Bravery Against the Silence: Challenging Social Deprivation in the School Systems

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore ways in which social deprivation within the education field influences educational achievement of minoritized students during the COVID-19 e-learning experience. COVID-19 forced students to turn to eLearning, and through the experience social deprivation was shown through the lack of resources, especially in minoritized areas and school. The quality of education was not equitable, less so than when learning takes place in traditional school buildings. Through a composite counter story, a tool used by critical race theory scholars to share counter-narrative of majoritarian stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002), the author acknowledges the presence and importance of discrimination experiences in the education system in middle and high school. The author challenges dominant narratives of equity (Pasquerella, 2016) in the school system and discusses the need for students having voices heard to have those injustices dealt with in ways that encourage collaboration, student growth, and student achievement. It is only through finding a voice that counters the majoritarian narrative all students are given the opportunities that allow them to achieve their full potential. The author argues someone must speak up, acknowledge a problem exists, and continue to exhibit a sense of urgency within our schools. The argument becomes who will be brave enough to encourage the issue to be acknowledged, addressed, and overcome so that minority students no longer feel segregated due to their racial identity.

Keywords: Covid-19; minority; counter-story; deprivation

Introduction

Systemic racism dates as far back as the 1600s in the United States. (Feagin, 2013). Over time, it has become a material, social, and ideological reality embedded in major institutions (Feagin, 2013, p. 2). Systemic racism is an expression of individual, interpersonal, and social arrangements predicated on socially constructed systems of classifying humans. One such system is biological racism involving the reliance on phenotypical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, and bone structure. This system relies on visible features (Sensoy & DiAnglo, 2017).

The social construction of people into racialized classifications is evident in the American educational system and its perpetuation of systemic racism through the "…undergirding of policy or legal rulings" (Closson, 2010, p. 279). This collective or shared meaning-making process of human classification continues in education through seemingly race-neutral processes that make up "kinds of people" (López López, 2019).

Educators in U.S. public and private schools (K-12) are primarily native-born, White people who speak English as their primary language and comprise the majority of educators in school, institutes, and colleges of education (Geiger, 2018). This homogeneity of educational systems is problematic in that it rests on the socio-politically minoritization of others through systematic patterns of practice that determine who will navigate educational contexts effortlessly (i.e., hiring, selecting/rejecting, mentoring, normalizing). The demographic divide between educators and students in terms of racial/ethnic backgrounds and affiliations brings attention to questions about institutional commitments to diversity and advocacy for ethnic/racial justice.

Studies illustrate that schools are not systematically producing good experiences and outcomes, especially for minority students (Warren & Goodman, 2018). The data are alarming and suggest school personnel use racial profiling and segregation to punish minoritized students more regularly than their White peers. For example, schools' tracking systems impose racial segregation on students. Even in integrated schools, studies have shown patterns of racial arrangements associated with tracked classes (Burris, 2014). These issues have been intensified with the issues of lack of resources and the technology gap that was brought to light by the Covid-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter Movement (Kumar, 2020).

Utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) in problematizing the educational system as an experiential pipeline, I consider how liberal ideologies, white privilege, and power are socialized practices that further silence the experiences of marginalized minoritized students (Aleman, 2009). More attention to pipelines, from the crib to the penitentiary, from the cradle to the grave, and from the womb to work is needed to understand how patterns of racism manifest for student groups historically underrepresented in higher education but now increasing within schools, colleges and universities (Gleditsch et al., 2017; Holmes & Menachemi, 2017). I first reviewed literature on schools and universities focused on minoritized students' experiences and outcomes in undergraduate courses, teaching in elementary through post-secondary levels, and faculty diversity in higher education. Then I explained my use of CRT and present findings in a

composite of counter-stories Through collaborative reflection to tell my stories and analyze them in connection to the literature and framework, I crafted an account of one fictionalized character who mediated racism throughout the educational pipeline and within educational contexts. The fictionalized composite approach positions readers as witnesses.

Context

As an educator and a doctoral student in the field of education, I have come to recognize the importance of utilizing CRT in education, and the arduous journey involved in becoming a change agent, but I am committed. As Ladson-Billings (2013) states, "we have an obligation to point out the endemic racism that is extant in our schools, colleges, and other public spaces. We must deconstruct laws, ordinances, and policies that work to re-inscribe racism and deny people their full rights" (p. 45). Confronted by a sense of urgency to work against racial oppression, I chose to end our suffering in silence.

Educators should be aware of how such practices of racial arrangement are expressions of their implicit biases: "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner" (Staats, 2016). Educators' attitudes about racial groups can unintentionally influence disciplinary decisions and consequently, contribute to academic failures. This is not only reflective of classroom practice but also reflective local school board policy and decision making. For example, in one central Florida county during four days of town hall meetings related to returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic, not one board member acknowledged the existence of a technology access gap between privileged and underprovided households and such gap disproportionately disenfranchises minority students. The district representative for one of the poorest areas in that county did not even acknowledge his majority migrant population. During the meetings, it was noted that two internet providers supported E-learning, but only the superintendent acknowledged this "support" was very limited and didn't meet the needs of our students. To sum, individual board members claimed to be speaking in the interest of all students, yet they failed to acknowledge the existence of issues for a significant vulnerable segment of the county's population: under-resourced minority children. In addition to technology access issues, they failed to address dietary needs, safety concerns, economic needs, and the lack quality teaching and learning during initial attempts at implementing E-learning models. (HCPS, 2020).

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to utilize a crafted account of one fictionalized character who mediated racism throughout the educational pipeline and within educational contexts to 1) work against multiple forms of racism and 2) advocate for equitable access to education for minoritized groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have determined the answers come not from remaining silent, but from speaking up and back. I decided to us my observations and my stories to expose the discrepancies existing in our schools.

The ethical compass (based on my own ethical beliefs) guiding this collaborative work rests on the following stances contextualized in two cases merged to encourage students and minority educators to be heard:

1. Encouraging students to become aware of their identity and positionality to avoid limiting themselves to an aspirational identity based solely on the images and representations in courses and texts.

2. Encouraging students who are minoritized and/or have domestic and/or international status to refuse to be constantly subjected to inexcusable behaviors of faculty that further suppress their voices (i.e., socio-political expression, minority voice in content, inclusion of student opinion, student representation in the content)

I relied on stories about my struggles, as a student and educators, and my students' struggles with racism in education. I use critical race theory and the methodology of counter-storytelling to craft a composite narrative. Counter-stories can reflect how dominant groups try to legitimize their position through the use of an ideology that associates minoritized positionality with bad behavior (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). I integrate these stories with an interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, sociology, history, and the law to better understand those experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). As these stories presented similar themes like discrimination, mental health, bravery against silence, the importance of education, I decided to develop a thematic composite counter-story. The principal character in my story was carefully designed to embody the qualities of each of the levels of discrimination the author has experienced or witnessed (Cook, 2013). Through a counter-story, which is a tool used by critical race theory scholars to share counter-narratives of majoritarian stories, the character's journey unfolds (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Counter-Stories

In the subsequent text, I share three connected narrative accounts that speak to the main purposes of this paper, I crafted a character around Latino/a students. The story begins with the last day in a Middle School classroom before schools closed due to Covid-19. Finally, the story ends with a reflection, as the character acknowledges the struggles that are yet to come and how she plans to counter the struggles faced by her students. Drawing on CRT tenets expressed by Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993), I show the racial inequalities in schooling, challenges in which schooling and race are conceived within academia and call for a focus on social justice.

Fighting the Silence in Middle and High Schools

March 13th, 2020 the day that changed my teaching career forever! The day that I will never forget for the pain that followed. The last day I saw my 7th grader Civics class for the year. That day…Friday, March 13th, 2020…

 I walked in my room that week, much like I did most weeks with my graded papers in one folder, my lesson plan book ready to finish foreign policy up that week so my students could enjoy their Spring Break. The kids had been uncharacteristically off the charts, so the week seemed to be more exhausting than usual. Covid-19 was a big issue on the news so I continued to follow it in my spare time. My students were asking about it, but I brushed it off. They had noticed I was growing uneasy about it because I had intensified my usual germ-o-phobia habits. My classroom is taped off in areas that are considered "my spaces" that my students are allowed in with permission only. I usually cleaned my desk at the end of the day but for the past few weeks I've been increasing that cleaning. That week particularly I had been going crazy, Lysol wipe downs the last 5 minutes of class, outside to sneeze or cough, hand sanitizer for anything, Lysol spray the entire room down in between classes, my students knew it was a sign that I was uncomfortable with what was going on in the world.

That Friday I walked in my room with a gut feeling that I needed to prepare my students for about a month of schoolwork. I rush to the office and make 130 copies of Cornell notes, iCivics worksheets, and teacher notes. All day I told my kids, I'll see you in 2 weeks. Just take this "just in case". "See you soon!" But it wouldn't be. That evening as soon as we returned home, we received the word, no school until April 15th. We were tasked with figuring out how

to transition to e-learning over our Spring Break. The world stood still. The world shut down. In the following days we went under lock down, e-learning, and the world just stopped!

E-learning was not easy. Luckily for the Civics department, we have been working online quite a bit over the year, so the transition was easier. The hard part was the technology and communication. I had to track down 130 kids, some whose parents spoke little to no English to maintain daily to weekly contact. Many of the students who had limited English proficiency lacked computer or electronic devices. Many shared a device between a family of 4 to 5 students. Some had no way to translate content into their native language in order to understand the information. The parents were often worried about bills or food and saw education as a minor concern at the time.

Several students quickly worked ahead, while most immediately were disengaged. I begged for just one assignment submission for several, while others were begging for extra work. There was no consistency in being able to teach because there was no consistency in internet connection for my Hispanic and poorer students, and no consistency in technology availability. Over half the school population was classified as migrants, meaning their families move from place to place for work. These families were usually large with four to five children and many had one cell phone to share. The school offered technology, but not everyone qualified. If students had younger or older siblings, they had to rely on their sibling's technology. The school only had 400 devices to hand out and students had to prove they had a permanent home, power, and internet connection. Many students were turned down simply because internet was not available in their areas. One company offered "free" internet access, but it wasn't available to most. Not only did our Hispanic students lack devices, but many lived in areas unable to receive internet service. Our poorer students who lived on farms also lived in areas unable to receive internet service. Many were told to use their phones (which only worked on school campus because students connected to the school wifi) or told to go to a public location and work in the parking lot. This is yet another issue since many parents Hispanic and poor, worked multiple jobs and were not home until late. Many students were expected to work as well to help support their families.

One student in particular disappeared almost immediately. I was able to get in touch when he told me his mom (who was pregnant at the time) was working in the fields all day and him along with dad and 4 brothers worked construction. His mother was concerned about her

sons' education but at the same time the family had no childcare and had no internet service, so she saw working as the only way to keep her sons out of trouble. I started holding special zoom sessions with this student and his mother every Friday night, where we would go through each of his classes and work on assignments. It became our weekly habit and it helped him make it through e-learning and his mother regain some confidence in the educational system.

The racial divide was evident. My Hispanic students often did not receive the support they needed in order to be successful in school. Many students required food, devices, and translating support. We were forced to rely heavily on our Spanish speaking students. This was not a reliable system as many of these teachers became responsible for translating close to a hundred students with just translating assignments. In our department, we started a system of translating lessons for personal needs while encouraging the growth of English vocabulary. We would take our academic vocabulary, send out a lesson in English and Spanish and have a video in Spanish to help further student understanding. Students were then encouraged to complete a chart in English, but Spanish was allowed.

The Mental Picture--The Missing Voice

During a formal observation of my teaching, I was once asked by administration how I track my students' progression in my class. The school administrator wanted to know if I monitor the labels assigned to students by their standardized test scores, their disciplinary backgrounds, and the behavioral issues with other teachers' troubles they had with other teachers. My response was, "I don't." Why?" I find tracking to be misleading. The students, those usually labeled by other teacher educators as the lower readers and writers, are usually the best students. Even those students with behavioral plans or numerous referrals are usually verbally loud and morally good kids. In my experience, tracking usually puts a narrative about a child forth that limits what other educators think are the capabilities of that child.

Friday afternoon while waiting for dismissal one of my Hispanic students asked me if I was disappointed in him. This young man was tracked by our school for behavior issues and lower grades—neither of which I ever saw from him. I told him no and asked why he posed that question. He then asked me if I knew how many discipline referrals he had. Once again, I told him no and asked him why. He told me that every other teacher knew exactly how many referrals he had, and his least favorite teacher made a point to remind him daily how many she had written some for him.

These stereotypes continued into e-learning. As I did my weekly phone calls, one of my Hispanic girls proudly showed me her math work. My husband is her math teacher and she had yet the opportunity to chat with him, but she wanted so badly to show off her work. She came from a migrant family and lived in a poorer area and her home was barely holding together. Very few teachers expected much from her due to her race and where she lived, many counted her out without a chance to thrive. She beamed with pride and then stated, "Do you think he will like it Miss? I don't think my teachers like me, so I don't want to do my work. It's so hard and boring and no one wants to listen to me." Even in e-learning, my students felt discriminated against and distant. These kids had lost hope. They struggled to just make it through the week of lessons. Most were viewed as failures by our administrators and teachers.

Counter-Stories from Me-Searching

In my attempt to disrupt the systemic racism (Feagin, 2013), which took place during my first year as a middle school teacher, I worked very closely with my students in order to critically examine the stories of students of color and their experiences while in Middle School and more specifically, their experience with the assessments requirements.

I am intent on exploring the following topics critically: systemic racism, teacher preparation for students of color, psychological implications of the incident endured, challenges \experienced while enrolled at the school, and their perceptions about marginalization. In seeking the stories of students of color, it is my hope to be able to illuminate their counter-stories and share the findings with the district so as to revisit the organizational policies and procedures for how they can be more equitable with regard to students of color. Counter-storytelling provides a platform for those typically marginalized and assists them in disrupting the dominant narratives that exist regarding students of color (Closson, 2010, Haney-Lopez, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2013).

The counter-storytelling continues as I pan out to include the context in which I was learning how much I needed to "write back" to power (Harris, 1994). Writing back is a form of resistance and a source of empowerment through which to unravel dominant narratives about education. I encouraged my students to write back to power to address the marginalization experienced within the school system. They told their unrest, their injustices, their lives full of discrimination. They renounced the Covid-19 life they were forced to live. They begged for

freedom, for understanding, for compassion. They fought back through their words, "write back" empowered them, giving them freedom, something they never felt before.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to utilize a crafted account of one fictionalized character who mediated racism throughout the educational pipeline and within educational contexts. It is evident from this work that there still exists a majoritarian narrative of student failure and underachievement reliant upon stereotypes that link people of color and poverty with "bad," while emphasizing White, middle-class people as examples of the "good"; with working-class as less intelligent and irresponsible in contrast to White middle-class and upper-class people (Solorzano & Yosso 2002). This dominant ideology operates to justify mistreatment of students of Latin descent and reinforces racism; the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others justifying dominance and "a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians, and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color (Marable, 1992). The result, intentional or not, is that socially-politically minoritized students are narrativized as having behavioral problems and treated as unimportant. This perception bled over to e-learning. Hispanic students were viewed as troubled, as lazy, as incompetent even if they lacked the resources needed to be successful in e-learning during the CoVID-19 pandemic (Kashner, 2020). The stereotype was emphasized throughout the county and justified the lower expectations held of our students.

Plausibly, minority students not receiving the resources they needed and educators underestimating or undermining minority students' abilities, risks shutting down democracy in classrooms and discourages students from being confident in using their critical thinking skills to advocate for social change.

The experiences shared in this counter-composite story serve as examples of how systemic racism still exists in educational systems. Minoritized students face discrimination and inequalities on all levels of education and because of segregation they often do not receive the quality education they deserve. Due to injustices that exist, ethnic/racial minoritized students may struggle behaviorally and academically to express themselves outside of acquiescing to the school system as it is. Some may act-out or stop working because they are not able to move people emotionally or politically and their assets may be neglected or misunderstood. Minoritized students can also have struggles that are not dealt with appropriately due to the

stronghold of culture and racial ideologies in educational institutions, such as white supremacy, that limit access to education. This struggle was brought to light with Covid-19 when so many minoritized students went without safety, technology, and information. This work further confirms that White Americans still possess power over Americans of color (Feagin, 2013) and this imbalance in power serves as a vehicle to continue to oppress minoritized people (Freire, 2000).

It is important to give students the confidence they need to break structural inequity. Educators in K-12 who understand students' experiences and advocate for social justice in the institution are necessary. They can work to amplify students' voices, ensure their enrollment continues, and provide the resources they need in a timely and convenient manner. However, educators are also needed to be involved in developing students' critical thinking abilities and modeling how to serve as allies for minoritized students by challenging systemic racism, implicit bias, poverty, and impediments to mental health. Overcoming racism in education is more likely when faculty improve their abilities to simultaneously advocate for social/racial justice, cultural diversity, and equity. Furthermore, recruiting and retaining minoritized faculty can boost the confidence of the students when they are not only members of the students' ethno-racial groups, but are also active supporters of those groups' educational success (Geiger, 2018).

When the faculty is not diverse, their absence can be interpreted as a signal that the institution rejects ethnic/racial/cultural diversity. This interpretation could cause minoritized students to become overly suspicious, vigilant, and active – so much so that they fail in their programs or leave the institution when either approach (doing more/doing less) to overcome racism in the culture, practices, and policies of the institution fails (Geiger, 2018). In order to disrupt systemic silencing, we encourage minoritized groups to engage in student clubs, student government, and other meetings in their institutions to discuss feelings that come with racial prejudice and discrimination such as inferiority, isolation, and urgency.

Bravery against silence is the praxis needed to educate people about the types of injustices people of color who are minoritized (Givens, 2016). According to Givens (2016), an invisible tax is a disproportionate amount of time and energy students expend to mitigate their experiences with racisms (i.e., anti-Blackness, anti-Semitism), for instance by organizing

institutional actions (i.e., minoritized student success groups), as if paying a toll (a fee or a fine) for going through the education pipeline.

As educators passionate about social justice and equity, we should speak up, acknowledge a problem exists, and continue to exhibit a sense of urgency. We are still learning the importance of utilizing our voices to amplify those society would leave in silence, but we are no longer silent within educational systems that do not advocate for minoritized students. Students need to have their voices heard and to have racial injustices dealt with in ways that encourage collaboration, student growth, and student achievement. We were and are (some of) those students.

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