

The Effects of Interest Convergence on Student Experience: “Who We Thought Would Speak”

Jacquelyn-Marie Kennelly
Fordham University

Abstract: This paper explores how the theory of interest convergence shapes educational equity, using a 2020 study of students of color in Scotland as a case in point. Despite approval from local authorities, researchers faced resistance from school gatekeepers, resulting in the exclusion of Black student voices from the research project. This reflects a broader pattern in which efforts to address race in education are only supported when aligned with dominant White interests. Connecting the UK study to current US debates over Critical Race Theory (CRT) and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), I argue that institutional self-interest often dictates whether racial equity is pursued and call for use of interest convergence and CRT as tools to challenge systemic barriers and promote meaningful, inclusive change in education.

A History of Interest Convergence

While developing research that used student voices to highlight occurrences of organizational othering in Scottish classrooms, my colleague Stella Mouroutsou and I (2020) found our most significant challenge was the reluctance of gatekeepers to allow us entry to their schools. Our research topic of othering and our Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework led some school leaders to immediately deny us access — although we had all necessary school and city ethical approvals and certifications — and others to ignore multiple attempts at contact. Connections abound between our experience and the current American political and pedagogical climate in which CRT and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) research is being misrepresented and maligned at the highest government levels. The power of gatekeepers to act in their own interests has led to egregious enactment of racist policies and an exponential increase in systemic inequity. The CRT theory of interest convergence has for decades been at the center of antiracism research (Bell, 1980; Gillborn, 2013; Brooks, 2024). I delve into the idea of interest convergence to connect our UK-based pedagogical research to the US educational equity crisis, and draw conclusions about factors affecting current education policy and practice in America.

The theory of interest convergence was first presented by Derek Bell in *Harvard Law Review* (1980). The premise of interest convergence proposes that “advancements in civil rights or legal protections for people of color often occur not out of genuine concern for equality or justice, but rather when it serves the interests of those in power” (Brooks, 2024). For example, during the Civil Rights Movement, the federal government supported desegregation not entirely out of a commitment to justice, but also because rising racial tensions posed a risk to domestic stability and the nation's international reputation during the Cold War. Bell (1980; 2004) describes the convergence of Black and White interests that led to the first US Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954) to integrate schools in the United States (US). Bell demonstrates that socio-cultural factors such as the Cold War, the global spotlight on the US Civil Rights Movement, and the financial benefit of desegregation for Southern states allowed integration to move forward. Bell explains, however, that as interests diverged, integration of schools was not achieved and education systems continued to be racially unjust due to factors such as violent opposition, litigious school boards, and defensive policies such as school choice and magnet schools. Bell's research, alongside the research of Kimberlé

Crenshaw (1988), is generally considered to be foundational work on the interest convergence principle.

More recently, Wright (2023) traces the decline of Black education since *Brown v. Board*, citing interest convergence as a driving factor in the loss of Black teachers, school communities, and systemic racism affecting Black students. Wright explores the historical context of Black education pre- and post-*Brown* and paints a picture both detailed and concise. He cites the firing of 100,000 Black teachers, the closing of Black schools, and the financial benefits of integration for White schools. Wright's well-organized explanations and explorations of interest convergence complement Bell's (1980) original paper on desegregation but Wright offers a modern view that includes White educational financial interests.

The legal implications of interest convergence continue today with the recent Supreme Court ruling of *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023) which effectively dismantled higher education affirmative action policies. In her analysis of the decision, Brooks (2024) examines affirmative action in higher education, the concept of interest convergence, and the political and social forces currently shaping government and education policy. She analyzes both historical and current affirmative action policies through the lens of interest convergence, noting that universities often struggle to present strong justifications for the importance of diversity. Brooks concludes that the current political and judicial climate appears invested in upholding class- and race-based power structures, shining a light on the continuous interest convergence at work in government action. Once policy becomes influenced by interest convergence educational environments are also affected from administrative decision-making to in-class lives of individual students.

Interest Convergence and Education in America and the UK

Aside from historical examples such as desegregation, there are myriad ways that the interest convergence principle has had an effect on education policy and practice. Multiple qualitative studies were undertaken in the 2000s with an aim of identifying and analyzing interest convergence as it relates to the classroom. One oft-cited example is Thandeka K. Chapman's "You Can't Erase Race! Using CRT to Explain the Presence of Race and Racism in Majority White Suburban Schools" (2013). Chapman explains in easily understandable terms how the concept of a post-racial era has made it more challenging to address race and racism. She asserts that school and federal policies about curriculum, tracking, and testing create and maintain an unfair and racist environment for students of color, and proceeds to define and explore colorblind racism and interest convergence in the school environment. Student interview transcripts support her conclusion that White interests continue to perpetuate a racially exclusionary environment for students of color in predominantly White suburban schools. Chapman's work aligns with interest convergence theory in that educational settings that adopt a colorblind approach due to a lack of interest in equity can contribute to the continued marginalization of students of color.

At the same time Chapman was undertaking her study, similar work was occurring internationally. In the United Kingdom, David Gillborn identified the 2000s as a period of interest-divergence, in that hidden racism was embedded in UK educational reform. In his work, "Interest-divergence and the Colour of Cutbacks: Race, Recession and the Undeclared War on Black Children" (2013), Gillborn argues that while education reform is framed with rhetoric that appears to support equity, it ultimately serves White interests and

disproportionately harms students of color by deepening the achievement gap. Gillborn's examination of equity rhetoric hits upon a key element of interest convergence-based social change: while it is often in school administration's interests to appear to value equity, meaningful change is not essential in meeting that interest. He cites proposed changes in British national educational assessments, which data has shown widens the racial achievement gap, as an indicator that interests have diverged. Gillborn's thoroughly vetted research highlights the hypocrisy of government colorblindness in its framing of new standards as equitable, when in reality it leans on voter-favored but inequitable meritocracy arguments, and ignores the needs of marginalized students.

It is not just educational policy that is affected by interest convergence. In the classroom, teacher decisions directly influence student engagement, achievement, and discourse. H. R. Milner's (2008) research centers on an exploration of teacher educators' constructions of race and biases, and the effect of these conceptions on how we teach teachers and, ultimately, how teachers instruct students. He points out that people in power, such as teachers and administrators, will allow social justice initiatives to advance when it serves their interests, but still have control over the pace and cost of this progress. Continuing Milner's much-cited study, Milner, Pearman, and McGee (2013) argue for the application of a developing theory of disruptive movement aimed at challenging and transforming racist policies and practices in teacher education. The researchers examine Bell's interest convergence principle and its effect on education. According to Milner et al., interest convergence provides a framework for identifying and addressing areas within teacher education that require further examination with the aim of improving educational policies and practices. The authors see interest convergence as a powerful tool, not just for analyzing and critiquing teacher education, but also for making sense of it and pushing for meaningful change.

Interest Convergence and Gatekeepers: "Who We Thought Would Speak"

Research efforts to study educational ill-effects of interest convergence are also put at risk by colorblind construction of bias in schools. In our 2020 study of Scottish high schoolers, Mouroutsou and I encountered nearly overwhelming resistance to our research. In the end, we were only able to access one school, and were required to rely on a gatekeeper teacher to invite students of color to participate. Although several Black students met eligibility criteria for participation in focus groups, ultimately, none were included. Upon seeking clarification about the selection process, the gatekeeper — a White teacher who had been incredibly supportive in ensuring the study's implementation at the school — explained that he and the headteacher observed that the eligible Black students appeared, in his and the headteacher's experience, hesitant to engage in conversations with adults. As a result, they selected only students "who we thought would speak." In this decision-making process, the gatekeeper inadvertently exercised his White privilege. His assumption that Black students would be less forthcoming, based solely on perceived engagement with him in class, led to their exclusion from the study. This reflects Delgado's (1989) argument that members of dominant groups often perceive their actions as neutral, while in fact these actions may perpetuate systemic racism.

As researchers, we engaged in reflexive consideration of how this process may have rendered us complicit in the silencing of Black student voices. Ultimately, we proceeded with the focus groups to ensure that perspectives from other students of color were still represented. I posit that in this case the gatekeeper was either uncomfortable approaching Black students or

was reluctant to engage Black students in a conversation around race. His personal interest in avoiding discomfort diverged with the potential interests of Black students in using their voice to participate in the study.

Notably, during their focus groups the student participants themselves identified interest convergence as a key factor in the lack of discourse on race. They recognized that discussions about race are unlikely to occur unless White individuals, particularly educators, perceive a benefit to such engagement; a concept aligned with Bell's theory of interest convergence (1979; 1995). One student participant suggested that White individuals often seek to avoid being perceived as "the bad guy," a dynamic that contributes to the silence surrounding racial issues: a silence made possible by White privilege. This privilege allows White people to evade the discomfort associated with conversations about race, whereas people of color must continuously engage with the realities of racial inequality.

In line with student opinions about teachers avoiding race and preferring to be "colorblind," students experienced very little direct language about race and ethnicity from teachers and other school adults, and noticed a tendency for their teachers to at best ignore and at worst engage in biased language and actions. A lack of interest convergence led to a lack of school action on behalf of these marginalized students (Crenshaw 1988). We also found that it was in the participants' best interests to talk about and learn about racial issues, for although students were talking about painful and difficult experiences, they unanimously vocalized positive feedback about their focus group experience and would have continued it for multiple sessions. Our study concluded that a colorblind mentality can block or silence marginalized student voices, and that White interests can control whether those conversations happen, which brings us to the conversations surrounding race today in the US.

The War on CRT and DEI

The current American social and political climate is bleak for those who value racial equality, and it is becoming increasingly important to understand the roots of inequity in education. Recently, the US Supreme Court ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023) effectively dismantled higher education affirmative action policies. In her exploration of the intersection between affirmative action in higher education and interest convergence, Brooks (2024) maintains that certain actors are undermining diversity efforts due to their interest in preserving power dynamics rooted in class and race. Brooks addresses the current political and social factors that affect government and educational policy, citing past and present litigation and analyzing the competing interests between marginalized citizens and the current government. The need for diversity, equity, and inclusion is clear. However, supporters of anti-CRT legislation do not agree.

Critics of DEI programming often misleadingly claim that DEI reinforces racial bias rather than correct it, arguing that such policies are inherently discriminatory. While Cunningham (2023) is not himself an opponent of CRT, he presents an opponent's point of view concisely and thoroughly, starting with President Trump's Executive Order 13950 that prohibited speech, activities, and workplace training events that address or promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Cunningham lists several complaints by opponents of DEI policies in education, such as a loss of traditional content and encouraging a divisive school environment. Anti-DEI rhetoric often centers on ideas of race neutrality, and many critics of equity policies erroneously believe that any race-based policy is racist and divisive. Cunningham notes

challengers to DEI programs often misrepresent and inaccurately define DEI, which hinders educational initiatives in social justice. Although opponents of DEI policies do advocate for race-neutral policies, such approaches fall short in effectively addressing existing racial disparities.

Another way critics justify dismantling DEI programs is their faith in meritocracy. They advocate for merit-based systems that emphasize equal treatment of individuals, regardless of race. Meritocracy, however, is based on assumption of equal chances of success, and CRT scholars reject this notion. According to CRT scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, the idea of meritocracy is a form of colorblind racism, the avoidance of direct engagement with racial issues that leads to the systemic continuation of disparities and inequalities in education, employment, healthcare, and the criminal justice system. Bonilla-Silva's book, *Racism without Racists* (2013), challenges the neutrality of Whiteness by arguing that a colorblind mindset and the resulting insistence on meritocracy-based policies in education perpetuate systemic racism.

Looking Forward: A Lens for Change

So how can we use understanding of past motivation (interest convergence) to spur future change (meaningful inclusion)? Understanding interest convergence, tracing its effects on policy and curriculum, leads to a clearer picture of where we are in education and how we got here. To effectively propose and enact change, the thing that needs changing must be named, acknowledged, and disrupted. Students of color often feel unheard and unsupported by authority figures in their schools (Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020; Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Oliha-Donaldson, 2017). When discussions about race are avoided due to White individuals' discomfort or a desire to maintain civility, the needs of students of color are overlooked. Acknowledging the privilege of being able to ignore race can help reveal how interest convergence operates in these settings, and this awareness is a crucial step toward creating a more supportive and inclusive school environment for everyone.

Critics of CRT and opponents of educational DEI policies hold a skewed perspective of race and racism, lack contextual knowledge, and respond to discomfort with deflection. Privilege allows those without a stake in the issue to simply ignore it. Exploring historical and current contexts of educational inequity and systemic racism is key to understanding the need for change. An interest convergence lens can be used to critically analyze several key areas within education. For instance, curriculum design that centers dominant cultural narratives may unintentionally marginalize the voices and experiences of students of color, reinforcing exclusionary norms. CRT and the concept of interest convergence offer valuable tools for examining teacher training programs, particularly in assessing how effectively they prepare educators to recognize and address racial disparities in the classroom. These theories can also be applied to school discipline policies, which often disproportionately affect students of color, revealing systemic biases and inequities that call for structural reform. By utilizing Critical Race Theory and interest convergence, educators can advocate for reforms that advance educational equity, including the removal of racial barriers, even or especially "colorblind" ones, and the development of inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments.

References

Bell, D. A. (1980). *Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma*. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518–533. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546>

- Bell, D. A. (2004). *Silent covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the unfulfilled hopes for racial reform*. Oxford University Press.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2013). *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2015) The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, “Post-Racial” America. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59(11), 1358–1376.
- Brooks, M. (2024). The Balancing Act: Analyzing the Interest Convergence of Affirmative Action in Supreme Court Decisions. *Journal of Intersectionality* 8(1), 63-90. <https://www.scienceopen.com/hosted-document?doi=10.13169/jinte.8.1.0005>
- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- Chapman, T. K. (2013). You can’t erase race! Using CRT to Explain the Presence of Race and Racism in Majority White Suburban Schools. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(4), 611–627. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2013.822619>
- Crenshaw, K. (1988). Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law. *Harvard Law Review*, 101(7), 1331–1387. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341398>
- Cunningham, R. (07/01/2023). To CRT or Not to CRT: The Impact of Anti-CRT Legislation on K--12 Teaching and Learning. *Journal of the Afro-American Historical & Genealogical Society* (40), 47-58. <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. NYU Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg26k>
- Gillborn, D. (2013). Interest-divergence and the Colour of Cutbacks: Race, Recession and the Undeclared War on Black Children. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(4), 477–491. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2013.822616>
- Kennelly, J-M. & Mouroutsou, S. (2020). The Normalcy of Racism in the School Experience of Students of Colour: "The Times When It Hurts". *Scottish Educational Review*, 52(2), 26-47.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2013). Critical Race Theory —What it Is Not! *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, 34-47. https://www.loyola.edu/_media/join-us/karson-institute/documents/Critical%20Race%20Theory%20What%20it%20is%20not.pdf
- Milner, H. (2008). Critical Race Theory and Interest Convergence as Analytic Tools in Teacher Education Policies and Practices. *Journal of Teacher Education* 59, 332-346. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249704305_Critical_Race_Theory_and_Interest_Convergence_as_Analytic_Tools_in_Teacher_Education_Policies_and_Practices
- Milner, H., Pearman, F. A. & McGee, E. O. (2013). Critical Race Theory, Interest Convergence, and Teacher Education. In M. Lynn & A.D. Dixson (Eds.), *The Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, 39-54. <https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/critical-race-theory-interest-convergence-and-teacher-education>
- Oliha-Donaldson, H. (2018). Let's Talk: An Exploration into Student Discourse about Diversity and the Implications for Intercultural Competence. *Howard Journal of Communications*, (29)2, 126-143.
- Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023)
- Wright, J. (2023). Racist Norms until Interests Converge: A Long Tradition of Egregious Educational Policy Patterns and Global Implications. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 56(3), 275-292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2023.2272952>.