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Dismantling Structural Systems of Oppression Through a Revolutionized Pedagogy

Ambar A. Quintanilla

Introduction

Imagine living in poverty and your parents juggling multiple jobs to barely make ends meet. Imagine a family of five being crammed into a one bedroom or studio apartment. Imagine coming from an abusive household, a community ridden with violence, with all odds stacked against you. Imagine feeling intellectually inferior to your classmates, constantly punished with detention or suspension, constantly being deemed as a failure, but nevertheless, school remains your only safe haven. Imagine this safe haven taken from you.

When COVID-19 came about it posed new challenges and devastating threats for our Black and Latinx students who already live in these disadvantaged conditions. They were already struggling in school, struggling to exist, and COVID-19 has exponentially increased the risk factors. It is important to acknowledge that COVID-19 affected all members of society at some level, but the ones who felt the greatest impact were Black and Latinx students. Educators, parents and students are not at fault; the discriminatory systems and institutions we have in place are responsible. COVID-19 simply exposed decades of socioeconomic inequities and structural systems of oppression embedded in our educational institutions. Examining preexistent pedagogical

practices is central to understanding how society has and continues to fail the most vulnerable students in our educational system.

Literature Review

As a relatively new subject matter, the conversations revolving around the educational effects of COVID-19 on Black and Latinx students are limited. Nevertheless, current scholarship reveals the glaring disparities between Black and Latinx students and their White counterparts. Diane Reay, a writer, scholar, previous inner-city schoolteacher of twenty years, and current Professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Cambridge, discusses educational inequities and injustices affecting underserved communities in her article “English Education in the Time of Coronavirus.” Reay draws a contrast between wealthy families who were able to achieve the same quality of school at home and disadvantaged families who lacked the resources to benefit from at-home learning. She writes, “Appalling educational inequalities existed long before COVID-19, but the isolation of many families from community and friends, and the further impoverishment of the already poor it has caused, has exacerbated those inequalities” (314). Reay’s statement supports my claim of institutionalized racism and how the government, and even society as a whole, has failed the most marginalized communities through systemic socioeconomic inequities. In an article titled “Disparities in Education: E-Learning and COVID-19, Who Matters?” published in the *Children & Youth Services Journal*, Julet Allen, et al. argue that those who live in disadvantaged communities are carrying the burden from virtual learning and COVID-19. Elucidating Reay’s claim, Allen et al. express their concerns about virtual learning “because it risks contributing to and reinforcing inequitable education policies as it fails to acknowledge race and discrimination which are factors seldom measured and addressed” (209). Allen et al. deem race and discrimination as significant factors of an inequi-

table education, which COVID-19 intensified. Some critics specifically attribute the inequities of education to lack of resources. For instance, Dr. Fawzia Reza, Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator at American College of Education, examines the “resource-driven challenges” experienced by underprivileged families and indicates that the institutionalized segregation of schools in the United States are at fault. Students are required by state or local policies to attend “public” schools in their districts resulting in the following circumstance: “Many African American and Latino students who belong to lower socio-economic backgrounds are therefore directed into schools where resources are more limited than they might be in schools with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds” (Reza 70). This approach supports my claim about oppressive systemic inequities in education because it reveals the commonality of social structures reinforcing race and discrimination through pedagogical practices.

Approaching the vast disparities of inequities in education through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens is necessary to fully comprehend the complex institutional and social structures at work. More importantly, in the wake of COVID-19, a CRT lens facilitates in outlining the various ways in which hegemonic power structures have disproportionately failed Black and Latinx students. In addition to the preceding sources, I will integrate Ramón Grosfoguel’s multiple hierarchies/power matrix, bell hook’s discussion of the banking system of education and engaged pedagogy, Aja Martinez’s counterstory and abstract liberalism, and Cornel West’s nihilistic threat to expound on how racism has been and continues to be socially constructed and discriminatory. Understanding these theoretical concepts and the multiple forms of hegemonic power structures is valuable to achieve socioeconomic equity in education and a revolutionized pedagogy.

Argument: Socially Constructed Systems of Oppression

Shortly after the Civil Rights Movements in the 60s, theorists and critics began forming new theoretical frameworks, which included racially diverse narratives, in an effort to combat and obliterate racial inequality. Grosfoguel argues that these narratives, though conceptually inclusive in their approach, strictly derived from a colonial epistemology. He critiques postmodernism and poststructuralism for “reproducing within its domains of thought and practice a particular form of coloniality of power/knowledge.” Grosfoguel conceptualizes this reproduction of Western knowledge with what Peruvian sociologist, Aníbal Quijano terms “colonial power matrix.” The power matrix, composed of [W]hite patriarchal, capitalistic hierarchies, formed cultural systems of oppression by “colonially impos[ing] the ways of thinking, acting and living to the rest of the peoples in the world” through dominant social ideologies (Grosfoguel). The multiple hierarchies consequently ignore the voices from the marginalized while validating and applauding Western thoughts and concepts about the marginalized. One of the most permeating systems of oppression the power matrix produced, where “race and racism become the organizing principle,” is a pedagogical hierarchy, limiting and silencing the voices and culture of Black and Latinx students while elevating White intellectuals (Grosfoguel).

Reiterating Grosfoguel’s critique of postmodernism and poststructuralism, Martinez analyzes society’s tendency to obscure dominant ideologies and social oppression through color-blind abstract liberalism. She states, “racism is endemic and central, permanent, and ‘normal’ part of US society [...] operating concurrently within multiple forms of social oppression” (10). Abstract liberalism, whose intentions are to eliminate racism, does not take into account the permanence of socially constructed forms of oppression. To tackle this, CRT and Martinez’s goal is to “theorize racialized experience” in the form of counterstory, to “expos[e]

stereotypes and injustice and [offer] additional truths through a narration of the researchers' own experiences" (Martinez 17). She aims to decolonize and de-academize this pedagogical hierarchy by uplifting Black and Latinx voices, which I will discuss in detail in the final section. The ultimate objective for both Martinez and Grosfoguel is, of course, social justice.

Grosfoguel's power matrix can also help contextualize the disproportionate educational gaps between Black and Latinx students and their White counterparts. Those students thriving at the top of the pedagogical hierarchy have structural socioeconomic advantages. For example, they have the ability to create a makeshift classroom in their homes where they are left undisturbed; they have internet access; they have parents with a high school diploma and/or college degree, or tutors, who can assist with schoolwork, all of which a large percentage of Black and Latinx students lack. Natalie Spievack and Megan Gallagher's article in *Urban Wire*, "For Students of Color, Remote Learning Environments Pose Multiple Challenges," recognizes that these educational gaps "[do] not reflect a lack of effort on the part of families, but rather a magnification of structural inequities in school quality and home environments baked into our society." It is important to consider how these structural inequities led to heartbreaking news stories about students who had to go the extra mile to participate in virtual learning. Reza recounts some of these stories:

An Arizona news station (News 4, Tuscan 2020) shared how a student climbed a tree to connect to the public Wi-Fi to complete his assignments on time. The principal of a school in Arizona also found three students under a blanket trying to access school Wi-Fi so that they could complete a school assignment (Buono, 2020)

In California, we witnessed two girls sitting outside a Taco Bell to access free Wi-Fi with notebooks and pencils on the pavement. A Taco Bell Corporation spokesperson told CNN,

the photo of two young girls outside of a Salinas, CA Taco Bell is a tough reminder of basic inequalities facing our communities,” (Ebrahimji). In California alone, “25% (1,529,000) of the state’s K-12 student population don’t have the adequate connection and 17% (1,063,000) don’t have the adequate devices for distance learning.

Ebrahimji

This reality is not a consequence of COVID-19; it has been alive for decades, structurally embedded in our society, but we continuously fail to notice or choose to ignore the multiple risk factors affecting Black and Latinx students daily.

Reinforcing Structural Systems of Oppression Through the Banking System of Education

In addition to socioeconomic advantages, Grosfoguel and Martinez argue that hegemonic power structures maintain dominance in educational settings by sustaining and promoting master narratives. One of the forms in which this is accomplished is through the banking system of education. hooks describes this approach as “learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor and be able to memorize and store it” (14). The problem with this approach is Black and Latinx students cannot relate to the information that is being fed to them by these master narratives. They cannot “memorize and store it” because it is irrelevant to their everyday experiences. This negatively results in their inability to comprehend the subject matter rendering them to be labelled intellectually inferior to their White counterparts.

Amy Stuart Wells, Professor and Director of the Sociology and Education Program at Columbia University, further criticizes the banking system of education by denouncing standardized testing and admissions criteria in her article “Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Diversity Across K–12 and Higher Education Sectors: Challenges and Opportunities for

Cross-Sector Learning.” She views these two systemic regulations as “tightly interconnected and interdependent when it comes to addressing issues of diversity and equity” (57). Standardized testing is a system of oppression that categorizes students based on their banking knowledge and does not consider their cultural and social knowledge. Moreover, to uphold the banking system of education, “teachers are held accountable for improving students’ scores on standardized math and reading tests at the cost of almost everything else that matters in education” (Wells 59). Although the Los Angeles Unified District (LAUSD) did not administer standardized testing in 2020 and does not plan to this upcoming year, students are still being measured by their academic performance, despite the hardships experienced by COVID-19.

I asked some of my younger cousins in the LAUSD system, parents of LAUSD children, and friends who are LAUSD teachers if academic expectations drastically changed since the birth of COVID-19; none attested to that. They report that students are *still* being tested based on the banking system of education, *still* expected to complete all assignments and *still* awarded for academic excellence. The decision to suspend standardized testing does not absolve the racist systems of oppression that are rooted in our educational system. As Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso theorize in “Critical race and LatCrit theory and method: counter Storytelling,” systems such as standardized testing “create meritocracy, which assumes all students begin in a level playing field” (480). In difficult times, such as COVID-19, we are reminded that this is absolutely not the case. Unfortunately, students from disadvantaged communities who were already below the “playing field” are now either struggling to stay there or are falling deeper underground, which causes feelings of inadequacy.

Feeling inadequate is an ongoing battle with the self for many Black and Latinx students and the effects of COVID-19 exacerbated these emotions. In *Race Matters*, Cornel West explores this pervading existential crisis

through what he calls the “nihilistic threat,” which leads to self-hatred, worthlessness, meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness. West defines the nihilistic threat as a “profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair” (12). The unequal playing field given to Black and Latinx students by an oppressive society leads to this psychological depression because it “feeds on poverty and shattered cultural institutions,” such as inequitable educational systems (West 16). Witnessing White students thriving during a pandemic can trigger the nihilistic threat for Black and Latinx students, specifically feelings of worthlessness and self-hatred. The incessant reliance on test scores and academic achievements ignores diversity and cultural conditions. Failure to address these conditions hinders racial progress. Racial equity and diversity in education cannot be achieved without the elimination of power structures, such as the banking system of education and standardized testing. If we do not dismantle these pervasive systems of oppression, the nihilistic threat will remain undefeated.

Master Narratives and Conservative Backlash on Racial Equity

I am fully aware that this will require significant work and progress because racial equity is a threat to hegemonic power structures. Despite efforts to overturn inequities in education, conservatives to this day remain adamant about preserving master narratives. In May 2021, according to an article in the Washington Post, Idaho withheld approval of a state budget bill to increase teacher salary until H377 was brought to the Idaho Senate floor for voting. The legislature passed on April 26th, 2021 prohibiting “schools from “indoctrinating” students through teaching critical race theory, which examines the ways in which race and racism influence U.S. politics, culture and law” (Meckler & Natason). Conservatives argued that CRT reinforces the narrative that White Americans are oppressors and colonizers. This

narrative, naturally, runs counter to society's master narrative. The fact that the deconstruction of the colonial master narrative continues to be up for debate, even after COVID-19's exposure of such inequitable educational disparities, highlights the permanence of race.

There will almost always be conservative backlash in discussions of race and racism when White interests are excluded. Martinez refers to Derrick Bell's term "interest convergence" in her CRT analysis to discuss how racial progress is "cyclical, rather than inevitable" (11). Those who belong to dominant discourses will only accept progress if it does not disrupt the colonial power matrix. In conversation with Bell's interest convergence, Enrique and Sonya Alemán in "Latin@ interests always have to "converge" with White interests?: (Re)claiming racial realism and interest-convergence in critical race theory praxis', *Race Ethnicity and Education*" assert that "[W]hite interests must get served, leaving out implications of race and racism or the discomfort of a discussion of White privilege" in order for them to become allies of marginalized communities (17). Teaching CRT implies that the U.S. was built on racism and White privilege and reduces White Americans to oppressors and colonizers. Considering Martinez, Bell, and Alemán's dialogue on interest convergence, conservatives' fear is not that students will learn about race and racism, but that it will devalue the master narrative.

White Students' Interests Far More Valuable than Black and Latinx Students'

The theoretical concept of interest convergence can be applied to the manner in which California responded (better yet, did not respond) to Black and Latinx students' interest during COVID-19. According to California Public Health Department data published in an *Ed Source* article titled "White students in California more likely to be getting in-person instruction than Black, Latino and Asian students," Sydney Johnson and Daniel Willis report that "about

80% of students on a free and reduced priced lunch plan, and 80% of English learners” continued to mostly receive a remote-learning education. Furthermore, nearly 90% of Black students and 85% of Latinx students attend school districts that were primarily distance learning, compared to 64% of White students (Johnson & Willis). School districts within high infection rates, such as Los Angeles, are opened slower than affluent areas (Orange County, for example) due to several socioeconomic factors: schools lack proper ventilation, COVID-19 is spreading faster in those areas and those communities tend to be overcrowded (Johnson & Willis). The majority of public schools in LAUSD lack funds and resources to properly serve Black and Latinx students because they do not benefit the interests of White America. These socioeconomic racial disparities did not appear overnight; they are merely a result of pedagogical hierarchies that have always existed and will continue to exist if no substantial institutional changes are made to our educational system.

Forming a Revolutionized Pedagogy

Before proposing solutions, I want to admit that I genuinely do not know if we will ever reach a place where we no longer have to theorize about pedagogical oppression, nor do I believe my proposed solutions are all-in-one. It is going to take decades to undo the educational damage COVID-19, and most importantly, decades of structural racism, have inflicted on Black and Latinx students.

The emergence of CRT introduced new methodologies to expand pedagogical thinking, with an emphasis on socioeconomic contexts. Achieving a revolutionized pedagogy will require socioeconomic equity in education. The first step to attaining a socioeconomic, revolutionized pedagogy, according to West, is to examine “the distribution of wealth, power and income – a distribution influenced by the racial caste system that denied opportunities” to underprivileged communities (63). Martinez has an alternate proposal: to

obliterate color blindness because “ignoring racial difference maintains and perpetuates the status quo” and allows for the categorization of “the hegemony of systems of domination and subordination, advantage and disadvantage” (7, 27). Once we acknowledge race as a social construct founded by capitalistic, patriarchal hierarchies, systems of oppression, master narratives, and interest convergence strategies, we can then begin to visualize a more just future for Black and Latinx students.

Shifting our focus to a revolutionized pedagogy, we can begin by implementing Martinez’s counterstory, Yosso’s culturally relevant curriculum and hooks engaged pedagogy. Martinez’s method and methodology will help validate the voices of Black and Latinx students by empowering students to share *testimonios* about oppression and marginalization. The ultimate goal of counterstory is to critique and dispose of master narratives while concurrently recognizing “experiential knowledge of the nondominant as ‘legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, and analyzing racial subordination’” (Martinez 16). In times like COVID-19, we need to remember that our Black and Latinx students are suffering. They do not have the cultural and educational resources to survive. Providing students with iPads or Chromebooks does not take into consideration their familial, linguistic and cultural conditions. It simply forms an additional barrier—a technological barrier. We need to listen to their *testimonios* before proposing abstract solutions that do not directly benefit their educational success. We need to ask ourselves: what social constructs do we need to address or eliminate to ensure the success of Black and Latinx students?

Yosso tackles social constructs by reversing underlying cultural deficit theories through community cultural wealth. She describes community cultural wealth as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (77). Yosso shifts focus away from deficits and disadvantages and focuses on

multiple forms of cultural assets and wealth. She identifies at least six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (77). These are cultural capital forms that marginalized groups possess but are not recognized or valued in education. As the educational gap continues to expand during COVID-19, we need to develop pedagogical practices that are more culturally sensitive and centered. We need to allow Black and Latinx students to bring individual, familial and communal knowledge into the classroom and rid ourselves of the structures and institutions that only serve to sustain discriminatory, racist systems. We need to praise Black and Latinx students who have had to take care of younger siblings while virtually learning, or had to turn on their cameras to expose their poor, overcrowded living conditions or had to learn to be their own I.T. person because of technological or parental language barriers or had to keep themselves motivated and engaged or had to endure the pain and sacrifices of their parents all while adjusting to a virtual learning environment. This experiential knowledge needs to be embedded in our teaching practices if we want to reduce the educational gap. A failure to do this will just add to the already existing feelings of worthlessness and self-hatred—the nihilistic threat Black and Latinx students experience.

Empowering students through education is a concept posited by hooks twenty-six years ago to decrease this psychological torment. De-academizing and decolonizing pedagogical hierarchies does not only call for student-based transformations; as a community, we share a collective responsibility to engage with this transformation. Academics, theorists, scholars, professors, teachers, administrators all need to collaborate to change current educational practices into education as the practice of freedom. hooks reevaluates the role of academics: they should self-actualize and heal within themselves before teaching healing so they can create a space for resistance. She envisions a classroom that “employs a holistic model of learning [...] where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process” (21). Teachers and stu-

dents should engage and learn from one another to create a holistic classroom. Observing teacher vulnerability will deconstruct oppressive classrooms and open the space for revolutionized pedagogy, for counterstories—stories about Black and Latinx struggles, resistance and liberation.

CONCLUSION

I realize that by limiting my discussion to Black and Latinx students, I am excluding other races that suffer from similar systems of structural oppression. I do not aim to devalue their experiences. As a Latina who had to overcome multiple discriminatory institutional and structural barriers throughout my childhood and adulthood to reach the privileged level of higher education and financial security, as a mother of an Afro-Latino child, and as a friend of many Black and Latinx students who suffered similar conditions, I feel a personal responsibility to focus my research topic on Black and Latinx students only. As Solorzano and Yosso put it, I have “survivor guilt;” I have a responsibility to “keep the path open for those who will come after [me]” and commit myself to “breaking down barriers, abolishing policies of exclusion, and building on students’ strength, so that [I] can widen the path, clear some barriers” (488). COVID-19 has exacerbated challenges and risk factors for Black and Latinx students. These communities are, without a doubt, the ones suffering the most. I have no absolute solution to the new level of socioeconomic educational oppression that has been inflicted on Black and Latinx students. Nevertheless, I strongly encourage educators, administrators, scholars, and theorists to implement some of the CRT methodologies I discussed so Black and Latinx students can have some hope for a better future.

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