

Whose Vision Will Guide Racial Equity in Schools?

White allies don't hold the answers to how students of color should be educated

By Sonya Douglass Horsford — March 17, 2021 ⌚ 5 min read



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In 1990, educational theorist Beverly Gordon warned, “The 21st century will be marked by the struggles of people of color for position, credibility, and respect within Western societies.” She described the greatest battle as being that for the control over the education of minority groups in white-dominant societies. She asked, “Whose vision of the role of African Americans, other people of color, and the disenfranchised will prevail? For what purposes might people of color be educated? How might education assist people of color in challenging the societal structures that maintain and reproduce inequality?”

Gordon's recasting of schooling in white-dominant societies as a battle over the education of the oppressed is an important reminder of the competing visions that comprise education in the United States. As policymakers and education leaders at every level of government work to advance racial equity in schools and other public institutions across the country, it is not yet clear whose vision will guide this major social, cultural, and political undertaking. Repeated traumatic events over the last year—the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the disproportionate loss of people of color in the wake of COVID-19—have shined a bright light on the collective pain, loss, and suffering of the African American community, in particular. And it will continue to endure in ways we cannot yet apprehend.



Even on issues of race and equity, white allies are the experts, taking up space in the margins with what they believe the education of Black and other historically disenfranchised children should look and feel like.

In a nation divided by race and reality, efforts to advance anti-racist, culturally responsive, and equitable approaches to education face great opposition from an emboldened coalition of white militants, conservatives, and conspiracy theorists who perceive race-conscious policies as anti-white, and thus, un-American. White liberals, on the other hand, continue to promote diversity and integration in urban communities—championing visions of equity and inclusion yet to be endorsed by the people of color they claim to support. Under the guise of school improvement and education reform, the 21st-century white architects of urban education have effectively defunded traditional public schools to finance their own top-down vision of how and for what purposes low-income students of color should be educated.

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Yet, the voices, experiences, and perspectives of people of color on the education of their very own children, no less, have historically been absent from the research, practice, and policy conversations that have and continue to

determine their fate. Even on issues of race and equity, white allies are the experts, taking up space in the margins with what they believe the education of Black and other historically disenfranchised children should look and feel like—still determining the conditions under which children of color are to be educated. The writer James Baldwin defined a liberal as “someone who thinks he knows more about your experience than you do.”

What is good for the oppressor is typically not good for the oppressed. But what happens when the dominant racial group controls not only the white power structures that govern and administer education and social policy but also the research evidence that serves as the basis for policy implementation, evaluation, and practice? The problem with the use of research evidence in the field of education is the premise. It is based on the liberal conception that educational opportunity is available to all, when U.S. education has never truly been a welcoming place for the racially marginalized and oppressed. And so nearly every education issue, including the school reopening debate amid the pandemic, is divided along the color line with nice white parents privileging their freedoms over the rights, concerns, hopes, and fears of parents of color.

The future of education in America demands a clearly articulated vision that can garner widespread support among those committed to advancing the work of racial equity and social justice. In fact, the best measure of whether or not the field is making progress on its equity agenda would be the quality of the learning experiences afforded to Black and other historically disenfranchised students. Rather than continuing to produce and consume research that “discovers” the inequalities every person of color already knew existed, I wonder if we might instead envision a system of education where everyone is free.

Where the education of people of color is determined by people of color—an emancipatory vision of education that affirms and recognizes: (a) education is a civil and human right, (b) education is a socializing force, (c) education is a valued profession, (d) education is a collective good and responsibility, and (e) education is the practice of freedom.

I wonder if it is possible to develop a shared vision of education in the United States. If so, who should create it? Who will lead it? Can the movement for racial equity and justice be advanced through the use of research evidence focused on efficiency and effectiveness alone? What might we learn when we hear directly from Black students, parents, grandparents, teachers, counselors, psychologists, principals, coaches, and community leaders? Fortunately, the tried-and-true research and scholarship of Black educators and theorists who have committed their intellectual lives and careers to studying the systematic education of Black children in white-dominant societies provide the guideposts and blueprint for those truly seeking to break free from the oppressive policies, ideologies, and values that serve as barriers to educational equity and justice. As researcher and educator Barbara Sizemore reminded us, “The value of white supremacy precludes equal status.”

To truly transform education, we must first deepen our understanding of the great battle that we are in. This begins with actually asking people of color what they want and need and then listening to what they say. The voices, concerns, ideas, and vision for what students, parents, and educators of color want and need is the evidentiary basis upon which any agenda for educational equity must be developed, if that is, in fact, what we truly seek to do.

Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution. If Black lives matter, so should Black thought, especially when it comes to any agenda for educational equity or social justice in schools. Black people have the answers. Who will listen?

Only time will tell whose vision will prevail.

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This is a really good piece. I was actually in a recent discussion about school choice with a Progressive who kept trying to spin school choice as racist and the opposition to school choice as anti-racist. When I argued that the large majorities of black people support school choice and that school choice gave black people power over the kinds of schools their children attended, the Progressive insisted that those black majorities were well-meaning but "desperate and misinformed." I find this perspective "white supremacist" in a way that I don't think white liberals really recognize. Your article doesn't mention school choice or any other particular policy or vision, and I'm sure that's deliberate. And there are certainly valid non-racist reasons to disagree with school choice (or to support some elements but not others, etc.) but several parts of this piece really resonated with me. We can't claim to be anti-racist while ignoring non-white voices and perspectives. And education "research" that ignores the questions being asked by racial minorities and other disenfranchised groups shouldn't be used to "trump" the voices and perspectives of those racial minorities and other disenfranchised groups.



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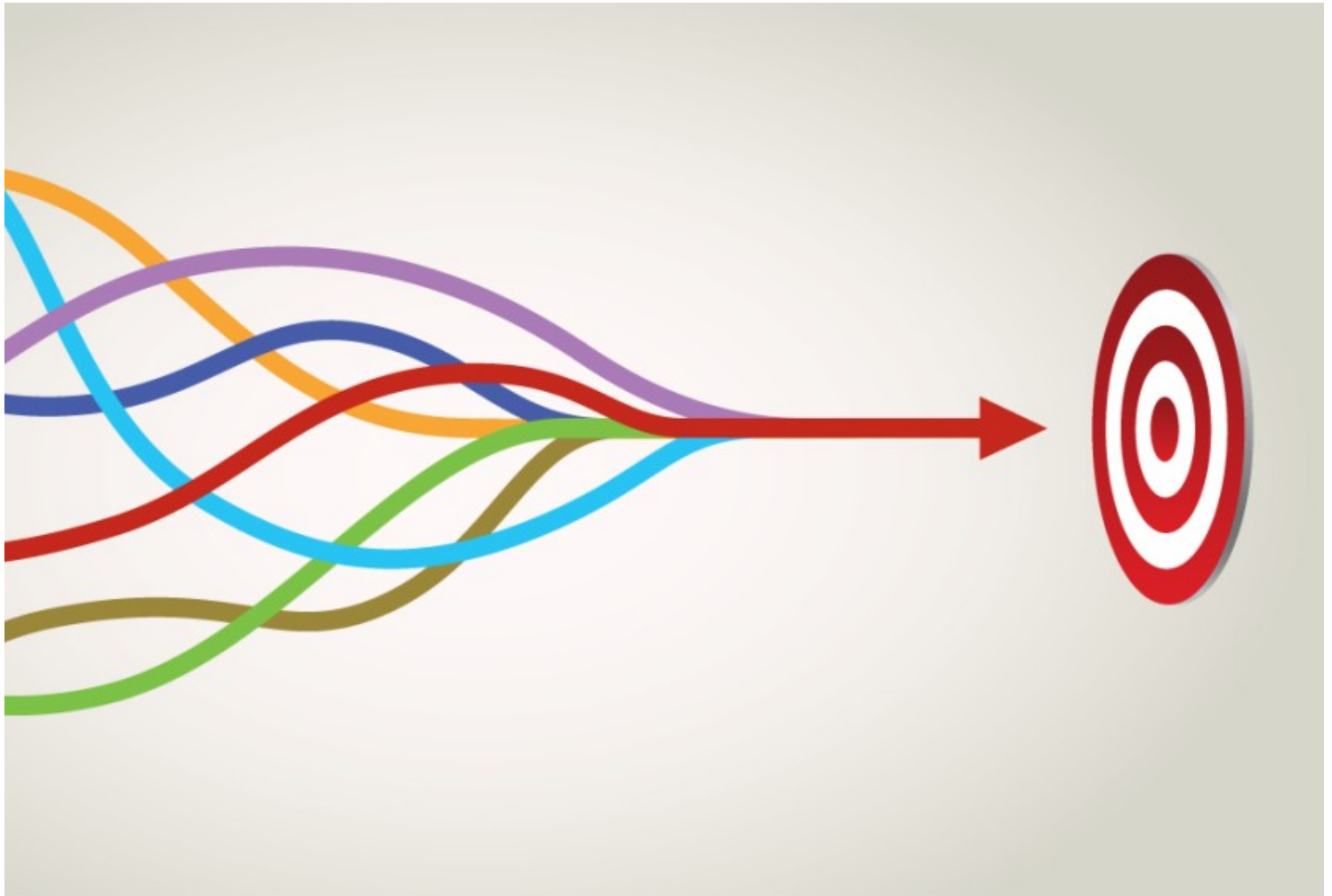


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