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Introduction Double Issue Part I

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Introduction: Education Stakeholders Striving for Equity and Culturally Relevant Approaches

Rosa M. Jimenez & Irina S. Okhremtchouk

Our world has changed. No one could have imagined our current reality. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a public health crisis prompting shelter in place and stay home policies, social distancing, business and school closures, massive unemployment, the loss of lives, and the loss of our world as we know it. The crisis has created new problems for us as a nation to tackle, but it has also exposed prior hidden suffering and social ills long neglected.

Students living in poverty and Students of Color across schools in America have experienced inequities and hardships for many years. The current crisis adds a pandemic onto preexisting layers of suffering some of which include: the ripple effects of poverty, xenophobia and systemic racism, political chasms and cultural divides, massive wealth disparity, food and housing insecurity, lack of access to affordable health care, and differential access to high quality schools and educational resources, among many other hardships.

During these trying times, the racial violence against Black people and People of Color at large at the hands of law enforcement, made yet another layer of injustices within our society simply unbearable. Although in existence since 2013, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement was reinvigorated in 2020 with massive protests against police brutality and racial injustice. Now is the time for social change and equity. Real change happens when one prioritizes equality for all, meaning our most marginalized members, at the expense of one's own priv-

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ilege. For the greater common good we call for everyday actions and collective struggle, such as protesting racial violence in the streets during a pandemic, and including wearing masks to save lives, staying indoors to protect vulnerable communities, and marching for others who may be unable to. In these overlapping societal pandemics of COVID-19, racial inequality we march as a collective, we vote for a new more democratic leadership, we wear that face covering again, we work alongside communities in grassroots movements. And do all of the above again, and again. Now is the time.

Writer and activist Arundhati Roy (2020) reminds us that “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.” As we embark on a new era of what our society will look like during (and after) the COVID-19 crisis, we have an opportunity to transform what education could be. Particularly for our most vulnerable students and communities, we can view the interruption in our normal to break from the status quo.

Normal has thus far been characterized by stark inequalities across every facet of education. The vast majority of students in public schools are students of color, while their teachers and school leaders remain predominantly white (Boser, 2014; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). These demographics signal marked cultural/racial, linguistic, gender, and class differences between those in positions of leadership and the students they are charged with serving. Schools need to acknowledge, understand and be able to effectively address issues of social class and poverty, race and racism, ethnolinguistic difference and immigration, and other differential power dynamics. We cannot successfully accomplish that without having persons reflective of students’ heritages among school teachers and leaders.

Research demonstrates great promise for stakeholders who strive to enact equity-minded organizational change, transformative teaching, and co-create socially just school-community relationships. School leaders and teachers who draw upon their lived experiences and/or develop multicultural competencies, have professional skillsets to cultivate stronger academic achievement, student cultural identities, positive school climates and school-community relations (Isola & Cummins, 2019; Jackson & Kohli, 2016; Valenzuela, 2016). School counselors, psychologists and other school personnel have equally important roles to play in supporting students’ mental health, wellness, belonging, and academic achievement (Henfield, Washington, Bersevic & De La Rue, 2019). Community organizing and civic groups are also often overlooked when talking about schooling and education; yet, it holds academic promise with our most marginalized youth and potential for broader social change (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006).

As co-editors for this section of this special issue, we included an array of stakeholders across different settings to explore how they centered social justice and equity. We sought to examine a broader scope of research topics to include

manuscripts about (or with) teachers, school leaders, school counselors, and parents/family and community partnerships. What are the experiences, strategies, and practices of these stakeholders? How are equitable, critical and culturally relevant approaches to teaching, leading, and engaging communities defined across contexts? While the manuscripts were written before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, they offer insights and lessons for resisting, negotiating, and transforming our nation's schools.

Abigail Amoaka Kayser leads our special issue section, illuminating the tensions and possibilities of Culturally Responsive family-school engagement. Her study interviews stakeholders at two public schools that acknowledged their parent/family engagement practices were inadequate, and documents the steps towards change. Kayser highlights the genuine tensions and fears, particularly among White teachers, sitting with discomfort, learning to re-define their roles and their perspectives of the families they served. At the dual-language school, administrators also questioned their over-reliance on activities, events, and cultural heritage months towards more genuine family-school engagement, shifting of pedagogies, and enacting culturally responsive approaches alongside families. This study is timely. As we negotiate how to better equip teachers, particularly the 80% of White teachers, it provides insights for educators, school leaders and community members to understand and practice culturally responsive teaching and parent/family engagement.

Next, we turn to Brandon Gamble's study of the experiences of *parents of Black youth* in relation to school psychologists and/or school-based mental health providers (SBMHP). The study found that parents do not readily trust school psychologists or other mental health providers, yet it demonstrated that parents are open to greater communication, and collaborations. Parents were not always aware of the differences between various health providers' positions and responsibilities. They suggested workshop topics they would like to see provided by school psychologists and SBMHP including ensuring Black voices being seen and heard, and having providers getting to know their children well. This study has implications for educators, school psychologists, and other mental health providers to envision genuine partnerships with parents to cultivate success, achievement, and liberation with Black youth.

E. Mackenzie Shell leads us into an examination of the promise of school counselors as leaders for social justice and equity. He builds his argument on the foundation that school counselors occupy a unique position at the intersection of students, families, and school actors, in addition to their training, and access to school-wide data. Shell argues, in this conceptual piece, for the use of Multi-cultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) and provides a case study exemplar for this key role. School counselors "act as cultural bridges between the family and schools" As such, culturally responsive approaches hold great promise for fostering school-family partnerships and addressing communi-

ty-based issues. Shell reminds us of the crucial role school counselors (can) play, beyond the burdensome paperwork and overwhelming caseloads.

In the next article, we turn to Keith Benson's autoethnography of his first year as the teacher's union president for a New Jersey school district facing neoliberal takeover. He details his efforts along with the teacher union as they took a more active role in preserving their public schools, resisting neoliberal education's attacks, and strengthening community partnerships. Benson weaves his experiential knowledge with research on neoliberalism and offers practical insights into community organizing and activism from within. Neoliberal policies continue to dismantle public schools through the guise of "accountability and choice," positioning privatization as the panacea. Yet, these very principles intensify racial and social inequalities in education. In his article, Benson tackles these challenges with an honest reflection of doubt, frustration, passion, and insight. It offers a palpable account of the various strategies, wins and losses, trial and error journey of teacher union's role in fighting for public schools.

Andrea Joseph, Rebecca Hnilica, and Mary Hansen follow with their analysis of using restorative practices to reduce racially disproportionate school suspensions. The authors draw on ecological systems theory and critical race theory to uncover the ways that restorative practices ran parallel to (and in competition with) punitive practices in one school. They found that these chaotic disciplinary practices created a detention-to-suspension pipeline, hindered relationship-building, and undermined the very principles of restorative justice. This work contributes to the field with a vivid look at the barriers and challenges school leaders faced in attempting to enact restorative practices, the lessons learned in their missteps, and a call for incorporating truly transformative restorative practices.

The final two articles turn to the role of teachers. In his article, Raúl Lomelí, provides a participatory research study about his work as a principal implementing culturally responsive professional development with a group of teachers. These *Critical Praxis Círculos* (CPC), as they were called, were professional learning communities where teachers met to discuss critical perspectives in education and generate pedagogical ideas for classroom implementation. The CPC's themselves were oriented in Mesoamerican and Native American tradition centered on trust, respect, and listening to experiential storytelling. The study found teachers engaged in dialogue which supported the development of a collective critical consciousness, albeit an emerging one with some participants. Teachers strengthened their competencies around culturally relevant teaching, made personal or curricular connections, and built upon community cultural wealth of students and families. This study contributes to the burgeoning work on Culturally Responsive Teacher Development (CRTD) for practicing teachers at school sites.

The final study in this special section tackles the readiness of Arizona and California special education teachers (SETs) to work with dual language learners (DLL). Taucia Gonzalez, Irina Okhremtchouk, and Kate Esposito challenge their

readers to re-envision what teacher readiness should be and must be. The study found a significant DLL *exposure gap* between pre- and in-service SETs. In other words, teachers had very little experience working with DLL students in their pre- and in-service preparation, resulting in low self-efficacy with this student population. The authors call on the readers and larger education community to be purposeful in ways by which they address the needs of DLL students with disabilities due to intersectionality of language and ability differences. The study's findings point to the urgent need for intersectional approaches in SET preparation in order to better serve students, and to engage special education as an equity tool.

Each of the articles included speak truth to power—within their own contexts. Collectively, we offer this special issue in solidarity with researchers, scholars, educators, and community members who seek to transform education. There are many unanswered questions as we continue on a path of distance learning in the era of pandemic and struggle for racial justice, and about what returning to brick-and-mortar schools should look like. As some continue distance learning, and others embark on difficult returns to in-person learning, let us also re-envision schooling to create new structures and paradigms of education – to authentically engage teachers and students, school personnel, families and community stakeholders in advancing social and racial justice anew.

In the spirit of Arundhati Roy, we ask, “Let us imagine another world of education. And be ready to fight for it.”

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