



Race, Education, and Criminal Justice Conference

University of Puget Sound, Saturday, October 6, 2012

Conference Conceptual Framework

“My experience and research has led me to the regrettable conclusion that our system of mass incarceration functions more like a caste system than a system of crime prevention or control.”

(Dr. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, NPR interview, 01/16/2012).

Many of us in our lives in families, communities and work, try our best to hold on to an ideal of justice and freedom; we struggle to hope that our schools and other societal institutions will be avenues for exploring, releasing and engaging the intellectual and creative potential of all, especially our young people. Such an ideal struggles amidst a dire reality of injustice and unfreedom to which all our lives are bound. This is the reality of expanding incarceration and the proliferation of prisons as a prominent national industry, larger than in any other nation in the world.

In the United States 2.7 million of our children have at least one parent who is incarcerated, according to the 2010 study from the Pew Research Center’s Economic Mobility Project. This means that 1 in every 28 children has a parent who is locked up, with the situation being 1 in 9 for Black children, 1 in 28 for Hispanic children, and 1 in 57 for White children. The devastation deepens because a family with a parent behind bars earns 22 percent less on average the year after the incarceration than it did the year before. Children with parents in prison are also more likely to be expelled from school. This devastation takes on cyclical dimensions as research has shown “that a child who has been suspended is more likely to be retained in grade, to drop out, to commit a crime, and/or to end up incarcerated as an adult” (NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, School to Prison Pipeline Initiative, p.3, October 2005). Such patterns of exclusion in society and in schools make the systemic problem of the opportunity gap in K-12 education and beyond even worse. We must come to terms and to task – we must take action – about this entrenched circuit of injustice and the state of heartbreak and outrage in which we live. The 2012 Race and Pedagogy Conference on *Race, Education, and Criminal Justice* to be held on October 6, will seek to do just that by connecting systems, issues, and people through action-oriented learning, dialogue, and strategizing.

The Race, Education, and Criminal Justice Conference will engage diverse participants from a range of communities and social and civic institutions and organizations in an examination of the historically grounded and structural dynamics connecting racial disparities in education and criminal justice systems. We will ask how do education and criminal justice systems, children, families, and communities intersect? How are practices within schools and criminal justice institutions interrelated? What is the geography of the crisis of mass incarceration and education nationally and locally? How do these connections disproportionately shape experiences of opportunity, justice, and freedom along racial lines?

“No one raises a child expecting that child to be suspended or expelled from school No one raises a child expecting that child to go to prison.”

(Dr. Dexter Gordon, Professor and Director, Race and Pedagogy Initiative and African American Studies, University of Puget Sound, and Karyn Osborne, Director of School, Family and Community Partnerships at Tacoma Public Schools, Tacoma News Tribune, p. A13, 04/26/12).

These questions will guide our examination of the production and perpetuation of the pipeline that leads children from schools to prisons, and the situations and systems that thwart human potential and relationships inside prisons and after incarceration.

We will probe, in particular, three developmental and interconnected sets of systems and issues. These are the school to prison pipeline, education inside of prisons, and post-release challenges to education, opportunities, and full civic participation. Rigorous and intimate examination of these entwined topics will help us to scrutinize even our own institutional and individual practices that could be complicit in making and sustaining the brutal pipelines and circuits that sustain unfreedom and inequity. Through this investigation, our goal is to find ways to connect our efforts and develop strategies to change systems that produce disenfranchisement and stigma into ones that release human potential and promote lifelong learning, wellness, compassion, care, and civic revitalization.

Our capacity to ensure “that our educational system is a doorway to opportunity – and not a point of entry to our criminal justice system – is a critical and achievable goal,” asserted U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder in a July 21, 2011, press release about the “School-to-Prison Pipeline.” The Race and Pedagogy Initiative (RPI) embraces this conviction. As part of our mission and programmatic commitment to a critical pedagogy about race in a mutual and reciprocal partnership with local experience and expertise, we share with noted critical educator, scholar, author, and activist, bell hooks, the bold vision for justice of “education as the practice of freedom” (*Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, 1994).

Engaging education as the practice of freedom calls us to recognize our lives and work as linked to a social and communal vision of freedom. Such a vision is primarily located in diverse historical legacies and imperatives carried by the struggles of structurally marginalized peoples both in their social movements and everyday lives. As an Initiative, we are committed to remembering and renewing this living heritage as a key part of our critical pedagogical mission. To take on this task we need, as bell hooks notes, “a revolution of values,” and approaches to education that resist and question systems of inequity and domination and seek to create practices of “change” and “liberation” in response to the expansive geography of unfreedom, injustice, and human loss that is overtaking our communities and nation. This crisis is separating far too many people from their families and communities, destroying their dreams and futures, and crushing ideals of civic and democratic participation.

Please join us for such a moment of revolution and resolution come Saturday, October 6, at the University of Puget Sound. It will be a day of learning and teaching, of connecting and caring, and of questioning and partnering for action.

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