Teaching in the Institutional Cage: Metaphor and Collateral Oppression

Becky L. Noël Smith, Independent Scholar

Abstract

> *This analysis is a philosophical exploration of Marilyn Frye's metaphor of the cage and Patricia Hill Collins' theory of intersecting oppressions. It argues that social structures and forms of oppressive knowledge make up the individual wires on each person's cage and that these work to confine individuals, particularly those in the schooling institution. The cage, however, remains in a state of flux as individuals transition into voluntary social groups (like the teaching profession). Thus, voluntary transitions into the profession can create scenarios where people experience either the intensification of existing barriers or the collateral acquisition of new oppressive wires.*

Keywords: moral oppression, intersectionality, collateral oppression, total institutions

Introduction: Reflecting on My Time in the Institution

> *...injustices may not be perceived as injustices, even by those who suffer them, until somebody invents a previously unplayed role. Only if somebody has a dream, and a voice to describe that dream, does what looked like nature begin to look like culture, what looked like fate begin to look like a moral abomination. For until then only the language of the oppressor is available, and most oppressors have had the wit to teach the oppressed a language in which the oppressed will sound crazy— **even to themselves**—if they describe themselves as oppressed.*
> —Richard Rorty, *Feminism and Pragmatism: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (1990, p. 4, original emphasis)

I devoted four years of my life to a Title I, public elementary school. The bonds I developed with my peers, the parents, and my students ensured that the people in my school became 'my community' even though my home was an hour from campus. I taught third grade for a couple years, and then I became the school's technology teacher. The latter post allowed me to experience a teacher-to-teacher social dynamic that contrasted with my previous, and sometimes isolating, dynamic in the grade-level classroom. The gain of adult interaction that accompanied the tech position came with the loss of the close, heart-warming bonds that developed throughout a year of working with my students. One position was not necessarily better than the other; they were just different.

The technology position allocated most of my time to troubleshooting the problems of my peers. I quickly realized that my effectiveness began with a diligence in listening to and un-

derstanding the difficulties the staff faced. The process required research, creativity, and persistence in the quest to devise and test possible solutions; it was a perpetual, learning-to-fix-it cycle. But I thrived on the challenge, and I derived energy from the resolutions that followed the exhaustion of collaboratively wading through problems with my peers.

Many of us worked rather late as we wrangled with the chaos of the profession, and most technological difficulties were addressed once the children had vacated for the day. In the isolation of the computer lab or in the stillness of a child-free classroom, my colleagues would privilege me with access to their perspectives on many things. Conversations about their issues with technology often evolved into issues with our profession in general. Many people expressed an intense frustration at the constant onslaught of changes and meaninglessness that continually dragged them farther and farther away from simply being able to teach. In fact, the veteran teachers were especially effective in illuminating the uselessness of the technological changes that flowed from the district, through me, and onto them. I took their suggestions and concerns to heart and acknowledged the tendency of my department to complicate their work. And their critiques helped me to become very deliberate and creative in my attempts to buffer them from any further meaninglessness.

The agonies my colleagues' expressed were very familiar to me. In fact, my own toil with the wrongness of the burdens placed upon classroom teachers gained in poignancy upon my move to the technology department. That is, the change liberated me from the restraints of standardization, so I was finally able to experience autonomy in both my lessons and my department. And in the absence of the restrictions, I developed a keen awareness for how truly unbearable things were prior to my fortune in freedom. As my observations and conversations traversed the school, though, I was persistently made aware of the cruelly, illogical and seemingly oppressive experiences that both my fellow teachers and our students endured.

So many of us were strapped down to practices with which we simply did not agree: drill and kill, test prep, testing strategies, scripted teaching programs and methods, incessant assessments that both stole time away from learning and provided us with no more knowledge than we possessed prior to administering them. We tokenized lessons about people and ideas which we shamefully admitted were worthy of far more time than the "scope and sequence" allowed. It was expected that our time be devoted to pounding away at the meaningless skills that distant, faceless policymakers and bureaucrats devised. But no amount of effort or hyper-curricular-integration could ever free up enough time for all the students to understand the multitude of standards required to be taught and tested in one year. With so little cohesion or continuity, and with such high-stakes attached to student and teacher "performance," it felt impossible to teach *anything* of quality. And sadly, the curricular overload caused a scarcity of time that meant we frequently put off or skipped over the most important things: the student-generated curiosities and conversations that led to our social and emotional growth.

The prevalence of similar sentiments grew with every teacher I encountered, and some portion of everyone's frustration, anxiety, and fear became embodied in my own experience. My uneasiness and distaste for the ways we and our profession were being shaped intensified because everything I knew to be good was eroding under the pressures and mentality of accountability. For example, I had entered the classroom with a solid understanding of the term "critical thinking," but the meaning of that phrase suffered a horrific contortion by bureaucrats, policy makers, administrators, and teachers even. Its perpetual misuse, with a suspicious parallel to the corporate world, came to mean 'climbing the ladder' of "higher order thinking." The beauty and

import of the *critical* portion of its identity was successfully erased through redefinition, like some sort of bizarre, forced marriage to Bloom's taxonomy.

The "teachable moment" also became a warped modification of itself under the constraints of accountability (Havigurst, 1953, p. 7). In other words, it no longer comprised an educator's ability to discern the educational appropriateness of a task in relation to a student's cognitive readiness. The teachable moment was twisted to mean a rare mini-lesson whose content could be seized from the interactions of the working classroom. The frequent misuse implied expectations of scarcity and the minimal amount of time allocated for such events. But if one of those slick, little moments was lucky enough to weasel its way through an unforeseen crack in the rigidity of the day's structure, then we were permitted to spare it a 'moment' so we could squash it on our way to the "important stuff." The pressures upon our learning environment ensured that meaningful encounters had all the frequency and status of an endangered species. It often left one questioning if things were intentionally structured to weed out trace elements of organic meaningfulness.

A problem began to emerge. I had entered the profession with the belief that the university had prepared me well: my classes had equipped me with a plethora of teaching methods; a foundation in developmental psychology; and an incipient understanding of the dynamics of class, race, and gender in schooling. But in reality, I was completely unprepared for why and how the structures of bureaucracy and standardization that were being forced upon our environment would slowly whittle away at us, our practices, and our humanity. Critics of this narrative could certainly argue that this experience was just part of learning "to play the game" in the workplace: employees appease the authoritative hierarchy, doing whatever is pushed down upon them, so they can maintain the hope of skirting the next round of layoffs and perhaps even make it to see another pay raise. In response to such sentiment, I do not propose that teachers deserve a different work dynamic than anyone else in the labor force, for it is tragic that any person should feel pressured to compromise their moral obligation to self and others. There is one small factor, however, which tweaks the moral perspective when comparing many jobs, particularly those of the corporate world, with the profession of teaching: a teacher's work is with the lives and souls of *children*.

People come to the profession for countless reasons, but my experience with teachers led me to believe that many did not approach the classroom with the intent of doing harm or creating obstacles for their students. On the contrary, many teachers affirm that the students provide the greatest and often only rewarding factor for working in the profession. I believe the people who dedicate themselves to the role of educator are those who have a strong sense of moral obligation and a deep intrinsic desire to grow and work toward the common good.[1]

John Dewey's (1916) thoughts attest to the intrinsic value derived from finding one's place in a fulfilling occupation:

> An occupation is the only thing which balances the distinctive capacity of an individual with his social service. To find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness. (p. 360)

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1. See Lortie (1975, p. 27) for the social and moral intentions of educators and the primary source of their satisfactions: intrinsic rewards from interpersonal achievement of human connection (Lortie, 1975, p. 27). See Hansen (2001) on the moral practice of teaching and Bushaw & Lopez (2011) for the public perspective on respect for the profession.

This "key to happiness" makes the educator's predicament most problematic, particularly for those who have glimpsed at the pride and satisfaction of the work. That is, if educators feel the restrictions and demands of the job coerce them to compromise their moral integrity, then they do so to the detriment of their communities' youngest and most innocent human beings. This clearly creates an ethical dilemma, but the cruelty intensifies. See, as the teachers' hands become directly responsible for administering the meaninglessness to which their students struggle to resist, they actually take up the sad task of abrading *their own* occupational incentive. A parallel can be drawn from Michel Foucault's (1975/1977) analogy of the medical doctor being charged with the oversight of executions. He stated: "Today a doctor must watch over those condemned to death, right up to the last moment—thus juxtaposing himself as the agent of welfare, as the alleviator of pain, with the official whose task it is to end life" (p. 11).

The educator's juxtaposition is not so different. The metrics may (or may not) indicate that the children's scores are growing, but any person who listens to and interacts with the youth will perceive that their bodies, their words, and their morale indicate that the love for learning in most of them is simply dying. Thus, the highly-standardized and techno-bureaucratic education policies require an infliction of so much meaninglessness and harm that they actually require educators to "teach" their students to death.[2] And for many, anxieties compound under looming feelings that refusal to oblige the demands of the institution will increasingly result in greater threats to one's personal livelihood. Thus, it stands to reason that job expectations and the necessity for income coerce many educators not only to knowingly do harm, but it forces them to take part in their own moral erosion.[3]

So, the irony is exposed. The very things which draw people to the profession (the desire to teach, to experience growth, to engage with the youth, to take part in a moral or civic obligation to the community) become warped under the bureaucratic, corporatized, and technocratic structures of the institution. The educator then finds herself in the position where her own actions are directly responsible for destroying that which she loves and, consequently, an important part of her *self*. And unless she can see beyond the options that are handed to her, she comes to live out the exact antithesis of her occupational and moral aims.

As a teacher, I observed and experienced the ways the policies over the schooling environment encouraged teachers to ignore their moral impulses and to suppress the growth of self and others. Perplexed by the conflict and the constraints, I came to question what it was exactly that had naggingly dissuaded me from teaching "from my gut." The mechanisms—and the problem—felt more severe than a moral identity crisis; they felt morally oppressive. And this, of course, necessitated the question: what does it mean to be oppressed?

The following analysis is a philosophical exploration which blends Marilyn Frye's metaphor of the cage with Patricia Hill Collins' theory of intersecting oppressions. I argue that social structures and forms of oppressive knowledge make up the individual wires on each person's cage and that these work to confine individuals, particularly those in the schooling institution. The cage is in a constant state of flux because the number of wires shifts with one's environment.

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2. The institutional lack of concern for student well-being, the lack of trust for the school personnel, and the levels of surveillance are discussed by Berliner, 2006, 2009; Heybach & Sheffield, 2013; Hsieh, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Strauss, 2013.

3. "Harm" refers to any lesson or activity which is not worthwhile to students and which results in stagnation for student and teacher. Dewey (1916) said, "Any aim is of value so far as it assists observation, choice, and planning in carrying on activity from moment to moment...if it gets in the way of the individual's own common sense...it does harm" (Dewey, p. 125).

Thus, I argue that transitions into voluntary social groups (like the teaching profession) create scenarios where people experience either the intensification of existing barriers or the collateral acquisition of wires. In either case, though, the burden of the cage is influenced by one's tendency to hold onto oppressive knowledge.

Metaphorical exploration can certainly assist in testing one's understanding of a complex concept, but it can also help simplify it. In this case, metaphor reveals the strengths and the weaknesses of the cage so that one can move on to more pragmatic questions: how does one take part in her own oppression, and what can be done about it?

Inspecting the Cage

As the Western understanding of oppression has developed, scholars have grown to see that the means for oppressing are primarily psychological and, therefore, frequently imperceptible (Cudd, 2006). This is not to say that psychological mechanisms of domination exist apart from the human interaction that is necessary for physical violence and institutional assertions of power, for surely the psychological mechanisms only exist and persist *because* of the interactions among humankind. Some of the most enduring oppressive habits are continually created, taught, and reinforced on the cultural and individual levels, and the fact that these mechanisms are so deeply and often unconsciously engrained into our existence means that they are insidiously persistent.

Oppression is varied and subtle, but always overlapping. Marilyn Frye (1983) used the analogy of the birdcage to describe its complexity.

> If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere…It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. (p. 4)

Frye's imagery describes the perspective one might see if she were to inspect the perimeter of the cage. That is, in walking around the outside of a classic, dome-shaped bird cage, she would be able to see the repeating pattern of bars which confine the being within. However, if we extend our gaze so as to look down upon the cage from above, it becomes possible to see how all of these wires converge upon a single vertex at the center of the dome.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) might have described this vertex as the point of intersectionality.[4] It is the location where various types of oppression cross one another. This point is of particular interest in this analysis because, architecturally speaking,

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4. Hill Collins (2000) did not specifically use the cage metaphor, but her definition blends well with Frye's. "Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (p. 18).

it also happens to be the very place on a dome where the greatest amount of compression amasses. Therefore, one must question what the tension surrounding this vertex implies psychologically and existentially for the person who is confined.

As one peers upon the intersecting wires at the top of the cage, it becomes easy to see that one's placement in life and within society will ultimately impact the *number* of wires that each person must negotiate in their actions. For instance, the mechanisms of confinement around a Mexican American, working-class, straight, single mother would look substantially different and arguably more restrictive than the wires constructed around a White, upper-middle class, gay man who is monogamously committed to his partner. Each person in this example would clearly come to suffer various limitations and agitations. The woman would confront the struggles associated with single parenthood, but she would also have to maneuver around the obstacles constructed by society's stereotypes and perceptions regarding her gender, class, race, parenting status, and citizenship.[5] The man on the other hand might be free of those particular constraints, but his sexuality would likely cause him to be confronted by different stereotypes, restrictions, and defamation.

These two people might appear to have little in common regarding oppressive experience. However, suppose both of them exist in a society where the dominant culture encourages marriage for straight women while simultaneously denying marriage to same-sex couples. In this heteronormative setting, she would increase her chances of suffering social and long-term economic limitations by choosing not to conform to the social expectation of marriage for someone of her gender.[6] Meanwhile, his refusal to give into the dominant expectation regarding sexuality would prohibit him from partaking in the social recognition and the economic and legal benefits of a state-recognized marriage.[7] The woman and the man would each endure varying degrees of oppression because their "sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support" (Cohen, 1997, p. 442).

This example demonstrates several points. First, it is obvious that one individual can experience multiple obstacles due to the constrictions of intersectionality. Second, and more importantly, the example shows how two people can run up against the *same* wire (instutionalized, heteronormative notions of marriage, in this case) even though they do *not* share the characteristics of gender, race, class, or sexuality. Their varying characteristics are not inconsequential, though, because these are *the* factors that allow two individuals to confront the same wire differently. The fact that the same wire can be viewed in different ways simply means that the wire has experiential facets. Thus, two very different people can be caged by the same wire, and each person's cage is cast with the bar because both have been pushed outside the dominant group which benefits from the maintenance of the given institutional practice.

People are constantly categorizing and being categorized by one another. Therefore, each human being simultaneously belongs to and transitions in and out of a multitude of voluntary and

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5. See Hill-Collins (2000) outlined this in Part 2, Section 4. The stereotypes associated with gender, class, and race "provides ideological justifications for intersecting oppressions" (p. 79).

6. Cohen (1997) defined heteronormativity as "the privilege, power, and normative status invested in heterosexuality–of the dominant society" (p. 445).

7. For example, same-sex couples are restricted from the lower tax brackets tied to combined household income, which limits take-home pay, the ability to save, and participation in some retirement plans like IRAs. Probate avoidance upon death also results in compounding economic and psychological harms.

non-voluntary social groups.[8] These transitions are present in every interaction, and so one's position of power is also maintained in a constant state of flux. For instance, the power dynamic experienced by a principal in her school setting would differ significantly from her home or when she appears before her school board. Furthermore, one's shifting position of privilege is also constantly influencing and being influenced by each setting, each person with whom one connects, and one's memberships among various social groups.[9] So, the shifts in individual relations of power mean that the make-up of the dominant group can and will also consistently adjust as a result. It is through these interactions and transitions across the many scenarios of power that each person comes to exist, in varying degrees, as both the oppressor and the oppressed (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 246).

Collateral Oppression as an Indiscernible Barrier

If two seemingly different people can share the same type of barrier, then the human transitioning among social groups and positions of privilege adds another layer of intricacy to the compounding potential of shared forms of oppression. In particular, movement in and out of voluntary social groups makes it possible for individuals to experience what could be considered collateral oppression: an incidental, but shared mechanism of confinement that is experienced through one's membership in a *voluntary* social group. An explanation of collateral oppression can easily be drawn out of the predominantly female, education profession. To better explain this, though, it is first necessary to look briefly at the relations of power that exist over the field.

Of the nation's K-12 educators, 76% are female. While women are an overwhelming majority of the teaching profession, just less than 50% of school principals are female (Snyder & Dillow, 2011, p. 60). The gender demographic for principalships may initially appear balanced, but when this statistic is compared to the proportion of women in the teaching workforce it becomes obvious that the authoritative hierarchy is disproportionately masculine. This connection between gender and authority in education, of course, worsens the farther up the chains of command and influence one travels. Approximately 24% of superintendents are women (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young & Ellerson, 2011, p. 86). But, the hierarchy of power extends well beyond the borders of the school district because federal policies increasingly determine educators' work, and yet the feminine perspective is represented in less than 17% of Congress (Manning, 2011, p. 6). Finally, there are even fewer women in the tier of influence which shapes the federal policies that direct the work of the profession. In fact, one need only look at Diane Ravitch's (2010) nickname for one of the most coercive groups—the Billionaire Boys' Club—to get a demographic sense of those who has wielded power over the nation's educators.[10]

The relation between wealth and power over the politics of schooling, of course, brings to light issues related to class. The broader social and economic perspective shows that class-related issues continue to impact the profession. Allegretto, Corcoran & Mishel, (2004) completed a salary comparison between teachers and professional equivalents that adjusted for week-

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8. "A social group is a collection of persons who share (or would share under similar circumstances) a set of social constraints on action" (Cudd, 2006, p. 44). A voluntary social group has an air of choice about it, as in an occupational group. A non-voluntary social group is something outside the realm of choice, like an ethnic group.

9. See Foucault (1982) for the constant presence of power relations, Bourdieu (2002) for the transactions of social capital as a result, and Hill Collins (2000) for how power and intersectionality are highlighted through situational transitions.

10. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, Eli & Edy Broad Foundation, Robertson Foundation, and Michael & Susan Dell Foundation (Ravitch, 2010, p. 195-222).

ly income. They found that teachers had "a wage disadvantage of 12.2%" each week. When they divided this by the average reported work hours for each profession, they concluded that "…the hourly wage disadvantage was an even larger 14.1%" (p. 2). This trend has gradually worsened since 1979, and by 2007 the American Federation of Teachers claimed that teachers "earn 70 cents on the dollar" when compared to their professional equivalents (Di Carlo, Johnson, & Cochran, p. 3). The difference amounts to about $22,000 per year.

There are obviously many things at work here, and these numbers provide only brief examples of the authoritative hierarchy as it currently spans over the school institution via the political and economic arenas. But the intersectionality of gender and class and its relation to power in the profession not only is very distinct; the patriarchal power dynamic has been deeply and historically entrenched in the bureaucracy and culture of the institution for well beyond a century.[11] Women continue to be the overwhelming majority of the laborers in the educational field today, and they are enclosing upon the highest ratio since the early 1900's (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010; Rury, 1989). If history is to offer a lesson, it is that alienation from power, the sexual division of labor,[12] and swells of resistance[13] also increase the farther the institution spans and the more bureaucratic and centralized it becomes.

Gender and Class via Collateral Oppression

Now, imagine that someone lacks experience with or perception for the intensity of the gender and class power dynamic that exists in the schooling institution. This person could be either a woman or a man, but for the sake of argument, assume the person in this example is a man. In choosing to become a school teacher, he would enter a voluntary social group that is predominantly female, and in doing so, he and his craft would be governed by this large patriarchal institutional structure. His place of subordination in this power structure would subject him to an environment where he would experience oppressive barriers in ways that might be quite foreign to him. That is, by stepping into the institutional setting, he would experience the infliction of power from the perspective of a woman.

His experience with power in this situation would be an example of collateral oppression. That is, the type of power exerted over the social group of educators may not necessarily, or historically, be aimed at him or his gender in particular. However, as a member of a voluntary social group that is governed by an increasingly wealthy, patriarchal, and bureaucratic power structure, he would acquire the intersecting wires of class and *gender*. This would happen despite his gender but because of his chosen affiliation with the profession.[14]

But the use of a male example here does not imply that a woman's understanding of power would make her more prepared for or less shocked by the patriarchal density of the schooling institution. My experience as a woman and my lifelong attempts at dodging gender stereotypes and their restrictions still left me sorely disoriented by the confrontations I made with the gender barrier inside the schooling institution. Hill Collins (2000) explained this situation by

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11. See Beecher (1977/1841, p. 21-33), Burch (2000), Hoffman (2003), Kaestle (1983, p. 75-103), Lortie (1975, p. 1-24), Mann (1841), Rury (1989), Tyack (1974), and Urban (1989) for historical information on the feminization of the teaching profession.

12. See Au (2009, p. 81-104), Ferguson (1984), Joncich Clifford (1989, p.300); Tyack (1974, p. 28-77); Spring (2005, p. 134-165) for the connections between gender and bureaucracy.

13. See Hoffman (2003, p. 227-320), Murphy (1990), and Urban (1989).

14. For more see Ferguson's (1984) explanation of "the bureaucrat as the second sex" (p. 83).

articulating the importance of location on one's perception of power: "Her gender may be more prominent when she becomes a mother, her race when she searches for housing, her social class when she applies for credit...In all these contexts, her position in relation to and within intersecting oppressions shifts" (p. 274).

Race via Collateral Oppression

So, if a man can acquire the oppressive restrictions that are tied to a different gender, then what does collateral oppression imply for race and the teaching profession? Well, while gender and class contribute to educators' outsider status, race factors in somewhat differently. That is, the teaching profession is predominantly White, so that in terms of race most of the social group falls *inside* the sphere of dominance. Though this may be the case, it is unrealistic to assume that a prevalence of whiteness leaves educators uncaged by the unjust racist practices of the schooling institution.

Survival in an ever-changing and increasingly diverse society[15] requires the ability to learn from both similarity and difference. If the tensions and propagation of racist practices in schools are to be diminished, educators must be willing to see their own expressions of power; they must imagine and perceive how those expressions influence their interactions with students. These explorations should occur in teacher education programs, but they must continue into one's collaborations with colleagues and community members as well.

As teachers bring their varied perspectives and experiences into the schools, the collective cultural knowledge grows in each school and in the profession as a whole. These variations form part of the tangible *human* resource that educators can then turn to as they grow in their understandings of themselves, their students, and their teaching practices. Diversity, therefore, is vital to the growth of the teaching profession.

Sadly, no shortage of scholarship has shown that the opportunities for drawing upon the benefits of diversity have dwindled over the last two decades. The resegregation of schools has been rising steadily.[16] The same pattern is evident in the attrition rates of minority teachers: between 1988 and 2008 the percentage of minority teachers increased from 12.4% to 16.5% (Ingersoll & May, 2011, p. 18). However, "minority turnover was, respectfully, 18% and 24% higher than White teacher turnover" (p. 23).[17] Minority teacher attrition and resegregation are both blatantly racist problems that afflict students, teacher, and their communities.

When the schools and the profession are robbed of diversity and stability, the teachers, students, and families who remain in the institution become more and more isolated from the wealth of cultural perspectives. Thus, resegregation and minority attrition form the mechanism of a much broader problem; they function like a divide and conquer scenario that works to the detriment of everyone in the institution. Those in the minority lose access to the multitude of benefits that come from collaborating and learning through similarity, and those in the majority lose access to the necessary benefits of learning about and through difference.

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15. "[In] 2008… 41% of all elementary and secondary students were minority, but only 16.5% of all elementary and secondary teachers were minority" (Ingersoll & May, 2011, p. 41)

16. See KewalRamani, Gilbertson, & Fox (2007); Frankenberg & Lee (2002); Grant (2009); Kozol (1991; 2005); Orfield (2001); Orfield & Lee (2004); and Renzulli & Evans (2005) for information on school poverty, resegregation, and White flight.

17. In Chicago it was reported that African Americans made up 30% of the tenured workforce, yet they comprised 40% of those who were laid off (Caref & Jankov, 2012, p. 23).

The isolated phenomena of resegregation and minority attrition touch on only a few of the many ways educators contend with the socially constructed inequalities, deprivations, and restrictions that result from racism. Of course, each injustice yields its own set of psychological and material side effects for those who experience it directly (racial isolation; disparities in resources; the erosion of autonomy and power at the school level; financial, emotional, and psychological hardships for educators and their families). As damaging as all of these personal injustices are for teachers, the harms extend well beyond the direct impact left on the individuals who are nudged, pushed, and separated out of the schools. Regardless of race, and consciously or not, every educator assumes the oppressive wire of racism collaterally. The harms of racism are felt through the connections educators make with their colleagues, their students, their schools, and their communities.[18] The damage is wielded upon everyone when students, teachers, and entire schools are unfairly judged and then disproportionately punished. It is experienced when the profession is expected to attend to the systematic and racist practices of standardization and high-stakes testing. But racism is most detrimental to educators when the direct attacks against students and colleagues forge a gulf between the wealth of cultural knowledges that would facilitate *human* solidarity, growth in the craft, and the progression toward a more humane institution.

Understanding the Structural Integrity of the Cage

A teacher's transition into the schooling environment can enhance one's awareness for the interrelated complexity of sexism, classism, and racism by intensifying her or his exposure to these oppressive power dynamics. And whether the result of a voluntary transition is an intensification of oppressive mechanisms (for a woman) or the collateral acquisition of oppressive barriers (gender for a man or race for White teachers), it stands to reason that an experience with the intersectionality of these barriers would be disorienting—and indiscernible even—to many who enter the teaching profession.

With collateral oppression and the variability of social groups and positions of power in mind, it now seems appropriate to elaborate on Marilyn Frye's metaphor of the cage. A wire is constructed over an individual each time she or he is classified as "Other" and pushed into one of the innumerable voluntary and non-voluntary social groups which stands outside the perpetually varying, dominant group (Beauvoir, 1949/2009). A collective social intent provides the fuel that creates an oppressive structure, but the wire itself is forged out of privilege. Like a piece of rebar, it provides the isolated frame onto which all oppressive weight eventually adheres. And this means that, with the acquisition of oppressive knowledge,[19] the slender arched wire gradually expands into a much larger, weighty concrete arch. The girth and, consequently, the structural weight of the oppressive barrier comes from the collective inaction of those who are apathetically and unknowingly afforded privilege by the subjection of the outlying social group. The greater the privilege that one group's oppression bestows upon the dominant group, the greater will be the girth and weight of that particular barrier; the wider that barrier, the more effort must be expended when the individual attempts to maneuver around or simply see past that particular obstruction.

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18. See Berliner (2009; 2006) for analyses on trends in poverty, academic achievement, and out-of-school factors that disproportionately impact the well-being of impoverished children.

19. Oppressive knowledges are social-cultural-institutional learning processes that are "mis-educative" (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 25) and lead to a lack of "oppositional knowledges" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 275).

One barrier can obviously be a nuisance, but the cage which restricts one's mobility and human potential is constructed of many intersecting wires. Those intersecting oppressions are most frequently, or perhaps most obviously, related to the dominant assumptions about people's non-voluntary characteristics like race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. However, when *voluntary* social groups are taken into account, the intersectionality of oppression becomes complicated by the very quality that defines a group as "voluntary": the ability *to* transition. So in essence, as voluntary social groups diversify through such transitions, not only does the possibility for collateral oppression increase; the obviousness of oppressive histories becomes more soluble and therefore dissolves more easily into the fluidity of that group's diversity. The result is that the source or type of power stands blurred and on the periphery of the individual's knowledge. And in the absence of historical, theoretical, or experiential knowledge through which to make sense of the situation, the only discernable aspect for the exercise of power is the resulting emotional disorientation that comes from one's collision with the unrecognizable barriers.[20] Again, as the number of wires increases, so will the tension and one's collisions with the cage.

So, if power indeed exists in every interaction, then both intersectionality and the cage metaphor can feel all-encompassing and inescapable. The sense of hopelessness elicited by this metaphor, though, can be alleviated through a better understanding of the structural mechanics of the cage. Architecturally, the dome-shaped cage is nothing more than a series of independent arches constructed around one focal point: the individual. When a slender arch (like a wire) is set into place, its structural support occurs through the balance of its weight and its proportion. Thus, the oppressive barrier can stand on its own only as long as this structural balance remains in check. But this balance rarely remains the same. Over time the individual accumulates the weight of oppressive knowledge, the barrier then expands around that wire, and the structural weight of the entire arch gradually increases. And as the weight of privilege and dominance bears down upon that one tiny wire, a deepening tension garners at the base of the arch. Too much of this type of tension, though, will break the integrity of the arch. So if the oppressive burden continues to grow in size and weight, it simultaneously requires additional buttressing at the base and on the sides so it can avoid collapsing under its own weight (Klein, Levenson, & Munroe, 2004). This yields one question in particular: if the compounding weight of oppression is to avoid its own destruction, then from where does the structural reinforcement come?

Strangely enough, the support is provided by the individual who stands at the center of the cage.

Letting Go

Jim Garrison (1997) said, "Oppression often consists of being assigned false choices, that is, choices among alternatives specified by others that do not necessarily have our best interests at heart" (p. xvi). Not only does the individual come to accept false choices as legitimate, as Garrison said, but as a member of a multitude of outlying social groups, she or he also comes to internalize numerous forms of oppressive knowledge (Freire 1970/1997).[21] This phenomenon of internalization means that the potential burden of any one oppressive structure (the wire or arch)

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20. Hill Collins (2000) referred to this as a lack of "oppositional knowledges" (p. 275).

21. Examples of "internalized oppression" offered by Sharp, Bermudez, Watson, & Fitzpatrick (2007) are beliefs in one's own inferiority; the act of privileging dominant perspectives over those of marginalized people; insecurity in self-confidence and self-worth; and avoiding self-validation until it comes from someone who is perceived to be dominant.

is directly proportional to the strength of one's own clutch upon that particular form of oppressive knowledge. Accordingly, then, it is the individual who actually buttresses the many intersecting arches of dominance, and she or he does so by psychologically grasping onto the base of each one of the barriers. The stronger the person's hold, the more privilege each structure will come to bear *for someone else*.

The caged individual may be completely unaware of the integral part she or he plays in providing strength for these oppressive structures. This is the very reason why learning to see and examine each intuited barrier is key. That is, one must first see them so as to know that she is even holding onto them, and only once she learns to feel the barriers in her psychological grips can she begin releasing her grasp upon them. The solution for attaining relief from the psychological weight of the cage is at least as old as Socrates. As Kerry Burch (2000) explained, Diotima tempted Socrates with her wisdom and this solution when she told him that "he must somehow 'let go' of the conventional way of knowing" (p. 42).

So, freeing oneself from the oppressive burden of someone else's privilege begins with releasing the assumptions, false choices, and the ways of knowing and acting that have been handed down through institutionalized and hegemonic ways of seeing the world.[22] This entails the ironic act of "unlearning" in order to grow (Noël Smith, 2013). By letting go, the person dismantles the most crucial support to the barrier so it can finally succumb to its own tension and give way under its own weight. "Thus we discover that we believe many things not because the things are so, but because we have been habituated through the weight of authority, by imitation, prestige, instruction, the unconscious effect of language, etc." (Dewey, 1925/1958, p. 14). Once the arch crumbles, the person can then begin working to relieve herself from the unconscious habit of accepting and burdening unjustified weight.

The symbiotic relationship between the oppressive burden and the psychological grip places the person in a rather precarious position, though, meaning that simply "letting go" is far easier said than done. The difficulty lies in the reality that the collapse of an oppressive arch brings with it collateral damage—that is, the person at the center of the cage stands in direct line of all falling debris. Thus, in an attempt to maintain a feeling of security, it is easy to grasp tightly onto those things one thought she knew or thought she believed. This is often done out of a desire to avoid the vulnerability, uncertainty, and inevitable pain that coincides with the collapse (Van Overwalle & Jordens, 2002; Elliot & Devine, 1994). Unfortunately, this also means that both the grasp and the burden are most severe right before the release; the tension is most intense in the moment that just precedes the fall; the feeling of insecurity is most unsettling in that first, unobstructed glimpse.

Intersecting oppressions, yet again, complicate this entire process. The individual must be willing, one structure at a time, to let go of the oppressive forms of knowledge that gradually have been secured into place. This means that a person who is dedicated to life-long growth will have to commit to reliving the shocking and painful collapse many times over in order to truly step beyond the ways in which she was taught to see this world, her place in it, and perhaps most importantly, the way she was taught to see herself. The willingness to face this potential rests in the learner's courage to acknowledge that growth beyond the deepest held beliefs may only rest upon her or his ability to acclimate to this self-inflicted dissonance, discomfort, and even pain. Commitment to growth also requires the rediscovery of life's longstanding wounds and the patience to finally tend properly to their healing. For better and worse, this healing process only

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22. This type of education occurs via Freire's (1970/1997) "banking" concept of education and is deeply rooted to Deweyean (1922/2002) "habit."

comes from persistently sifting through, learning from, and then sweeping away the debris of someone else's privilege.

Standing amid the Remnants

The only thing left standing after the collapse of an oppressive structure of knowledge is but the slender wire to which all the destructive mass initially adhered. The social nature of humankind and the constant transitions in and out of scenarios of power make it difficult and perhaps unlikely for a person to shed the entirety of the cage. And one might seek justification for how or why the wires can possibly remain intact even after a person has let go. Well, despite the refusal to no longer accept the belief in one's socially constructed inferiority, the reality remains that women continue to make less money than men for comparable work, Black men persistently suffer from disparities in labor and incarceration, and same-sex couples still cannot marry in a majority of the United States. Unjust social structures are incredibly difficult to circumnavigate entirely without mass collective movement, but a diminution of oppressive knowledge might at least make it easier for a person to make one's way in the world.

Once a person has achieved this state of mind, the potential exists for her or him to begin learning how to maneuver with the remaining wires and how to discover new environments where confinements are not so readily constructed (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 110). Better yet, once an individual is equipped with the experience of burdening, recognizing, and releasing oppressive forms of knowledge, the hope exists that she or he can then begin experimenting with and bolstering democratic qualities in new environments. When the mind is no longer occupied with holding onto constructed ways of knowing, her hands are free to extend toward, connect to, and assist another human being. When the eyes are no longer blocked by the overlapping arches she once supported, she will be free to see another's humanity and possibility for what they truly may be.

Conclusion

The cage metaphor and the theory of intersectionality explain how physical, social, and financial attributes affect the number and type of constraints an individual may have to negotiate throughout life. However, because human beings are always transitioning in and out of varying social environments, intersectionality also explains how power dynamics and the number of constraints can change based on the environment. As collateral oppression is incorporated, it becomes obvious that a voluntary transition (like the choice to transition into the teaching profession) can bring with it the intensification of existing barriers or the acquisition of oppressive wires that may be altogether foreign to the person who "voluntarily" experiences it. As can be imagined, the result is disorientation, especially when those involved lack the theoretical or experiential knowledge for understanding and counteracting the oppressive dynamics around them.

Oppression is not only the act of being forced outside the realm of privilege and social power; it is the act of accepting that such a placement is where one actually belongs. As time, experience, interaction, and the social environment continually work upon the individual, a person cannot help but take in some aspects of the patterns, tendencies, and habits of that environment. These work to teach a person how one is expected to act; how one is expected to stand in relation and comparison to others; and what one should come to expect from life as a result of her or his physical attributes, personal interests, and financial status. Thus, oppression is the unquestioning acceptance of what one has been *taught*; it is a lack of faith in the tangibility of one's

own experience and in the ability to *know* and *learn* from the hard-fought struggles and the connections made with fellow human beings. When viewed in this light, it is possible to see not only how power and knowledge are interconnected, but how they function in ways that can be as restrictive as they can be liberatory. Liberation from institutionalized schooling will begin only after those on the inside start letting go of the belief that people who know nothing about our students or their learning processes (corporate testing companies, bureaucrats, venture philanthropists, policymakers, 'think' tanks, and federal curriculum committees) know more about the needs of public school children than the students, their families, and their teachers.

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Becky L. Noël Smith is a mother and former teacher who advocates for democratic policies and practices in the public's schools. She is a board member and national secretary for Save Our Schools, and she co-founded Opt Out Orlando, which is a Florida-based group dedicated to educational activism. Becky has an M.A. from the University of Central Florida and research interests in philosophy of education, history of education, and social theory.