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CYES 290: Theory of Social Inequality

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Historicizing Assimilation and Exclusion in the Classroom

When I was assigned to observe Mrs. Donoghue's 1st grade classroom at Columbus Park Elementary School as part of an assignment for the course "Complexities of Urban Schooling," I imagined myself rushing around a crowded room, getting to know students, and helping them with their work. Yet I was soon informed by Mrs. Donoghue that I would be of most help to her by working with a small group of students she felt needed extra attention. Consequently, I spent my 15 hours of observation time at Columbus Park not in Mrs. Donoghue's classroom, but rather at a small table in the hallway working with no more than three students at a time.

These three students, two Latino boys named Julio and Eddie, and a young Black girl named Genesis, are who Mrs. Donoghue identified as struggling the most due to her inability to accommodate their ways of communicating in the larger classroom setting. Julio and Eddie only spoke Spanish, and Genesis usually preferred communicating through body language rather than verbally, meaning her presence went largely unacknowledged by both her classmates and her teacher.

These three students were of course incredibly different, but the factor that unified them as far as Mrs. Donoghue was concerned was that they were all unable to complete their activities at the standard that had been set for them. She was unsure Julio, Eddie and Genesis would be able to move onto the third grade, the factor that would ultimately determine this was their test scores, and she had informed me they all regularly received zeros.

Herbert Kohl regards this practice of holding all students to the same standards measured through testing as alienating and immoral, writing in his essay *The Educational Panopticon* that "Because of no tolerance and no exceptions policies, students who just can't do well because of disabilities that are no fault of their own, or students who don't speak English, are forced to take tests they know will fail" (Kohl, 2009, p.3). Kohl identifies these strict policies and the emphasis on testing as contributing to schools as sites of coercion and surveillance dedicated to undermining the autonomy of both students and teachers. Although she enforced testing, Mrs.

Donoghue expressed to me on numerous occasions that she wished she had more control over her curriculum, saying, “All we do is test, test, test, I don’t know why they’re making us do this, if I could create the tests it would be very different.” These curriculum mandates ensure that it is not only students who are being assessed regularly, but also teachers who are evaluated on their students' performance on tests relating to materials that they have no control over. In other words, although teachers are agents of surveillance in the classroom, they are also under surveillance.

This distinction is important because so often, understandings of social inequality within education default to solely shifting the burden onto bad teachers. This is not to say that we should not critique the ways in which a majority white teacher workforce that dominate Black and brown public schools fail and harm their students by upholding white supremacist logic in the classroom. Yet I believe that opening up our analysis beyond teacher/student relations will ultimately allow us to cultivate a much deeper understanding of how to support students. When we keep our scope narrow, we risk leaving those at the top of hierarchies of power unscrutinized. This is what Payne describes as the RAP (Redneck as Patsi) thesis that he outlines in his essay “Black Bastards and White Millionaires”. This essay is primarily focused on how we try to answer the question “who is responsible for the hurts of the world?” (Payne, 1984 p. 41). Payne illustrates the theories that have been used and continue to evolve to try to answer this seemingly simple question, from more progressive theories to a range of denial theories, one of these denial theories being the RAP theory.

The RAP thesis “turns the world inside out, substituting the more vicious and dramatic expressions of inequality for the possibility that those of higher status create, maintain, and profit most from the racial status quo” (Payne, 1984 p.13). As I noted earlier, some examples of this thinking are when disparities in educational opportunities across racial lines are attributed to a handful of bad teachers at every school, rather than due to systemic injustices in the school system. But this thinking translates across all institutions, for example in the field of health it may look like explaining away the pregnancy-related mortality rate for Black women is 5.2 that of white women (CDC, 2019) as due the negligence of a few bad doctors, rather than seeking to transform a for-profit medical system with an ongoing history of eugenic logics.

What I am trying to illustrate through this example is that surveillance is a network of relations that does not just operate from top to bottom, but also, as Foucault writes, “from bottom

to top and laterally; this network ‘holds’ the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another.” He continues that surveillance is “inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching, not as an additional or adjacent part, but as a mechanism that is inherent to it and which increases its efficiency.” (Foucault, 1979 pg.176-177). This framework, of surveillance not as something additional to schooling but as embedded, unsettles the assumption of education as “the great equalizer”. Instead, it begins the work of surfacing the often unspoken reality that our education system as we know it has historically, and continues to operate as a tool of colonization and white supremacy, rather than a site conducive to the learning, curiosity, and growth of youth, specifically minoritized youth.

Understanding the original intents of schooling in the US help us make sense of the racial dynamics unfolding in classrooms such as Mrs. Donoghue’s, where students of color are consistently punished and excluded. As Omi and Winant write in *Racial Formation in the United States*, “Since racial formation is always historically situated, understandings of the meaning of race, and of the way race structures society, have changed enormously over time” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 112). Historicizing education allows us to make sense of the ways in which Genesis, as a young, disabled Black girl was pushed to the margins of the classroom. It also helps us understand why it is unsurprising that Julio and Eddie were expected to speak English at school, despite the fact that over half of students attending Worcester Public schools do not speak English as their first language, and over a third are English language learners (Worcester, 2018 p.5).

Asserting English as a dominant language has been a tactic of control since the creation of the first schools in the United States, which were mission schools to convert and use Native American labor to further the church's cause. These schools were then shifted into boarding schools with the intent of destroying and vilifying Indigenous culture, where students were punished for speaking in their Native language or practicing any cultural activities. (Ladson Billing 2006, p. 5). The role of Residential schools cannot be understated in this assimilation project, which took place not just in the United States but globally. Māori author Andre Eruera Vercoe speaks of the fact that, even years after the creation of these initial schools, schooling for Indigenous children in Australia is still destroying their cultures and communities. He writes “Given the education system that we’ve been lumped with, I can honestly say that unless Māori have a greater input into how structural mechanisms are organized, it may be a waste of time

sending their children to school. If anything, the school remains the ideological and cultural enemy of the Māori. Ever since Samuel Marsden encouraged the Church Missionary Society to set up shop here, ideological suppression of tikanga Māori – no, of *being* Māori – has encapsulated the hidden agenda of provincial power, typically made up of the white, male middle class” (Reyhner, J. & Singh, 2010, p.6).

The distinction that Vercoe makes, from suppression of tikanga Maori (tikanga meaning the culture and practices of Maori people) to suppression of the very essence of *being* Maori, is important in that it reflects the way schooling for Indigenous children is part of the larger settler colonial project of disappearing Indigenous people altogether. In “Decolonization is not a metaphor” Tuck and Yang explain how this requires the racialization of Indigenous peoples in a way where “Native Americanness is *subtractive*: Native Americans are constructed to become fewer in number and *less* Native, but never exactly white, over time.” The goal of this, which is enforced through blood quantum registries and policies, is to ultimately phase out Indigenous claims to land and usher in settler claims to property (Tuck & Yang, 2012 p. 12).

Understanding that the first schools were sites of the forced assimilation of Indigenous people helps us understand the ways in which schooling aids in all racialization projects that work to ensure the ascendancy of white settlers as the true and rightful owners and occupiers of the land. Under settler colonial contexts, Black people are racialized very differently than Indigenous people in that Blackness is *expansive* through the one-drop rule, which ensures “That a slave/criminal status will be inherited by an expanding number of “Black descendants.” (Tuck & Yang, 2012 p. 12). These aims are reflected in the history of schooling for Black people, or more accurately, the lack of.

During the period of enslavement, Black people were prohibited from receiving an education, and even after emancipation there was the development of a freedmen’s school whose purpose was the maintenance of a servant class (Ladson-Billing 2006 p.5) In the South, the need for farm labor meant that the typical school year for rural Black students was four months, and it was not until 1968 that Black students in the South experienced universal secondary schooling. Rather than being forced into schools for the purpose of assimilation, Black people were barred from schools for as long as possible in order to serve the aims of settler colonialism to capture and contain people for labor. Just as Indigenous people to this day are most often forced to speak

English and are punished for practicing their culture, the exclusion of Black people from schools has far from ended.

This practice is nowhere more glaringly obvious than in the statistics surrounding the suspension, expulsion, and incarceration rates of Black youth, or what is referred to as the “school to prison pipeline.” Black students represent 31 percent of school-related arrests and are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students (Edward & Henderson, 2020) and nearly 40 percent of Black people serving the longest prison terms were incarcerated before age 25 (Urban Institute, 2017). As well as incarceration and juvenile centers, underfunding predominantly Black schools is another form of exclusion from the opportunities that education can afford. The Chicago Public Schools, which have an 87 percent Black and Latine population, spend about \$8,482 annually per pupil, while the nearby Highland Park which has a 90 percent white population spends \$17,291 annually. In 30 states, districts with a higher number of minoritized students receive less money per child than in districts with schools that are predominantly white (Ladson-Billing, 2006 p. 6).

Genesis’s experience aligns with these statistics in that her public school in Worcester was predominantly Black and brown, underfunded, and she frequently experienced punishment and exclusion due to both her Blackness, as well as her disability, which is another identity she holds that has been historically excluded from the classroom. Julio and Eddie’s experience of being unable to succeed in school due to not speaking English should not be compared directly to the forced assimilation experienced by Indigenous youth in residential schools. Yet it does illuminate the ways in which controlling language has always been a tactic of white supremacy in schools. Without broadening our scope of the situation, it feels logical to resort to oversimple explanations of inequality.

My intentions in writing this are not to condemn advocacy that calls for less standardized testing, more teachers of color, and more bilingual education in schools. These measures are necessary and important, and I am deeply grateful to those who have been doing the work of making schools a more supportive space for marginalized students. My desire is simply that these measures are rooted in moving towards Black liberation and decolonization (not as a metaphor but as the literal repatriation of stolen Indigenous land) and reject new modes of surveillance and punishment that may develop in their wake. As educators entering the fundamentally racist schooling system, who will be both surveilled and surveillance, I believe

our job is to work towards rejecting the logics of surveillance and punishment altogether and invest in the collective sovereignty and liberation of our students instead.

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