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# “I DON’T WANT TO SEE COLOR”

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Educating Children on the Complexity of Racism and Color-Blindness



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BA Thesis

## Acknowledgements

As I was sitting in class at Loyola University in New Orleans, a fascinating discussion unfolded in front of me. It was in Public Policy: Ethics class taught by a gracious, old man who was intrigued by Europe and therefore often asked my opinion on diverse and sensitive matters including abortion, the Iraq War, stem cell research and the educational system. Before we were going to start discussing Nuclear Ethics, the professor asked what we thought about the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson. What I heard from African American students, of how they experienced American society, was chilling. I felt how these African American students still to this day feel the inequality and racism. One African American student literally said: “When you don’t count, you don’t care”. I had never felt the helplessness of racism so vividly before, nor how powerful the color of my own skin could be.

This was one of the many moments in the past year that has inspired me to write about racism in American society. A few very important people in my life not only inspired me and helped me through this process of writing my thesis, but they were also my rocks in the difficult and dark moments of the past year. I would like to give a special thanks to Audrey, Linda and Kate who are my dearest friends and who I have the utmost respect and love for.

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## Abstract

### Hope for Change

Try to imagine participating in society but not being accepted. Try to imagine working extremely hard but after ten tries still not getting a job. Try to imagine telling your younger sibling that they do not matter. Try to imagine saying there is hope when you feel all hope is lost. Try to imagine losing trust in your fellow citizen but subsequently are told that everyone is trustworthy. Try to imagine living in constant fear and always being disadvantaged. Now stop. If one is not in this position, one will not be able to fully comprehend what it is like to be in such a position.

In 2008 America saw the first African American man rise to presidential power. The election of president Barrack Obama was the *hope* and *change* that echoed throughout his campaign and was supported by millions of white, African, Asian and Latino/a Americans. Did this beacon of hope, however, lead to the ever needing change? Many people believe that there is no more contemporary racial inequality in American society. The election of the first African American president and the no longer presence of blatant and visible reproduction of racism has fueled the idea that America has moved on to a postracist era. These are, however, no valid reasons to believe that racism has disappeared, in fact it has taken on a new and invisible form. It is hidden. It has gone underground, out of sight for those who are on top of the hierarchy. It does not undermine them, nor does it rob them of being able to chase the American dream. Present day race riots including the riots in Ferguson, New York, Baltimore and Texas that show the lingering racism and color-blindness in American society. Images of these occurrences are staggering and painful to watch for all Americans as well as the rest of the world. The racism and inequality that African Americans undergo is chilling to witness and they are tired, tired of asking for basic rights.

Key Words: Race, Racism, Postracist era, Racial inequality, Color-blindness, No Child Left Behind Act, Education, Mad Hot Ballroom

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	2
Abstract .....	3
Introduction .....	5
.....	5
<i>1</i> .....	7
From Blatant Racism to Hidden Color-Blindness.....	7
1.1 Historical Evolvement of blatant racism into color-blindness .....	8
1.2 The Social Debate on Color-Blindness .....	10
1.3 The Academic Debate on Color-Blindness .....	12
1.4 Conclusion .....	15
<i>2</i> .....	17
Educational Policy on a National Level, State Level, and Local Level.....	17
2.1 Federal Level .....	18
2.2 State Level .....	22
2.3 Local Level .....	24
2.4 Conclusion .....	27
<i>3</i> .....	29
Case Study: Color-Blindness in <i>Mad Hot Ballroom</i> .....	29
3.1 Introduction to <i>Mad Hot Ballroom</i> .....	30
3.2 Color-Blindness in <i>Mad Hot Ballroom</i> .....	31
3.3 Other Factors .....	33
3.4 What to do ‘against’ color-blindness .....	35
3.5 Conclusion .....	35
Conclusion.....	37
Works Cited.....	38

## Introduction



“There is not a black America and a white America and a Latino America and Asian America- there’s the United States of America”, were the words that president Barack Obama spoke in his “A More Perfect Union Speech” on the topic of race. With his election as the first African American president of America Obama became a symbol for breaking past the color-lines. He also fueled the idea that America is now in a postracist era. This term has created a lot of debate in the social as well as academic world. Racism is inevitably connected with America, through its Constitution and history. Today, the consequences of these dark pages in history are finding its way in American society in a form that is unknown and dangerous. Blatant racism has slowly but surely made room for a new and invisible concept that captures racial inequality, namely color-blindness. As many believe America should move past racism, with the argument and historical moment of having an African American president, they believe the color of someone’s skin should be disregarded. The idea of moving past race is not wrong. However, when racism is still present it becomes impossible to marginalize race. Racism is still present in American society, that is in its institutions, and one of the most significant institutions is education. As “education is, of course, a key element of what T.H. Marshall called social citizenship, which offers an important potential counterweight to patterns of economic equality in a market-based society” (Harris and Lieberman 25).

In 2002, the federal government signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law and it has become the most significant act when it comes to education. The American political system is divided into three general levels: the national, state and local level. All levels are important to understand the dynamics and the success of the No Child Left Behind Act.

The local level has the most authority which is why the focus of the case study, the documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom*, will be analyzed on this level. Also, to analyze if and how color-blindness is felt and dealt with on a day to day basis. Children are the future of America and the only way that America can make and unmake this racial hierarchical system is with human action and knowledge.

The key literature for this thesis is *Racism Without Racists* by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and “Racial Inequality in a Postracist Era” by Frederick C. Harris and Robert C. Lieberman. The social debate has intrigued the academic world as well, with the postracist era and the concept of color-blindness being highly debated issues. Bonilla-Silva, Harris and Lieberman

are the progressive scholars to touch upon these issues. They all analyze the concepts building on the social debate fueled by the election of president Obama. Bonilla-Silva wrote *Racism Without Racists*, which reaches out to many different perspectives including the historical perspective, the style of color-blindness and the way society is functioning now and will most likely function in the future. Also, the saying of ‘racism without racists’ is extremely powerful and catchy. Harris and Lieberman discuss color-blindness more in relation to race, attitudes and other institutions including education and delve deep into the context behind the two significant concepts. All three scholars are researching this topic because it is a fairly new phenomenon. My contribution to the debate is the analysis and significance of how color-blindness is taking shape in the youngest minds of society.

This thesis will analyze how American history, the No Child Left Behind Act (on three political levels) and socio-economic factors influence schools in New York City, in the form of the documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom*, and how they are dealing with institutionalized racism called color blindness.



## From Blatant Racism to Hidden Color-Blindness

There is a strange kind of enigma associated with the problem of racism. No one, or almost no one, wishes to see themselves as racist; still racism persists, real and tenacious.

--- Albert Memmi on Racism

America is known as the 'Land of the Free' and the 'Land of Opportunity' where the ideals of freedom and equality are highly valued and displayed to the outside world. However, when looking more closely it becomes clear that a struggle remains between the American ideals and the subordinate status of minorities, including African Americans. There is a paradox between a tremendous amount of racial inequality and the belief and claim of many Americans that race is no longer relevant in American society. In all the facets and institutions in and of American society there is still a sense of racial inequality that has taken on more subtle forms. Blatant racism has made room for color-blindness, racial prejudice and disconsciousness. The fact that racism has become more subtle and is taking on these forms is exceedingly worrying and dangerous. American society today is still not free of racism, which makes the idea of not being influenced by race or racial prejudice paradoxical. As long as racism exists one can neither do away with race, nor let color-blindness engage in 'blaming the victim'. This is often done in a very indirect way of 'now you see it, now you don't', a style that fits the character of the 'underground' racism we see today (Bonilla-Silva 25). Racism has become less visible, yet still is a problem, manifesting underground where only people aware of it can locate it. The evolution of blatant racism in the form of visible and public discrimination in the judicial system to the concept of color-blindness is important for understanding current American society. Also, it is significant to look beyond the context of civil rights when it comes to racism.



## 1.1 Historical Evolvement of blatant racism into color-blindness

During the time the American Constitution was written, racism was already present and therefore significantly influenced the foundation of American society. Open and obvious, blatant, racism in the form of slavery was already present in the American Constitution in 1788 when it was ratified by eleven states. Three main reasons that influenced the Founding Fathers to safeguard slavery was because slavery was an important economic institution, the state had a significant amount of power and the arrangement of the three-fifths clause. The first reason that influenced the protection of slavery was “the aggregate value of all the slaves in the nation exceeded that of any other form of property except real estate” (Finkelman 14), indicating the importance of slaves for economic purposes. Slavery remained an extremely significant economic institution from the ratification of the Constitution until 1861 (14). The second reason is that “the government created a government of limited powers, Congress lacked the power to interfere in the domestic institutions of the states” (9) giving a free card to states to continue allowing slavery. The third and final reason is the three-fifths clause being “the most obvious example of how Constitutional arrangements protected slavery” (10). The three-fifths clause entails a compromise that was reached between the southern and northern states on the debated issue how slaves would be counted within a state population. It came down to the fact that southern states received more power with which they kept the institution of slavery standing. Through these examples it becomes clear how pro-slavery sentiments were present in the foundation of America.

In the era of slavery and the Civil War racism remained blatant and left traumatization in its wake, for the generation that was kept as a slave as well as for the generations that followed. The horrific journey of African slaves began with “the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into hell” (qtd. in Graff 184). The slaves that were captured and brought to North America were broken and beaten both physically and psychologically. The humiliation of being traumatized by a fellow human being is immense because it creates unbearable shame to be denied your subjectivity, “which says through word or action, ‘What you need, what you desire, and what you feel are of complete and utter insignificance’” (qtd. in Graff 189). It was only after the Civil War, in 1865, that slavery was removed from the Constitution.

In the Reconstruction period, that lasted from 1865 until 1877, racism took on the form of segregation and the Jim Crow laws. Jim Crow laws were inspired “by minstrel shows,

featuring white men in makeup imitating African Americans in song and dance” (Norton et al. 282). Jim Crow was a southern slave who was imitated by Thomas D. Rice in the 1840s. Rice and other minstrels contributed to establishing racial segregation (Norton et al. 282). In the Jim Crow system racial inequality was enforced through means including segregation in the form of signs stating “No Niggers Welcomed Here” (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 3) and being victim to brutal lynching (Murrin et al. 559). African Americans were considered inferior by nature doomed to forever serve the white race. C. Vann Woodward, describes the extent to which racial inequality laws went as follows:

The extremes to which caste penalties and separation were carried in parts of the South could hardly find a counterpart short of the latitudes of India and South Africa... Curfew... separate phone booths... separate books and storage of books in public school... South Carolina separated the mulatto caste of prostitutes, and even “Ray Stannard Baker found Jim Crow Bibles for Negro witnesses in Atlanta and Jim Crow elevators for Negro passengers in Atlanta buildings.” (qtd. in Bonilla-Silva 2014, 28)

The Great Compromise of 1877 was an unwritten deal that ended the Reconstruction era, having met two great objectives inherited from the Civil War: to reincorporate the former Confederate states into the Union, and to abolish slavery in the South (Murrin et al. 536). However, former slaves and their descendants were still not treated as equal citizens and it took decades before the promises of equality were fulfilled.

After the Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement era took a stand and racism was slowly starting to make a shift towards color-blindness. The Civil Rights Movement was finally able to break down legal barriers but were unsuccessful in breaking down racial barriers, as it “ended the “violence of segregation,” but not the “violence of poverty”” (Graff 187). Jim Crow laws were still practiced in all public conveniences and institutions in the South, as white Americans saw the development of freedom for African Americans as a threat to white supremacy. However, compared to racism under the Jim Crow laws, “the ideology of color-blindness seems like ‘racism lite’” (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 3). American society moved from blatant racism which consisted of name calling and legal violence to color-blindness where it is furtively whispered that African Americans are human beings as well. Simultaneously, society experienced a shift from using the biblical story of Ham (Genesis 9:20-27) as God’s divine justification for slavery to blaming African American themselves for their unequal positions and opportunities in American society. When an African American activist was asked about the success of the Civil Rights era he responded:

Everything has changed, but nothin' has changed. In the 1960s Bull Connor threw us in jail, sicked dogs on us, turned the water hose on us. Today Birmingham has a black mayor. Last year he picked me up at the airport and gave me a key to the city. But in the shadow of City Hall I saw black people still living in slums. ... In the shadows of Downtown I observed a growing underclass. Everything has changed, but nothin' has changed.” (qtd. in Graff 188)

His description of how the position of African Americans had not changed but had rather moved out of sight, is interconnected with the concept of racism going underground and becoming invisible. As the Jim Crow system kept blatant racism alive, the resistance towards this racist system indirectly led to the more secretive yet ever present idea of racism, namely in the form of color-blindness.

Today, President Barack Obama, the first African American president, is the most powerful person of the United States and has been a beacon of light in the fight against racism. It has been argued since the election of president Obama that race “would no longer stand as a barrier to opportunity or achievement” (Harris and Lieberman 2). In his campaign, Obama tried to reach beyond race and the color line and he succeeded and received a high percentage of the white vote which meant he did better among white voters than any Democrat in recent elections (3). Obama envisioned an American future in which racial distinctions would blur and ultimately fade into insignificance, and projected himself as an avatar of the future (2). This has fueled the idea of America being in a postracist era as the election of the first African American president held an important and symbolic meaning for Americans of all races. The concept of color-blindness has also been given a positive connotation while it is a far more complex issue than people know.

## 1.2 The Social Debate on Color-Blindness

The term and concept of color-blindness is extremely complex, multifaceted and slippery making it impossible to give one overarching definition. A few definitions will be presented to indicate how difficult it is to define the notion. According to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva the concept of color-blindness explains contemporary racial inequality due to nonracial dynamics (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 2). On the one hand color-blindness is thought to protect African Americans and other racial minorities while on the other hand “that benign and invidious discrimination are indistinguishable and equally pernicious” according to professor Ian F. Haney López (Lopez 989). Charles Gallagher agrees with Lopez and adds that the term

is pernicious because “color-blindness allows whites to believe that segregation and discrimination are no longer an issue because it is now illegal for individuals to be denied access to housing, public accommodations or jobs because of their race” (Gallagher 25). White Americans can go as far as thinking they are tolerant and progressive because they chose not to judge someone by the color of their skin. The logic behind the concept of color-blindness goes in a vicious circle:

since race no longer shapes life chances in a color-blind world there is no need to take race into account when discussing differences in outcomes between racial groups. This approach erases America’s racial hierarchy by implying that social, economic and political power and mobility is equally shared among all racial groups. Ignoring the extent or ways in which race shapes life chances validates whites’ social location in the existing racial hierarchy while legitimating the political and economic arrangements that perpetuate and reproduce racial inequality and privilege. (Gallagher 28)

This shows the logic of proponents and opponents on the term color-blindness and it builds on the neutral definition from the Oxford dictionary as being, “not influenced by racial prejudice”. The idea of race is trying to be erased by white Americans, however, this is not legitimate if a majority of American lives is still negatively influenced on the basis of their race and the color of their skin. In other words, on the one hand white Americans generally believe that race should be disregarded to erase the racial hierarchy and racism while on the other hand colored Americans are continuing to struggle with racial inequality in American society leaving them feeling insignificant through the idea of color-blindness.

The definitions above will be used as a stepping stone for the further analysis of the complicated debates on the concept of color-blindness. Simultaneously, it becomes apparent how the American government and the American people want to start with a clean slate. After the dark chapter in American history, color-blindness is being used as a solution for making racial inequality disappear. However, this is where the debate becomes slippery. To get a better sense of the difficulty and complexity of color blindness, both the social debate and academic debate will be explained and analyzed.

In the social debate it becomes clear how slippery the concept of color-blindness really is, as on the one hand the term is simplified and on the other hand it is put into historical and social context. This can be exemplified by the different views on color-blindness of Republican Chief Justice, John Roberts and Democratic Associate Justice, Sonia Sotomayor. Roberts believes that “the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race, is to stop

discriminating on the basis of race.” This could be a good point, if there was no form of racism and everyone lived together without indirectly or unintendedly categorizing on the base of someone’s skin color. Sotomayor responds by stating that “the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to speak openly and candidly on the subject of race, and to apply the constitution with eyes open to the unfortunate effects of centuries of racial discrimination.” Her view takes into account the historical context and the position of minorities in American society. Color-blindness seems to operate under the assumption that Americans are living in a postracist era, where race is no longer important. Also, removing it from the public debate. When in fact it remains a significant problem. Race is not only trying to be disregarded but it is also being used to justify racial inequality.

In “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” Zora Neale Hurston writes about how she came to view race as a social construction. The essay was published in 1928 and it is an honest and personal revelation consisting of thoughts that were not of her time. Hurston begins by explaining how she grew up in the little Negro town of Eatonville in Florida and discovered at age 13 that she was not simply ‘Zora’ but realizing, “I was now a little colored girl” (Hurston 1). As she continues there is an ambivalence in her story. On the one hand she is summed up by society on the basis of race: She responds that she is not “tragically colored” (1) and that she does “not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood” (1). This indicates that she does not want to complain about the color of her skin and her status in society. On the other hand Hurston celebrates her heritage by stating how she is often reminded of being a granddaughter of slaves: “The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said “On the line!”, the Reconstruction said “Get set!” and the generation before said “Go!”. I am off to a flying start ...” (2). Here she recognizes the racial history, is content with her heritage and states how times have changed and how she is building on that. She has a very modern view indicated by not wanting to be judged on the basis of race. “At certain times I have no race, I am me. ... The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time” (2). It becomes apparent, that even Zora Hurston is undecided on the matter. Race is important for her, it defines part of her heritage, but also allows others to reduce her to it. She therewith sheds light on the complexity of the dilemma and its history.

### 1.3 The Academic Debate on Color-Blindness

The problem does not necessarily only lie with the term race, the real problem is “the social and political construction of race in a way that advantages whites over people of color

in economic markets, political institutions and social policies” (Williams 368). This has been the case from the year that the American Constitution was signed, which indicates that race has been used to create American society. On the basis of race, Americans have, for decades, decided on who is allowed to enter the U.S. and contribute to society and who is not. It has not only been a matter of who but also a matter of when. At times when the Chinese, Mexicans and African Americans were needed, they were allowed into the country, establishing ‘race’ as a factor for immigration. In current American society, people tend to think in categories, including racial categories, which people are then also judged by. Lopez states that “if one defined the colorblind ideal not as a society free from racial hierarchy but as a society in which no racial distinctions are made, then obviously ending racial categorization would promote this goal” (995). In moving past and beyond racial distinction and racial categorization is an important to inspire people to take the first step and exclude racism from their lives. However, putting away with race entirely and for good also provides society with new challenges and eventually, the question of whether turning color-blind actually is the direction most desirable to proceed into, needs to be asked.

Next to analyzing this social dilemma, it is also important to evaluate the academic debate and use (the) different frames to explain the concept of color-blindness further. In his book *Racism without Racists* Bonilla-Silva argues that there are four frames that help to explain color-blindness: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 26). The first, most important and the most complex frame is abstract liberalism which involves “using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., “equal opportunity,” the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 28). He elaborates on two elements that white Americans use to (indirectly/unintentionally) justify racial inequality: equal opportunity and individualism. The principle of equal opportunity “is invoked by whites today to oppose affirmative-action policies because they supposedly represent the ‘preferential treatment’ of certain groups” (28). This idea takes neither the history of racism nor the social and economic status into account. It ignores the underrepresentation of people of color in society, hence, making it an abstract utilization of the idea of ‘equal opportunity’ (28). The second principle is regarding each person as an individual who has the right to making choices. However, this claim “ignores the multiple institutional and state-sponsored practices behind segregation and being unconcerned about these practices’ negative consequences for minorities” (28).

The second frame is naturalization which allows “whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences” (28). Bonilla-Silva explains this by how white Americans claim that people with a similar background gravitate towards each other, ‘gravitate toward likeness’ (28). In other words, that is how African Americans often having African American friends while white Americans often have white American friends is justified. The contradicting color-blind logic behind this is that these preferences “are almost biologically driven and typical of all groups in society, preferences for primary associations with member of one’s race are rationalized as nonracial because ‘they [racial minorities] do it too’” (28). This frame attempts to argue that segregation is a natural process.

The third frame is cultural racism which relies on “culturally based arguments such as “Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education” or “blacks have too many babies” to explain the standing of minorities in society” (28). This frame has evolved from the biological argument, in the Jim crow system, to a cultural argument. These cultural, stereotypical thoughts lead to people who would not refer to themselves as racist. In his research Bonilla-Silva did many interviews including an interview with ‘white middle-class student’ George McDermott who says the following:

I don’t believe in handouts. ... So that the whole welfare system falls into that [category]. ... The idea of fourteen-year-old kids getting pregnant and then having five children by the time they’re twenty is absurd! It’s ridiculous! And that’s what’s causing this country to go downhill. (29)

The simplification of color-blindness and the culturally based arguments easily lead to racist thoughts and being racially color-blind.

The fourth and final frame is minimization of racism and this suggests “discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances (“It’s better now than in the past” or “There is discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there”)” (29). In the past year, there have been many race related uprisings in Ferguson, New York and Baltimore where African Americans are accused of being ‘hypersensitive’, using race as an ‘excuse’ or even more appalling ‘playing the infamous race card’ (29). It becomes apparent how the struggles of racial minorities is not only minimized but also blamed on themselves. With all four frames it becomes clear how alert one must be to find a racial remark. What all the frames have in common is that they are not being put in the greater context, in the economic, social and historical context of American society.

The complexity of racism in American society together with common, false simplifications are leading to the frightening and dangerous practice of color-blindness. In

1963, Martin Luther King Jr. gave the famous speech 'I Have a Dream', aspiring to live in a society where "people are judged by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin." This idea was and still is how many people believe a person should be judged. When looking closer, however, this is where the concept of color-blindness becomes dangerous, for it could create and perpetuate greater inequality in American society and "will undermine accountability for civil rights violations (hate crimes, discrimination in the workplace and biased racial profiling), health care disparities, and racial/ethnic disease patterns important for medical treatment and educational inequities" (Sue). It becomes apparent that the striving for a color-blind society protects whites from realizing that they are in fact benefitting from racism. As long as Americans simplify the issue and "as long as it is hidden from consciousness, they can maintain the illusion that they are not responsible for the state of race relations because they do not knowingly engage in racist behaviors" (Sue). If, therefore, a majority simplifies this complex issue and therefore supports a racial color-blind American society, and believing the notion that America has arrived at a postracist era, racial minorities will likely face the biggest challenge yet to come.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of color-blindness has a long and varied career and it is observed that its meaning and valence have changed dramatically in recent decades indicating the changing status and meaning of the rhetoric of color-blindness (Harris and Lieberman 13). History has shown how racism has shifted from being visible to invisible in American society. Martin Luther King Jr. and Zora Hurston both have an indecisive view on racial-colorblindness which is comprehensible due to the complexity of the issue. The social and academic debate give an idea of the struggles and dilemmas that comes along with institutionalized racism and racial color-blindness. Proponents of color-blindness simplify the matter while opponents of color-blindness emphasize the importance of putting the issue into a social and historical context. The academic debate then delves deeper into trying to explain why and in what way color-blindness is justified. Bonilla-Silva uses four frames, abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism, that demonstrate how 'easy' racist remarks are made. Furthermore, the importance of 'equal opportunity' and 'individualism' makes it clear how the two mentalities influence and enforce racism and color-blind ideas. This goes together with racism in American history and how Americans want to begin with a clean slate, which for many includes disregarding race. The key to



making Americans aware of the dangers of a color-blind society is making racism visible again. The following chapters will discuss racism on a political level, analyzing the influence on the institution of education and contemplating whether a color-blind society is desirable.

# 2



## Educational Policy on a National Level, State Level, and Local Level

Education has been at the frontier of the political conflict over affirmative action in American politics and law.

--- Frederick C. Harris and Robert C. Lieberman

Chapter one explained the way in which blatant and visible racism have made room for color-blindness, and this chapter will now show how beneath the surface of racism and discrimination lays another layer of institutions that have made racial inequality persist in American society (Harris and Lieberman 2). Chapter 2 will take a closer look at the education institution on a national, state and local level. The institution of education has been chosen because what is taught to children in the classrooms is eventually reflected in society. Through education racism can either be kept alive or it can be addressed. Racism is partly prevailing because it is in people's mind. Therefore, by focusing on education I will analyze to what extent children are faced with racism and color-blindness and if so, how the school and teachers are dealing with it. In this chapter the national level will be analyzed through the U.S. Department of Education, the state level will be explored through The New York State Education Department (NYSED) and the local level will finally be analyzed through The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). The most important policy when it comes to education in America is, the No Child Left Behind Act. That is why this act will be used as a foundation to look at the American educational system and the three levels will be used as an analysis tool because that is how America's political system is structured. This chapter will work towards a better understanding of the local level, as chapter 3 will delve deeper into the local level with the help of a case study. America has faced a long history of racism and slavery that have created structural obstacles, including school boundary lines, poverty

connected to social-economic reasons, decentralization that affect the achievement of goals of the No Child Left Behind Act.

## 2.1 Federal Level

When looking on a federal level, the No Child Left Behind Act will be analyzed by looking at the socio-economic factors and geographic challenges children face in the process of receiving education. The full, or rather long name of the No Child Left Behind Act is “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (1 USC, 2002). In 2002, the bill was signed into law by George W. Bush Jr. and it was seen as one of the biggest and most significant achievements by the Bush administration. The purpose of the Act is to achieve the following points:

- (1) to support State and local efforts to raise academic standards through advanced placement programs, and thus further increase the number of students who participate and succeed in advanced placement programs;
- (2) to encourage more of the 600,000 students who take advanced placement courses each year but do not take advanced placement exams each year, to demonstrate their achievements through taking the exams;
- (3) to build on the many benefits of advanced placement programs for students, which benefits may include the acquisition of skills that are important to many employers, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores that are 100 points above the national averages, and the achievement of better grades in secondary school and in college than the grades of students who have not participated in the programs;
- (4) to increase the availability and broaden the range of schools, including middle schools, that have advanced placement and pre-advanced placement programs;
- (5) to demonstrate that larger and more diverse groups of students can participate and succeed in advanced placement programs;
- (6) to provide greater access to advanced placement and pre-advanced placement courses and highly trained teachers for low-income and other disadvantaged students;
- (7) to provide access to advanced placement courses for secondary school students at schools that do not offer advanced placement programs, increase the rate at which secondary school students participate in advanced placement courses, and increase

the numbers of students who receive advanced placement test scores for which college academic credit is awarded;

- (8) to increase the participation of low-income individuals in taking advanced placement tests through the payment or partial payment of the costs of the advanced placement test fees; and
- (9) to increase the number of individuals that achieve a baccalaureate or advanced degree, and to decrease the amount of time such individuals require to attain such degrees. (1702 USC, 2002)

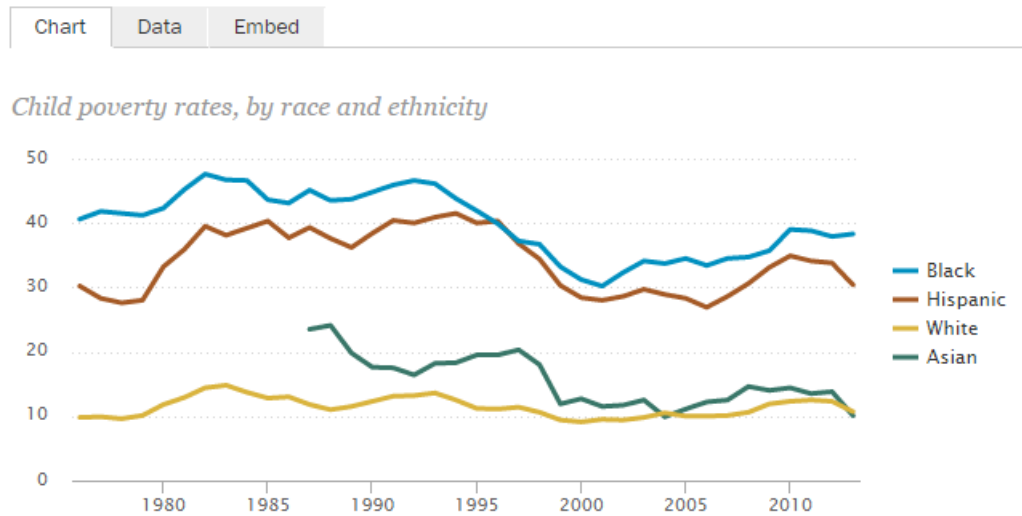
The overall goals of the Act are to raise the level of education and to provide education for every single child whether they have a low-income, are from a diverse group (minority group) or are disabled. The question that consequently arises is, to what extent has the Act achieved its goals. The fifth goal and purpose of the act, “to demonstrate that larger and more diverse groups of students can participate and succeed in advanced placement programs” (1702 USC, 2002), is to establish and support diversity while at the same time the American Government wants equality. However, aspects including geographic restriction, socio-economic factors are getting in the way of achieving this ideal.

Legally, it is not allowed to deny children equal education opportunities based on their race, however, “it is perfectly legal to provide disparate education opportunities based on where they live” (Wilson 626). According to Erika Wilson in her article “Leveling Localism and Racial Inequality in Education through the No Child Left Behind Act Public Choice Provision”, the geographic restriction is an indicator of the creating of inequality when it comes to receiving education. In America, the local level of education has a prominent role and with that a lot of input. One rule that the local level, also called ‘localism’, has established is school boundary lines. School boundary lines are drawn so that children living in a certain area go to the school built in that area. This does not sound unfair until it becomes clear that school district demographics reflect the economical and racial segregation that still exists in neighborhoods (627). According to Judith DeSena, professor of sociology at St. John’s University, neighborhoods are a good indicator of the social, political and economic dynamics of a society and it is the environment where the interaction between physical space and social space takes place (DeSena 241). The focus on neighborhoods, and geographic restriction, are significant in discovering low-income students and how equal and unequal they are being treated by the Act and the educational system. In her article “What’s space got to do with it?” Sharon Zukin builds on the idea of the relations between physical space and social space in neighborhoods of DeSena by stating “space is not only relational, but also hierarchical”

(Zukin 346). Zukin adds that space always comes out of a struggle between an autonomous self and an external power. In this case, the struggle between African Americans and the American government has led to a certain social and economic status of African Americans. This has given the Government indirect control over where they now reside when it comes to the state, city and neighborhood. One way to fight off this kind of inequality is to make inter-district transfers possible, and to accomplish that an alteration has to be made in the No Child Left Behind Act. These school boundary lines are essential because they determine the quality of education a child receives.

A socio-economic factor that is prohibiting the achievement of equality in students receiving equal education is poverty. Poverty effects many things including health and social well-being. Poverty rates are especially high amongst minority groups, including African Americans. The reason why African Americans and other minority groups (e.g. Hispanics and Asians) lag well behind white Americans in many areas of society is because: “they are about three times more likely to be poor than white, earn about 40 percent less than whites, and have about an eighth of the net worth that whites have” (qtd in Bonilla-Silva 2014, 2). Even though the overall child poverty rate has slightly decreased since the improvement of the American economy, the poverty rate of African American children has changed little according to data research by Pew Research in 2013. The chart below depicts the harsh reality of the high rates of poverty in America and how African American children are the ones most likely to live in poverty. African American children “were almost four times more likely as white or Asian children to be living in poverty in 2013” (Pew Research) according to data from the Pew Research center.

## Child Poverty Rate Stable Among Blacks, Drops Among Other Groups



Pew Research Center

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 'Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013'. Note: Children are younger than 18. Whites include only non-Hispanics. Blacks and Asians include both the Hispanic and non-Hispanic components of their populations. Hispanics are of any race. In 2001 and earlier, respondents were only allowed to report one race group, and Asians include Pacific Islanders. From 2002-2013, respondents could choose more than one race; whites, blacks and Asians include only the single-race components of their populations in these years.

*Figure 1*

The high chance of African American children being poor, as has been mentioned in the previous paragraph, influences where they live, which in turn influences which school they attend.

Furthermore, poverty also leads to many other things, as there are no 'financial' safety nets in America, they are forced to get around through other means. If they drop out of school and are poor they cannot contribute to society and are discriminated against on the basis of this. With that, anger, frustration and violence is fueled in the form of joining gangs or doing drugs which will most likely lead to incarceration. This is a vicious circle that is very difficult to break free from if the American government is indirectly not providing equal educational opportunities. Examples of what young, and older, African Americans have ranged from Michael Brown being shot in Ferguson, Eric Garner being choked to death in New York City, from Freddie Gray being beaten to death in Baltimore to a teenager being harshly thrown to the ground in Texas. These incidents were all caught on camera leading to people saying this is a chain reaction when the truth is that this has always happened and is continuing to happen. There appears to be more to it than African Americans simple 'being lazy or being

violent’, as they are being barred from fully participating in, and being educated by, American society.

Children, of *all* skin colors, are the most important part of society because of the following stated by Unicef on child well-being: “the true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born” (Unicef 1). The Unicef report ranks and compares twenty-one rich economic advanced countries the measure the countries child well-being. It is done on the basis of six different dimensions: “material well-being, health and safety, education, peer and family relationships, behaviors and risks, and young people’s own subjective sense of well-being” (2). While the Netherlands ranks the best of all countries, the United States ranks close to the bottom when taking into account all six dimensions. The report also indicates that goal is to broadly reveal strengths and weaknesses of the countries, however, complexities or societal struggles are not specifically taken into account. Poverty is one of the elements that the report also touches upon and states how it affects different aspects of child well-being in various different ways: “particularly when prolonged, poverty has been shown to be likely to have an effect on children’s health, cognitive development, achievement at school, aspirations, self-perceptions, relationships, risk behaviors and employment prospects” (39). The report broadly indicates the strengths and weaknesses of the countries, however, societal complexities and struggles of individual countries are not take into account. Overall, the report stresses the importance of child well-being, which includes education, and that it is representative of a countries social and economic state. Even though the No Child Left Behind Act has goals to educate every single child, poor or rich, black or white, living in the city or on the countryside, there are external factors influenced by history, politics, the economy, culture that are all interwoven and influence the achievement of the above-mentioned act’s goals.

## 2.2 State Level

When looking on a state level, New York State will be analyzed by looking at the influence of decentralization and the lack of education ‘culture’. In the No Child Left Behind Act it is also explained what the goals and the role of the state is, and it reads as follows:

- (1) IN GENERAL- Each State shall establish a statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement for local educational agencies and schools

receiving funds under this part, in order to increase the opportunity for all students served by those agencies and schools to meet the State's academic content standards and student academic achievement standards.

(2) PRIORITIES- In carrying out this subsection, a State shall —

(A) first, provide support and assistance to local educational agencies with schools subject to corrective action under section 1116 and assist those schools, in accordance with section 1116(b)(11), for which a local educational agency has failed to carry out its responsibilities under paragraphs (7) and (8) of section 1116(b);

(B) second, provide support and assistance to other local educational agencies with schools identified as in need of improvement under section 1116(b); and

(C) third, provide support and assistance to other local educational agencies and schools participating under this part that need that support and assistance in order to achieve the purpose of this part.

(3) REGIONAL CENTERS- Such a statewide system shall, to the extent practicable, work with and receive support and assistance from the comprehensive regional technical assistance centers and the regional educational laboratories under section 941(h) of the Educational Research, Development, Dissemination, and Improvement Act of 1994, or other providers of technical assistance. (1111 USC, 2002)

In many other countries education is a fundamental right and commitment, however, in America, education is not a right because it is not written in the Constitution. Thus, the commitment is put on a federal and state level which means that every state organizes their own education policy. When looking at the responsibilities of the state mentioned above, it becomes clear that the state has to ‘provide assistance and support’ for almost all aspects of local schools. The state in return receives support from the regional center, which shows that there is no major and overall institution. Education is decentralized, meaning that there are a lot of different systems. Here, it becomes apparent that it is more about independence and the individual rather than about society and the common good.

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) supports and is responsible for the supervision of all public schools, as well as state tests and examinations, in the state. According to the official website of NYSED, their mission is: “to raise the knowledge, skill, and opportunity of all the people in New York. Our vision is to provide leadership for a system that yields the best educated people in the world” (“NYSED”). Besides that it shows



the evident same goal as the No Child Left Behind Act, it also demonstrates the decentralization by stating their goal is for ‘all people in New York’.

America is one of the few countries where the institution of education is decentralized which could be a reason why America is missing out on the “culture” of education. By centralizing education as a key focus of the state, a country can establish baseline requirements that set the frame for policy and judicial challenges (Lurie). It also contributes to the so called “culture” of education: where “the cultural assumptions and values surrounding an education system do more to support or undermine it than the system can do on its own” (Lurie). By trying to create this “culture” other factors blocking the goal that every child deserves education may slowly dissolve. If America would add the right to education in the Constitution, it would create a baseline for rights. Therefore, the American government would have a better overview and more power to intervene if rules are not abided. This idea will, however, most likely not have a lot of support as Americans are hesitant for a ‘powerful’ federal government. That is why the local level has received and still maintains the most control when it comes to the institution of education.

### 2.3 Local Level

When looking at a local, or city, level, New York City will be analyzed by taking into account the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and looking at the power of the local level, analyzing the ‘culture’ of education and analyzing the difference in urban and suburban schools. The general obligations of ‘localism’ according to the No Child Left Behind Act is:

- (1) IN GENERAL- Each local educational agency plan shall provide assurances that the local educational agency will —
  - (A) inform eligible schools and parents of school wide program authority and the ability of such schools to consolidate funds from Federal, State, and local sources;
  - (F) take into account the experience of model programs for the educationally disadvantaged, and the findings of relevant scientifically based research indicating that services may be most effective if focused on students in the earliest grades at schools that receive funds under this part;
  - (G) in the case of a local educational agency that chooses to use funds under this part to provide early childhood development services to low-income children below the

age of compulsory school attendance, ensure that such services comply with the performance standards established under section 641A(a) of the Head Start Act; (K) coordinate and collaborate, to the extent feasible and necessary as determined by the local educational agency, with the State educational agency and other agencies providing services to children, youth, and families with respect to a school in school improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under section 1116 if such a school requests assistance from the local educational agency in addressing major factors that have significantly affected student achievement at the school;

(L) ensure, through incentives for voluntary transfers, the provision of professional development, recruitment programs, or other effective strategies, that low-income students and minority students are not taught at higher rates than other students by unqualified, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers. (1112 USC, 2002)

The obligations of the local level are by far the most of all three levels. The only clauses that are included touch upon the low-income students, who are often African American students. The local level has the most influence on the functioning of schools and therefore it is most likely that racism and color-blindness need to be addressed on this level first.

The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) is responsible for ensuring, providing, informing, reviewing, collaborating and coordinating the city's public school system. According to the NYCDOE official website it is "the largest school district in the U.S., serving 1.1 million students in over 1,800 schools" ("NYCDOE"). The decentralization movement began in the 1960s in New York City. According to Evans Clinchy in his article "The Educationally Challenged American School District", around the same time thirty two community school districts were created and were given autonomy to a certain extent to run the elementary and middle schools (Clinchy 275). Around a decade later, the creation of more schools expanded in East Harlem's Community School District 4. Later, CCE was established which was an independent organization "devoted to helping teachers and parents throughout the city establish the new, small, autonomous schools" (275). It becomes apparent how open the local level is to input from American citizens.

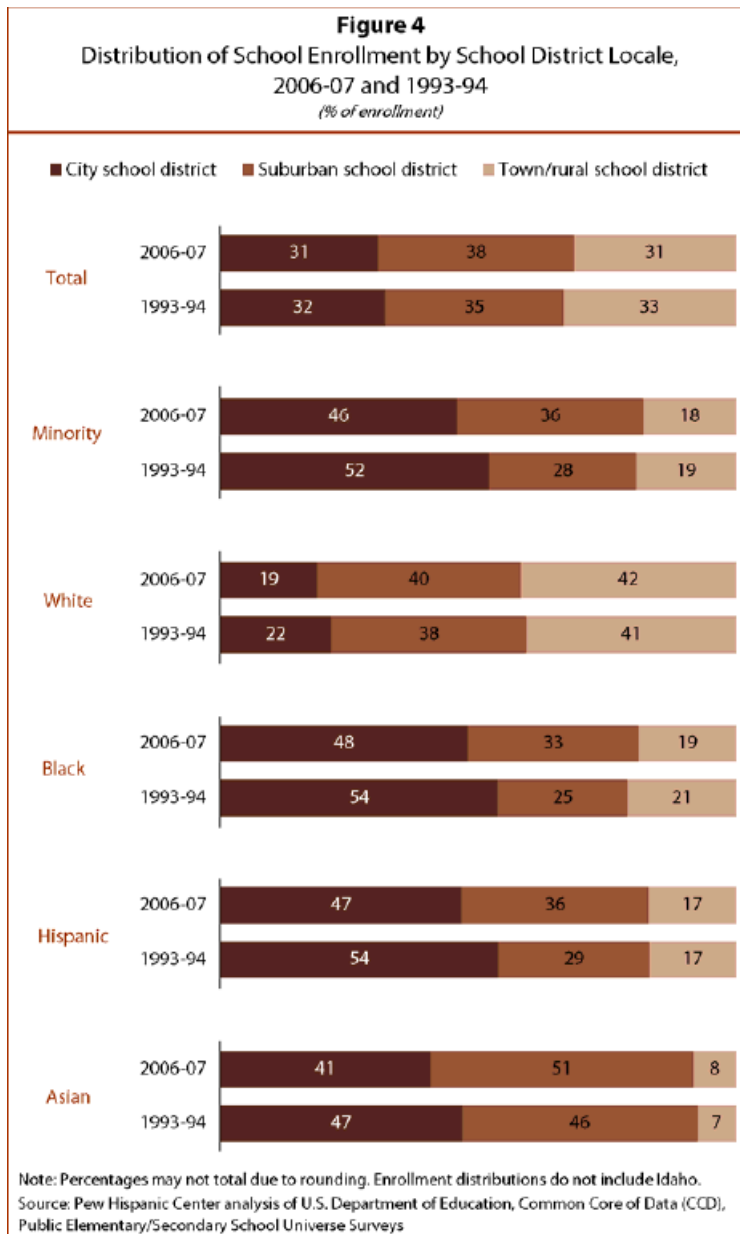
The local level, or localism, has been accepted as the favored model of education in America and it has been supported by the Supreme Court. In 1955, after the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, "the Supreme Court has consistently expressed a doctrinal preference for principles of localism at the expense of the constitutional rights of minority and poor students" (Wilson 636) according to Erika Wilson. The *Brown v. Board of Education* was a legendary and changing point in American history, when the Court declared state laws

establishing segregated public schools, for black and white students, to be unconstitutional. In 1954, Roscoe Brown jr., at the time the president of Bronx Community College, praised this historical moment by stating:

I witnessed my people being brutalized by the Nazis ... Coming home ... it was like a mirror we had to face. We were fighting the Nazis, but look what we are doing here in this country. During and after slavery, we in this country had been discriminating against African Americans. It [Brown] was an inevitable decision because the U.S. could no longer exist half free and half unfree. (qtd. in Fine 502)

It took years until the decision was implemented everywhere as the Supreme Court stated to gradually, rather than immediately, implement them with the fear of violent protests by white Americans. This connects with the idea of meritocracy, an political view that America maintains. Meritocracy is a political philosophy where individuals should be given power to be responsible for themselves and to determine their own fate. This is being done on the local level, clarifying why this level has the most authority when it comes to the institution of education.

Today, when looking at New York City, as well as other cities, inequality in education can be measured through the differences between suburban and urban schools. The academic achievement gap and resource gap between suburban and urban schools is neither accidental nor coincidental (Wilson 645) according to Erika Wilson. Even though segregation is not present anymore in American society, the socio-economic factors still influence where white Americans and African Americans live. The boundaries of residence is typically made between cities and suburbs (645) and therefore also between white Americans and minorities. In the table below, it becomes clear how in 2006-2007 40% of the white American children go to suburban schools and 48% of the African American children go to urban school districts.



*Figure 2*

The statistics in figure 2 are slightly worrying because urban school districts often have lesser money and therefore less resources to achieve academic levels. Therefore, these schools often score lower (646) which again leads to an obstacle in achieving the promise of equal educational opportunity for all students.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, it becomes apparent how every level of the political educational system faces different challenges and obstacles to achieve the overall goal of giving *all* children

education and leaving no child behind. Geographic restrictions, socio economic factors including poverty, the influence of decentralization, the lack of a 'culture' of education, the idea of meritocracy and the racially divided suburban and urban schools have all impacted the lives of African Americans, and e.g. Hispanics and Asians. These factors are barricading the achievement of the goal of the No Child Left Behind Act, namely that all children have the right to receiving education. Therefore, the first impression seemingly shows that the federal, state and local level are creating common expectations for all and seemingly disregarding race. While the factors and visible impact on minorities receive little attention. It becomes apparent that a structure is in place that is built up out of so many different elements that it is not seen in one single glance. Most importantly, the structure that is creating obstacles for minorities and keeping racism alive is not directly meant to do that. Rather, consequences and influences of American history is upholding these obstacles. The result is that African American students continue to lag behind white Americans in almost all aspects of American society, including education.

# 3



## Case Study: Color-Blindness in *Mad Hot Ballroom*

White skin privilege is the flip side of discrimination. While discrimination is negative and overt, white skin privilege is negative but passive. It's a great blind spot more than a painful boil, but in a subtle way it is far more destructive... For me, the quest for racial unity remains the defining moral issue of our time. I say to you who are young, take this issue and find a way of making it yours.

--- Bill Bradley on Education

Chapter two showed that the local level has the most authority when it comes to education. This chapter is going to analyze the documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom* to indicate if and how racism and color-blindness are taking shape in schools, on a local level. "Education has long been a central platform for struggles over racial equality in American society," (Harris and Lieberman 25) and that is why it is important to analyze what is being done to counter racism and color-blindness. This final chapter will indicate that "education is an arena where a variety of forces combine to influence inequality in often hidden and indirect ways" (Harris and Lieberman 26) and show how schools in New York City are dealing with various factors and actors in this 'arena'. Education is the central institution in influencing the form racism takes. According to Amanda Lewis, it is the institution that is involved in drawing and redrawing of racial lines (Lewis 4). Though the education system does not explicitly 'teach' racial identity in the way they teach multiplication or punctuation, schools are settings where people acquire some version "of the rules of racial classification" and of their racial identity (qtd. in Lewis 4). This chapter will analyze how schools in New York City are dealing with color-blindness while encountering various factors including teaching about other cultures, the role of the teacher and what to do to break the vicious circle of color-blind logic.

### 3.1 Introduction to *Mad Hot Ballroom*

The focus of this thesis is on education as it is the essence of society, because what happens in the educational system is eventually reflected in a society. Children are taught morals, values and prejudices in school and when these prejudices include forms of racism it is then kept alive. While children should be raised open-minded and taught to be curious and critical about what is different to them. Education is not simply the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think as Albert Einstein said. One way to train the mind of children is through dance. As dance is much more than just a physical activity, rather dancing is about: connections—to our friends, to our families, to our neighbors. It is one of the most expressive ways we celebrate and communicate our cultures and communities. With Dancing Classrooms, we are able to reach children in existing classroom settings and address fundamental issues of mutual respect and self-esteem – issues that social dance puts into practice. We hope to inspire children through dance to do well, to respect one another, to be proud. (Dancing Classrooms)

The documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom* is a good example of a curriculum where children learn to understand and respect other cultures, through learning ballroom dancing. This is the first step in addressing the continuation of color-blindness.

The documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom* will serve as a case study to indicate how a school deals with color-blindness by organizing a dance program that fits into the regular school curriculum. In 1994, the first ballroom dance program was introduced to 5<sup>th</sup> graders, children aged between 10 and 11 years old, in two different public schools in New York City. In 2005, when the documentary came out, “6,000 kids from over 60 schools in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens are required to take this 10-week course” (Mad Hot Ballroom 00:46-00:54). The program is organized by Dancing Classrooms, a learning program that cultivates life skills through the practice of ballroom dance (Dancing Classrooms). The program is planned in the form of a competition and it remains optional for a school to take part in this program and competition. According to Dancing Classrooms, the program was originally designed “to bring children from around the city together and unite the vast diversity of cultures and ethnicities that are in New York City” (Dancing Classrooms). The overall mission of the organization is,

to cultivate essential life skills in children through the practice of social dance. Our vision is to meaningfully participate in the development of schools and communities

where every child is connected, respected, and provided a safe environment in which to thrive. (Dancing Classrooms)

Children are open to learning new things and new people, and what the program tries to reinforce through dance is respect, confidence and teamwork. Before starting to analyze the documentary, I would like to make it clear that the documentary is a cultural product that does not give a perfect indication of reality and that it can be interpreted in different ways. My analysis will focus on analyzing the message and the meaning of the documentary.

### 3.2 Color-Blindness in *Mad Hot Ballroom*

The documentary will be analyzed on the basis of three principles by Bonilla-Silva, explain color-blindness that was already elaborated in chapter one, namely, abstract liberalism, naturalization, and minimization of racism. The documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom* shows how a dance program teaches children to be more respectful and accepting towards each other. The documentary starts with a story about how most children, 97%, who go to school in Washington Heights, Manhattan live amongst the poverty rate and how many of them are children with problems (6:55-7:00). Most children therefore do not have the money to afford and attend extracurricular activities.

When looking at abstract liberalism, the justification of racial inequality through equal opportunity and individualism, becomes clear through the message that all children have the same opportunities but in the documentary overall the students have a lower socio economic status. The message of the film is: if you work hard you can achieve anything. This goes hand in hand with the American idea of individualism, the principle that each individual has the right to making decisions. In American society, however, this claim “ignores the multiple institutional and state-sponsored practices behind segregation and being unconcerned about these practices’ negative consequences for minorities” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 28). The children in the documentary are being told that if they work hard they can achieve anything they want to, while structural racism is being ignored. Charles Gallagher explains the logic of this color-blindness frame as:

whites are able to imagine that the socio-economic success they enjoy relative to racial minorities is a function of individual hard work, determination, thrift and investments in education. The color-blind perspective removes from personal thought and public discussion any taint or suggestion of white supremacy or white guilt while legitimating the existing social, political and economic arrangements which privilege whites. This



perspective insinuates that class and culture, and not institutional racism, are responsible for social inequality. (Gallagher 26)

When in fact, the reality is that most of the children will encounter various obstacles in their lives. The idea that everyone is equal and has equal opportunities is not the case for racial minorities in America. Another interesting point is how the documentary is not about the different skin colors of the students but about who is a good dancer and who is not.

When looking at the frame of naturalization, with the argument that racial minorities ‘gravitate toward likeness’ (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 28), it can be linked to the way in which the documentary subdivides the interviews with the students. In between the dancing class scenes, students are interviewed about what they think about the program, what the boys and girls think of each other, the role of the parents and what they think about the fact that it is a competition. The scenes of the students answering these questions are almost all filmed with the African American students together, with the American Chinese students together, and with the Latino/a student’s together. It comes across as if the filmmakers want to make it seem as if this form of racial segregation is a normal and ‘natural’ process. This color-blind argument is explained and justified by the idea that they “are almost biologically driven and typical of all groups in society, preferences for primary associations with members of one’s race are rationalized as nonracial because ‘they (racial minorities) do it too’” (28). In other words, children are taught that it is normal to only have friends with the same race.

When looking at the frame of minimization of racism, where the struggle of racial minorities are minimized and blamed on themselves, it can be linked to the competition element of the documentary. If you do your best, no matter your race or ethnicity, you will succeed, that is the indirect message of this documentary. It becomes clear how “some youngsters are motivated by the idea of competition, but others worry they will not be able to succeed. If standards are clear and everyone has equal access to the means to achieve those standards, then competition can be a means to promote achievement and validate hard work” (Agrelo 146). Equal access to means to achieve goals is indeed very important, however, it does not stop there. The history and the structural inequality in all its different forms have to be taught to children so that they are aware of the racial hierarchy. Hard work and discipline are important elements of achieving success, but there is no guarantee. Especially when one belongs to a racial minority. As I mentioned before, the documentary does not make a difference on the basis of race but on the basis of how good a student can dance. The best dancers eventually are allowed to compete. This is a good example of how race and identity do not play an important role anymore. In that case, the documentary does a good job in

representing American society, of how many people believe America has landed in a post-racist era.

### 3.3 Other Factors

Another point that the documentary touches upon is the notion of taking pride in the country of origin. This is a key element in the success of a student as well as a first step to creating more understanding for other cultures and breaking down structural racism. In her article ““If You Don’t Identify with Your Ancestry, You’re like a Race without a Land””: Constructing Race at a Small Urban Middle School” Sarah Jewett analyzes, by using an ethnographic approach, the ways in which administrators, students and teachers reproduce constructed race through policies, pedagogies, and practices (Jewett 144). Jewett discusses the importance of teaching children to be aware and deal with racism. She also writes about the role of the teacher and how they are dealing with the concept of color-blindness.

“If we take seriously the fact that race is a social construction, we must pay attention to how racialization processes work – that is, how race is produced and perpetuated on an everyday basis” (qtd. in Jewett 144) according to associate professor of sociology Amanda E. Lewis. The institution of education is a platform where these racialization processes take place, in the form of ‘hidden curriculum,’ in explicit history lessons, in discipline practices, and in interpersonal relations (qtd. in Jewett 144). In her book *Race in the Schoolyard: Negotiating the Color Line in Classrooms and Communities* Lewis gives an example of the complicated way race influences interactions and understandings influence students’ school experiences. While doing research she witnesses an interaction between the teacher and Kendrick, an eight year old African American boy. In her account the following takes place:

Over an hour or so, several white students who ask were allowed to go to the bathroom, while the two black children who asked were told to wait. ... After Gerald, the white son of the mathematicians, returned, Kendrick asked to go to the bathroom. He had asked to go fifteen minutes earlier and had been told, like Taureen earlier, to wait. ... His protestations and “buts” were cut off as he was sent back to his group. I witnessed his surprise and indignation, ... In an effort not to cry as tears accumulated at the edge of his eyes, he swallowed the incident whole. (Lewis 2)

It is these small interactions, or rather processes, that often unintentionally take place in the classroom. In this case it seemed unintentional as the teacher was focused on the entire class. According to Lewis it also seemed unintentional as she asked a few indirect questions after

the interaction had taken place. A problem arises, however, when the teacher becomes unaware of the actions afterwards. This classroom story helps indicate “how such patterns can emerge and make themselves felt – how race shapes classroom practices, how race is part of the daily experiences of student of color in school, how the most well-meaning adults perpetuate inequities without any awareness of that they are doing so” (3). Through this example it also becomes evident how important the role of the teacher is.

The role of the teacher, and the relationship towards the student, is crucial when it comes to creating an open-minded, tolerant and fair space in the classroom. In the research that has been done on student roles within racially mixed groups by Eileen R. C. Parsons, Lynn Uyen Tran and Crystall Travis Gomillion they point to three important roles of the teacher. The first role is to make sure that students are in an environment where they can broaden their ideas, “recognize and accept that one student does not possess all the abilities needed for given tasks; acknowledge that each student has some of the requisite abilities; and believe that successful completion of tasks relies upon the invaluable resources of each group member” (Parsons and Tran 1471). The second role is to focus on students who are perceived to have a low status rather than students with a high status. For example, when comparing low status students to high status students “high status students talk more, have greater access to materials and other resources, and exert more influence upon the group process” (1471). The role of the teacher is then to acknowledge these differences and by recognizing the competence of the low status students “the teacher attempt to change how students perceive their low status peers and how the low status students perceive themselves” (1471). In other words, awareness is created for the differences and similarities between students. The third and final role of the teacher is to work together with students. Teachers and students should establish “a set of cultural norms and procedural roles regarding group work” (1472).

It becomes tricky and slippery when teachers start teaching with the main focus on commonalities/similarities rather than differences. The idea of color-blindness of not looking at someone’s skin but rather at the person is not a bad idea in itself, the context and societal structure is what makes this concept complicated. The same goes for wanting to emphasize similarities rather than differences as the following teacher states, “I also emphasize the vast commonalities rather than the differences.” With this he wanted his students to understand that “basically, in this country, we are so culturally alike, and stop looking at the few differences” (Jewett 154). This mindset, of disregarding color and differences, is dangerous if it is not communicated and taught within a context. Striving not to see color, color blindness, may seem to be offered as a way to focus on equality and individualism however it

becomes dangerous when it reduces the ways in which race is described, and it can also disregard the ways in which racism set into institutional structures (Jewett 157).

### 3.4 What to do ‘against’ color-blindness

When racism and color-blindness are embedded in the institutions of society one of the ways to end the vicious circle is to focus and recognize that “society is a system, that the system is powerfully constraining, and yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction” (qtd. in Jewett 158). That is why it is important to make children, as well as teachers, aware of the concept of racism and color-blindness. According to Tyrone Howard students need to be given the opportunity to study race and color-blindness “as a social construct, as well as the social, political, historical, geographical, cultural, and economic ramifications of racism” (qtd. in Jewett 158). This is a first step to break the vicious circle structural racism and color-blindness.

Another way to break this vicious circle is through fighting dysconsciousness. Dysconsciousness entails “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (qtd. in Parsons, Tran, and Gomillion 1473). Children have to learn about the social construct of race and the political, historical and cultural implication of racism and moreover they have to become critical thinkers. Only then can change be set into motion.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has gone into depth in analyzing the local level with a case study, the documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom*. Education is an important institution as lines of racism and color-blindness are drawn and redrawn here. Children have an innocent, open and brave mind that can easily be taught to abide the racial hierarchy in American society. However, they can also be taught about racism and color-blindness and the context in which it should be viewed. The historical, political and cultural view towards the institution of racism should be taught, together with thinking critically. *Mad Hot Ballroom* is a good example of how hidden color-blindness is positioned in the education system. It is a very intriguing and instructive documentary, however, when you peel off the layers it becomes clear how deep and structural racism is in American society, as well as in the educational system. To break

the vicious circle of color-blind logic all three levels, national, state and local, have to work together. Within the local level, the board of school, teachers and students need to also work together to make each other aware of the invisible ideas of color-blindness.

## Conclusion



In conclusion, after dark pages in American history, Americans want to start with a clean slate and with that in mind they want to disregard color. One thing has become clear, that color-blindness is an extremely difficult, complex and slippery concept that needs to be placed into a historic, political and cultural context. There is a big debate between proponents and opponents of color-blindness as the one simplifies the matter while the other emphasizes the importance of putting the issue into a social and historical context. A very important element, however, is making racism more visible. The effects of color-blindness could turn into a dangerous affair that would severely undermine African Americans and other racial minorities. There are many factors that unintentionally keep the racial structure in American society standing including geographic restrictions, socio-economic factors, decentralization, the idea of meritocracy and the racial division between urban and suburban schools. Creating a 'culture' of education will probably take obstacles away from achieving the important goal of the No Child Left Behind Act to make education available for *all* American children. The documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom* gives a good indication of the invisible nature of color-blindness and how it is kept in place without people realizing it. Children are the most important people of society as they are not biased, open minded and the backbone of America. From a young age children should be taught about the racial construction and color-blindness because they are exposed to racial actions at a very young age. The different political levels need to work together in order to let school boards and teachers work together better. However, the first step to break the vicious circle of color-blindness is to create awareness. America does not want to be racist, nor does it want to be color-blind to purposely disregard African Americans. The realization needs to sink in that the lack of complete knowledge about history leads to the repetition of history. Racism, in the form of color-blindness, is now evolving in American society which is perhaps more destructive and dangerous than the days of blatant racism and segregation. If white Americans continue to remain unknowledgeable about their color-blindness logic, they will keep a racial structure in place that will continue to hurt and damage African Americans and other racial minorities. In order to maintain the foundation of America, namely that all men are created equal, America needs to make children see color.

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