

WHAT PETE BUTTIGIEG – AND ALL WHITE AMERICANS – NEED TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT RACISM

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Abstract

It is essential that educators—particularly white educators—work to understand racial inequality within a prophetic framework, refuse to perpetuate inaccurate and racist images of black and brown youth, and actively deconstruct structural inequalities within the education system. Structural racism, which is institutionalized within the education system, as well as perceptions about educational mobility are important issues for the field of education and were recently the central issues of the eye-catching hashtag #PeteButtigiegIsALyingMF. This Voices opinion piece examines Michael Harriot’s conversation with 2020 presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg about structural racism, contextualizes this online moment through a theoretical perspective, and provides a call to action for white Americans.

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Of all the candidates currently vying for the position of President of the United States, I have the most in common with Pete Buttigieg. We are both white, young, and pro-choice, and we both grew up in the Hoosier state in towns affected by de-industrialization and economic decline accompanied by job loss and closed factories. We also both attended Harvard University; the incredible privileges of our educational journeys are not lost on me. A recent viral conversation focused on Buttigieg's (mis)understanding of structural racism and implications for the education system compelled me to speak up. As a scholar interested in social media and accustomed to off-the-wall, viral hashtags, even I was shocked to see #PeteButtigiegIsALyingMF trending on Twitter. This hashtag was the result of an article by *The Root's* Michael Harriot (Harriot, 2019a). In the article, Harriot critiques a 2011 interview during which Buttigieg claimed that kids in "lower income and minority neighborhoods" do not have role models who "testify to the value of education" and because of this, they are not as motivated in school (WNIT Public Television, 2011). Harriot (2019a) appropriately describes this snippet of Buttigieg's statement as an act of victim blaming, implying a contention that black kids and their communities are the issue. By failing to mention the structural reasons that many black youth are forced to endure educational inequality (e.g., funding, unemployment rates, discipline), Buttigieg's comment of a "lack of motivation" fuels the harmful rhetoric of describing black people as "lazy" or lacking agency, thus dubbing him a liar (WNIT Public Television, 2011).

This conversation is unfortunately not new. In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates recounts his experience with the American education system, which he describes as "an apparatus urging us to accept American innocence at face value and not to inquire too much" (Coates 2015, p. 8). Coates (2015) describes the ways in which the education system perpetuates injustice by failing black boys and pushing them to the streets, then jail or death. Scholars like Cornell West contextualize Coates's narrative further by framing these inequitable structures as catalysts for behaviors of hopelessness and self-hatred, which he famously described as the "nihilistic threat" (West 1993, p. 12). West additionally describes one potential solution to this hopelessness and racial reasoning via a new, "prophetic" framework or, "one of moral reasoning with its fundamental ideas of a mature black identity, coalition strategy, and black cultural democracy" (West 1993, p. 28). However, this hopelessness is more commonly quelled by the idea that working your way up the social ladder or pecking order of society is an absolute means for improving your economic group membership. In other words, many marginalized youth are subject to the impractical task of improving their life chances in a "meritocratic" education system that seemingly only requires hard work and motivation. This is the real lie: white America's disregard for understanding the dire ramifications of a system that is not set up for all students.

Notable scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2013) poignantly clarifies in *On Intellectual Activism* that while many black and brown youth have been historically and erroneously imagined as an American problem, "the greater enemy to American democracy is more likely to be an uninformed and uncritical American public that can be manipulated by soothing political slogans, feelgood photo ops, and an endless round of holiday sales" (Collins 2013, p. 138). The maelstrom of tweets associated with Buttigieg's seeming digression prompted a phone call with Harriot, a response from Harriot stating that "Buttigieg listened," as well as individual accounts of Buttigieg's empathy for others (via [#PeteButtigiegCalledMe](#)). This political soothing included face-saving messages of "Mayor Pete's views have progressed" and "at least he is trying"; some cited recent demonstrations of what he thinks people in power can do to make things more equal (Harriot, 2019b). Since then, Harriot has sat down with Buttigieg and had a promising discussion

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about structural racism and how the politician plans to address it in society (Harriot, 2019c). While I am optimistic Pete Buttigieg *might* have an informed understanding of institutional racism, this conversation cannot stop with white *listening* or superficial Twitter debates. White Americans, and educators in particular, must actively work to understand racial inequality within West's conceptualization of a prophetic framework of doing what is morally best for everyone, by not only refusing to perpetuate inaccurate and racist images of black and brown youth, but also by actively deconstructing structural inequalities within the education system.

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