



“CURRICULUM PUNISHMENT.” WHAT IT IS AND WHY YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT IT NOW



NEPC Fellow [H. Richard Milner IV](#) has coined a new term for an old practice: “Curriculum punishment” describes a situation in which “students are harmed when they are not exposed to potentially transformative, racially just learning opportunities.” He reflected about this idea in his 2018 [American Educational Research Association Brown Lecture](#). Milner is Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair of Education at Vanderbilt’s Peabody College of Education.

Here’s an example Milner provided earlier this year in a [recap of his lecture](#) that appeared in the peer-refereed journal *Educational Researcher*. Soon after school desegregation was implemented in Alabama, a Black educator (who was being interviewed by Milner) asked a White guidance counselor what he had done to try and help Black students in their district get admitted to college. The counselor replied that he had focused his efforts on “every major school in Alabama. And that’s Auburn and the University of Alabama.” As Milner notes, the counselor’s decision to ignore historically Black colleges and universities and attend only to segregated and historically White institutions, meant that Black students experienced curriculum punishment in that were never informed about HBCUs where they might have thrived. The counselor was functioning as a purveyor of curriculum in that he was *teaching students about* college access.

“Black students are punished for not being White,” Milner writes. “All students are punished for their counselor not being aware of historically Black colleges and universities and/or for having a counselor who does not see the value in exposing students to a learning opportunity that could benefit them.”

Milner shares another example offered by this same Black educator. He asked the educator

if Black teachers in his district had, during the 1960s, led students in discussions of racist acts of violence against Black leaders such as Martin Luther King and Malcom X. The educator replied that, although the community was deeply affected by such events, they did not address them in school “because we had a White superintendent, if you addressed it, that would have been your last day at that time.” For this same reason, the educator, who Milner refers to as Mr. Williams, also refrained from sharing his own experiences participating in non-violent marches and communicating with Dr. King.

“This form of curriculum punishment is prevalent currently in many schools as educators, due to structural and systemic barriers, may not address the killing of unarmed Black bodies,” Milner writes. “Thus, the point is not to criticize Mr. Williams or the other teachers who did not teach about the killings but to stress how curriculum punishment is a manifestation of systemic challenges that worked to maintain the status quo.”

Milner emphasizes the importance of preparing teachers to address race-related issues with their students. Otherwise, he fears, we will continue to see educators actually “boast about the fact that they do not, have not, and will not address race in their talk, curriculum practices, or work more broadly.”

“[C]urriculum punishment,” he concludes, “can result in emotional, psychological, social, and traumatic cognitive strain and dissonance among young people as they attempt to make sense of societal injustices.”

In this moment of crisis, as people of color suffer disproportionately from the coronavirus pandemic and violence perpetrated through the state, this concept of curriculum punishment is more relevant than ever to our nation’s educators and schools.

NEPC Resources on Diversity: Race, Ethnicity, Class, Culture, and/or Gender

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>