars per slave is a great deal of income when millions of slaves are being auctioned on the block. Historians estimate that 10 to 12 million slaves were sold by Europeans during the antebellum period (Johnson, Smith, & WGBH Team, 1998). Furthermore, counting Blacks as 3/5ths of a person for the benefit of having more Southern votes exploited oppressed people to skew the results to ensure that slavery continued. In other words, a candidate running for President of the United States would receive more votes from the South. To add insult to injury, if a slave were to escape to a free state, federal laws were in place (see Article IV, Section 2) that guaranteed the slave would be returned thus pro-

protecting the right to own slaves in perpetuity. This guarantee was a grave contradiction in terms of social justice given that liberty and justice was *not* for all. *Er'body taking 'bout social justice ain't going there.*

In such a system of oppression and institutionalized racism, public education was born. The *Plessey vs. Ferguson* case in 1896 established an educational policy of separate and (un)equal that would remain constitutional for the next 58 years. Exactly another 58 years has passed after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling in 1954, but schools are still segregated by race and class thus maintaining a two-tiered system of education (Leonard, 2008, 2009). Sometimes this two-tiered system is manifested as a school-within-a-school—one for Blacks and one for Whites. This two-tiered system is often operated under the guise of a magnet school. Blacks and other students of color are in the “regular” school while most of the White students are in the magnet school. On paper, this type of school looks diverse, but often White students in the magnet school never interact with Black students in the regular school. In some cases, they do not even have lunch or physical education at the same time. Tracking operates in the same manner, except in this system, Whites, in many cases regardless of ability, are tracked into honors and advanced courses while poor students and students of color are tracked in remedial and special education courses (Blanchett, 2006). These kinds of schools are not models of social justice. Rather they fail to level the playing field and operate to limit the educational opportunity of Black and other under-represented minority children.

Beyond 3/5ths Education

While the quality of life for Blacks in America has improved, Blacks continue to experience higher school dropout rates and higher unemployment rates compared to White Americans (Lang, 2011). While there are many factors that lead to these results, none is more evident than low teacher expectations, deficit-oriented pedagogy, and a two-tiered system of education. To illustrate the fact that low expectations continue despite social justice mission statements in colleges and schools of education, consider the following statement made by a White female who was enrolled in a mathematics methods course that I taught a few years ago:

The reason children in urban schools need to learn basic skills and children in suburban schools need to learn problem solving is because inner-city children will grow up to work in the fast food industry or in factories and children living in the suburbs will grow up to be managers and business leaders.

Needless to say, I could have heard a pin drop in the classroom after this statement was made. However, this White student, who was embarking upon a career

in the teaching profession, verbalized what is reality in terms of Black education and Black employment. Black children, for the most part, are still receiving a sharecropper, skill-based mathematics education (Moses & Cobb, 2001). Results of standardized tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2011) continue to show performance disparities by race. While everyone continues to be lifted, comparisons by race reveal Blacks are underperforming. However, when data are examined differently by type of school (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006), one finds public schools significantly out-perform Catholic schools. When charters and non-charters are compared, charter schools score significantly lower than non-charter schools. Among private schools, Lutheran schools have the highest scores, and conservative Christian schools have the lowest scores (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006). These data suggest there is more than one way to slice the data to determine how well our children are doing in mathematics. Thus, economic variables and race may not be the most salient factors when comparing mathematics achievement.

To create additional learning opportunities, I advocate for culturally relevant and social justice pedagogy. There should be less stress on computation where underrepresented minorities continue to score high on assessments like NAEP and more emphasis on number theory, data and statistics, measurement, algebra and geometry (Leonard, 2008). For example, one of the more difficult questions that appeared on the eighth-grade version of the mathematics NAEP test in 2011 was as follows:

Which of the following is an equation of a line that passes through the point (0, 5) and has a negative slope?

- A. $y = 5x$
- B. $y = 5x - 5$
- C. $y = 5x + 5$
- D. $y = -5x - 5$
- E. $y = -5x + 5$

To solve this problem in a culturally relevant way, the teacher could use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and overlay a coordinate grid on a map of the students' neighborhood to help them understand the concept of slope. For example, take my old neighborhood in the St. Louis area. The location of my former home is labeled A, which can serve as the origin (see Figure 1); tables can be created to obtain the coordinates and then plot the points (see Table 1).

Table 1
Coordinate Values

C. $y = 5x + 5$		E. $y = -5x + 5$	
x	y	x	y
0	5	0	5
1	10	1	0
2	15	2	-5
3	20	3	-10

In two instances, the first condition of the line passing through $(0, 5)$ is met (C & E); and in two instances, the second condition for a negative slope ($y = mx + b$), where m is the slope (-5) , is met (D & E). E is the only equation that meets both conditions so by process of elimination and direct proof the answer must be E. A negative slope goes (tilts to the left) toward Goodfellow, and a positive slope (tilts to the right) toward Hodiamont. Contextualizing the problem with the students' neighborhood is culturally relevant and will anchor the instruction so students might not so easily forget the mathematics.



Figure 1
 Google Map of St. Louis, MO 63112.

This example suggests the context in which students live imbue culture and can provide examples for teaching mathematics. Moreover, cultural relevance has been linked to STEM (science, technology, mathematics, and engineering) fields through robotics clubs and computer programming classes (Bracey, in press). Providing opportunities for underrepresented minority students to link culture to STEM fields has led to greater retention of mathematics concepts (Bracey, in press; Leonard & Hill, 2008). In Bracey's study (in press), the use of mentors and role models from diverse backgrounds were important in terms of motivation and retention in mathematics. While teachers of any background and gender can develop dispositions that relate to social justice (Villegas, 2007), it is important that Black students experience the tutelage of Black teachers, especially Black males, who can serve as role models.

According to Barr, Sadovnik, and Visconti (2006), Black children had higher performance in mathematics when they had Black teachers. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2005), in her book *Beyond the Big House* reported that Black teachers held 40% of Black professional jobs from 1890 to 1910. However, according to the Schools and Staffing Survey (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2004), Black teachers were only 7.9% of the public teacher workforce in 2003–2004. Similarly, fewer Blacks are employed as professors and teacher educators. In 2009, 6% of all faculty in higher education in the United States were Black (NCES, 2011). How do we restore teaching as an honorable profession among Black college students? How do we ensure that Blacks are significantly represented among the 100,000 mathematics and science teachers that President Obama is calling for? *We have to go out and get them.*

I am pleased to learn that institutions like Georgia State University (GSU) surpass the national norm in terms of diverse student enrollment. Latest enrollment figures show the student body is 33% Black, 15% Asian, and 8% Hispanic. In addition to undergraduate education, graduate programs have made tremendous strides at GSU, particularly in mathematics education. Currently, there are 46 PhD students in mathematics education, and 32 (nearly 70%) of these students are Black/African American. I know of no other graduate program in mathematics education that has such a record. Institutions like GSU are making a difference in the state of Georgia and the nation. However, once we recruit diverse students, we must be serious about our social justice stance in order to retain them.

Furthermore, additional effort is needed to support Blacks and other underrepresented students if they are to fill the ranks of the professoriate. Such aspirations begin in our nation's classrooms with our youngest students, including my grandson, Christopher, who began Kindergarten at a magnet school in September. Will he experience the regular school or the magnet school? His

cousin, Terrance, who also began Kindergarten this fall, attends a private religious school. Will he be tracked in the redbird, bluebird, or the blackbird reading group? These young African American boys represent the class of 2025. As my progeny, will they grow up in an America that looks backward and perpetuates a 3/5ths mentality or one that looks forward to 100% participation in terms of equal educational access?

Closing Remarks

In closing, the same weekend that I was rendered speechless by a former U.S. Senator who referenced the 3/5ths rule in terms of my success, I also had the awesome privilege of meeting and shaking the hand of Congressman John Lewis (U.S. Representative for Georgia's 5th Congressional District). Congressman Lewis was visiting the city of Denver to encourage people to vote. He reminded the Black Church of the power of one. Every person is considered a whole person and is entitled to one vote.

However, rules and laws that have the potential to suppress the right to vote have been instituted in 2012. With less than 20 days to go before the November 6th election, the intent of voter-approved IDs is to limit the number of votes cast by the poor and people of color. While Wisconsin and Texas have taken such laws off the books and judges have blocked the law in Pennsylvania and South Carolina, voter ID laws remain in effect in Kansas, Indiana, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Georgia (Bronner, 2012). Present day voter-approved ID laws perpetuate a 3/5ths mentality.

Yet Congressman Lewis came to challenge that mentality insisting that "regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or gender, everyone has one vote." He reduced it down to the least common denominator of one. If everyone has the right to cast one vote without discrimination, then we can all participate equally in the democratic process. Repressing the vote and demanding identification to vote, are attempts to undo that equality. Nevertheless, I was so encouraged by this giant of Civil Rights. I was reminded of how he suffered on Bloody Sunday. How many Blacks died trying to get the right to vote? I remembered Freedom Rides and how the bus he rode was bombed. Congressman Lewis is only one person, but he left a lifelong impression upon me. While the struggle is not over, I refuse to give up hope that as a nation we will truly experience the power of one: *one* vote, *one* hundred percent access to high-quality schools, *one* nation under God with liberty and justice for all. Social justice is a verb and not a noun. *Er'body talkin' 'bout social justice ain't going there.* What are you prepared to do?

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