What Exactly Are We Doing Here? Reflections on the Role of Critical Educational Studies

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Abstract

In advancing the struggle for social justice in education, we often advance an anti-racist praxis in our classrooms. However, students, teachers, and others trying to make sense of our praxis—oftentimes well-intentioned in their queries—will ask "why are we always talking about race?" and "why do we only present one perspective and one position (a "liberal" one) in this class?" These questions are relevant and require us to clarify what exactly are we doing in critical educational studies? As a former K-12 teacher, an instructor of Urban Education, Multicultural Education, and as a critical educational researcher, I seek to ask—and answer—three questions pertinent to critical educational studies: (1) What does it mean to study Urban Education? (2) Why do we focus on race and racism in social justice work, and why not just focus on class? (3) Why do some people attempt to equate critical educational studies with left-wing propaganda? I begin by examining the difference between education and pedagogy in order to advance a definition of critical educational studies, and then advance claims to answer the aforementioned questions. I close the piece by providing three points of consideration in our educational praxis as well as concluding reflections around responsibility, education, and our trajectory for the future.

Keywords: *urban education, multicultural education, critical educational studies, anti-racist education*

Introduction

As a former elementary, middle, and high school teacher as well as instructor of Multicultural Education and Urban Education courses in teacher preparation programs, I have found that there is sometimes a lack of clarity around what critical educational studies entails. By *critical educational studies*, I mean a study of both *education*[1] and *pedagogy*, of both instructional strategies as well as an orientation to the world that allow us to make informed choices in teaching and learning that work towards a humanizing future.

My aim here is to provide a point of introduction to critical educational studies that tackles from the start the questions that require us to define and clarify our educational praxis. This work is intended for different, but related audiences: aspiring educators in teacher preparation programs,

1. "Education" is much broader than schooling, but in this work, I utilize it as synonymous with schooling as is implied when we discuss multicultural education and urban education. That is to say, a more accurate title for the courses would be *Multicultural Schooling* and *Urban Schooling.*

in-service teachers looking to delve into deeper reflection about what it means to teach, and even doctoral students and other scholars searching for a better understanding of social justice efforts in education. Additionally, this work may be of interest to instructors of social justice and equity-based courses that seek to establish a common language and vision for the work in their courses. I hope this article can serve as an introductory course text or as an object of reflection among those thinking about critical educational studies. Specifically, I examine three questions: (1) What does it mean to study Urban Education? (2) Why do we focus on race and racism in social justice work, and why not just focus on class? (3) Why do some people attempt to equate critical educational studies with left-wing propaganda?

I answer each of the following questions in their own section below. As a stylistic note, I make the decision to place references to texts in footnotes so that it may read more like a conversation than a treatise of the topic. It is possible that each individual section of this article can be read on its own, though the three sections are related and paint a broader picture that I advance as important to our work in critical educational studies. In the conclusion, I provide a brief reflection on this work as well as three activities that facilitators can use when working in teacher preparation courses, professional development with in-service teachers, or as educators who engage these themes among themselves.

Why Urban? Why Education? Why Urban Education?

In teacher education, there are courses designed to specifically explore concerns with educational equity. Two common course offerings are *Multicultural Education* and *Urban Education*. In some cases, they are synonymous with one another and are just a matter of whether a department wants to call the course "multicultural" or "urban." In other cases, departments offer both a multicultural education and an urban education course with some nuanced differences. There are other scholars that have unpacked what the term "multicultural" means when we think about multicultural education.[2] Here, I will focus on what we mean by "urban," but also by what we mean when we say "education," and also by "urban education."

Urban is a term that we readily deploy in order to describe spaces and people within spaces, but when pressed to provide a definition of what urban means, some of us struggle. There are others that have provided a definition of the term that might be helpful.[3] Here, I explain how I have interpreted the use of the term "urban" in the field of education.

I have briefly explored my concern with the term elsewhere,[4] but urban can serve to describe a space such as New York City with its massive skyscrapers and 8.5 million people to a small town with less than 20,000 people. How can this be so? When we use the term *urban* in relation to schools, it often serves as a loose term to define diverse spaces in which we find mostly non-White, low-income people of color. Additionally, urban often has connotations of challenges that low-income schools with mostly students of color may face such as increased criminalization of disciplinary infractions, underperformance on standardized tests, and large numbers of English Language Learners, to name a few. Though there are scholars that have addressed concerns around

2. Jason Irizarry, "Reinvigorating multicultural education through youth participatory action research," *Multicultural Perspectives* 11, no. 4 (2009): 194-99. See also Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. (Boston: Pearson, 2012), 2-18.

3. Richard Milner IV, "But what is Urban Education?" *Urban Education* 47, no. 3 (2009): 556-61. See also Ericka J. Fisher, *Educating the Urban Race*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

4. See Josué R. López, and Jason Irizarry, "Somos pero no somos iguales/We Are but We Are Not the Same: Unpacking Latinx Indigeneity and the Implications for Urban Schools," *Urban Education* (2019): 1-26.

the school-to-prison pipeline,[5] the opportunity gap and the educational debt in terms of disparities in standardized testing,[6] and the concerns with deficit-based approaches to labeling and mis-educating bilingual and multilingual students,[7] these attributes continue to be pervasive in urban schools. An important point to underscore here is that the label of *urban* often has a racialized dimension, and I take up the concern with race in more depth in the following section.

Someone may point out that though the field of education often uses the term "urban" to describe a group of people—particularly low-income people of color—rather than the actual geographic location, this does not necessarily mean that we must do the same. In other words, we could redefine the way the term "urban" should be used, or at the very least use it more accurately. This would be helpful for a number of reasons: it would allow us to more adequately understand the relation between different geographic spaces such as urban, suburban, and rural; it would allow us to understand that race and racism are significant across these different geographical contexts; and it would allow us to more effectively examine the role of racism in schools located within these geographic spaces. These are important points for us to keep in mind. Indeed, it may be more helpful to move away from naming courses "Urban Education" and instead moving toward a name that more accurately captures our goals of examining racialized schooling practices in different geographical locations such as "Space, Place Race, and Education."

How might we then understand the term education? In order to provide a definition, I distinguish between education and pedagogy. There are others that have provided their own conception of what these terms mean with direct and indirect definitions. Here, I also provide my own interpretations of these terms. I narrowly define education in the context of formal schooling as the instructional decisions that we usually associate with a "toolkit." This involves valuable teacher skills such as lesson planning, helpful questions in checking for comprehension, incorporating manipulatives into the lesson, supporting students in developing word-attack skills to decode (read aloud) difficult words as well as understand the meaning of words in the context of a sentence or paragraph, numerous strategies to support students behind grade level, and approaches for working with students whose native language is not English. It is important to acknowledge that education as historically occurred beyond the classroom, as notable educational historians have indicated.[8] Indeed, it continues to be so today. We may consider how we learn from our families, friends, those in our communities, media, etc. Due to the scope of this essay, though, I limit my analysis of the term "education" to its role in the classroom. In other words, I use education as synonymous with schooling throughout this work.

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5. Torin Monahan, "The Surveillance Curriculum: Risk Management and Social Control in the Neoliberal School," in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader,* ed. Antonia Darder et al. (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 123-134. See also Nancy A. Heitzeg, "Education or Incarceration: Zero Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline." in *Forum onPpublic Policy Online* (2009): 1-21. Moreover, see Brenda Guadalupe Valles and Octavio Villalpando, "A Critical Race Policy Analysis of the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Chicanos," in *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education,* eds. Marvin Lynn and Adrienne Dixson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 260-69.

6. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in US schools," *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (2006): 3-12. See also Richard Milner IV."Beyond a test score: Explaining opportunity gaps in educational practice," *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 6 (2012): 693-718.

7. Ofelia García, "Emergent Bilinguals and TESOL: What's in a Name?" in *Tesol Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2009): 322-326. See also Ofelia García, Susan Ibarra Johnson, and Kate Seltzer, *The Translanguaging Classroom* (Philadelphia: Caslon, 2017).

8. Consider, for instance, Lawrence Cremin's rich work on the history of education in the United States. Consider his definition of education as going "beyond the schools to a host of other institutions that educate: families, churches, libraries, museums, publishers, benevolent societies, youth groups, agricultural fairs, radio networks, military organizations, and research institutes." See *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970): xi.

I provide this limited definition of *education* in order to address a common concern found by many instructors of courses in critical education studies, such as Multicultural Education and Urban Education. There are some pre-service teachers that believe the role of their teacher preparation program is to solely provide them this toolkit so that they know what to do and when to do it when they are hired to teach. When discussions regarding anti-racism, feminism, open-border movements, sexual and gender equity, and other social justice matters are presented as part of learning, pre-service teachers may react by saying "This has nothing to do with me or with teaching. I just want to know how to best teach my student and get them to college." This reaction is not limited to pre-service teachers, but also includes many in-service teachers attempting to do what they can to best support their students in the classroom.

Though the preoccupation with what to do once students are in front of us as teachers is absolutely important, the focus on acquisition of instructional strategies to deal with the immediate concerns can narrow the scope of learning. Critical pedagogue Paulo Freire[9] would refer to the concern with developing a teacher toolkit as the mechanization of education. His warning was that we should not move the act of teaching to a mechanical one where we think a teacher provides a particular input, a student provides a specific output, and so and so forth. Freire insists on us recognizing that the act of teaching and learning is not one of automatons but of human beings. Throughout his works, Freire insisted upon educators understanding that part of being human is that we are constantly in a process of becoming, or of growing. This aspect is what makes studying education a critical activity, and what I put forth as critical educational studies, or both education and pedagogy. Let us now define pedagogy.

I define pedagogy as an orientation to the world and others within it which informs all our decisions as educators. This certainly includes which instructional strategies we choose but also other aspects of teaching and learning such as text selection, assignments/academic expectations, discipline/forms of redirecting student behavior, building student-teacher relationships, facilitating student-student relationships, fostering family and community relations, and connecting learning to movements for social justice. Part of the difference between education and pedagogy is that it is possible that education could be an activity that is completed while pedagogical development is infinite since it is tied to our ability to grow as human beings. For example, a pre-service teacher specializing in English could demonstrate on an exam that she knows thirty different strategies of how to support reading comprehension for bilingual and multilingual students when reading *To Kill a Mockingbird.* She has prepared her teacher toolkit for this task. However, her development as a pedagogue could always be extended. What is her knowledge of the historical period in which the novel was set and in which Harper Lee wrote the novel? This would require, at a minimum, extensive study in the history of race and racism. How does *To Kill a Mockingbird* make sense in the reality of her students? This would require, at a minimum, numerous conversations to get to know her students, their families, and their community. Why is Harper Lee's story valuable to our efforts for racial justice in the present? This would require, at a minimum, not only a complex examination of the past and present, but also deep reflection—alone and with others—to think about the trajectory for the future of our society. This is certainly more work than can be done in a 45-minute prep period on a Wednesday afternoon. Indeed, it is more than enough work for a lifetime.

The connection between pedagogy and education is an intimate one: we can make better decisions for our students if we constantly seek to extend our learning (our orientation to the world

9. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

and others within it), including the selection of stronger instructional strategies. Rather than distinguishing between the two, I use the term critical educational studies to refer to both as one. Furthermore, it is important to note that the implications of constantly having to re-orient oneself to the world and others can appear daunting to some at first. It is an awesome responsibility. There are two points to make briefly here. First, let us recall Freire's position on the human condition as one of constantly becoming. Humans are always growing, and what critical educational studies do is remind us of the fact that we are humans and that teaching is a human act. In other words, we as educators are constantly growing and we are constantly facilitating growth in our students. No one is expected to be perfect or complete. What we can expect from ourselves, though, is a disposition that allows us to learn as much and as often as we can to best serve our students. We would desire the same disposition from our students, so it seems that we as teachers should embody the same expectations. Secondly, the responsibility of re-orienting and growing can make educators hesitate and potentially slide into despair. This might appear in the form of paralysis from fear of making a mistake or disserving our students. Again, we can refer to the first point above around human growth and (im)perfection. We can also imagine that we might want our students to make the best choice possible under difficult conditions and to be able to learn from their mistakes. If we expect our students to learn and grow moving forward, again we should embody these expectations as well.

Let us finally place both Urban and Education together. What is it that we mean when we study Urban Education? My proposition here is that we do not study education as I have defined it above, but instead it is both education and pedagogy, or critical educational studies. We might ask "critical of what?" My answer is: of urban, what it means, and what it is meant to imply. In other words, the term "urban" does not accurately depict the relationship between space, race, and its subsequent impact on education. As noted earlier, I recognize that "Urban Education" is not actually an appropriate name for work around spatial and racial justice in education. However, given that there are "Urban Education" courses across colleges and universities, I will use the term as such and encourage us to be conscious of its limitations.

As stated earlier, urban has, among other things, a racialized dimension to it. It then follows that race and racism will be central in Urban Education. Our work as educators will involve both the development of instructional strategies as well as re-orienting ourselves to the world and others in it so that we may advance anti-racist education.

Why race? Why not just class?

I divide this section into three parts. The first provides working definitions of terms important to the section and the article more broadly. The second examines the relationship between race and class. The third proposes that an anti-racist struggle involves an element that a class-based struggle does not necessarily address.

Race, Racism, and Racialization

It seems important to provide some working definitions of race, racialization, and racism so that we may work with a common understanding of what I mean when I use these terms throughout the section. The definitions I provide are limited and require further unpacking, particularly as we begin to think about how race, racialization, and racism came to be and continue to function in our lives. There are a number of authors that provide a more comprehensive analysis of these terms

in their own writings,[10] but I provide the following as workable definitions that allow us to think together through a common language.

Race is a manner of dividing and grouping people, typically by physiological characteristics—most notably skin color in the United States. Race is a social construct, meaning that it is an invention by human beings used to divide and, ultimately, to dominate others since race does not serve to explain any inherent biological or cultural differences in abilities. However, we cannot dismiss the significance of race because of its very concrete impact on the lived experiences of people of color. In other words, there is a clear power imbalance in US society informed by race. An example: though we know race is a social construct, disproportionate police violence and rates of incarceration against communities of color, particularly Black communities, highlights the relevance of race (and racism) today. In other words, we can recognize intellectually that race is an invented concept, but in reality it has significant implications for how people are treated by others (in our example, by police officers) and by institutions (in our example, by the criminal justice system). If we consider educational examples, US history has demonstrated a consistent violence in the mis-education of communities of color, such as the experience of Indigenous peoples and their cultural and linguistic erasures through boarding schools.[11] We may also consider the civil rights struggle that involved *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), effectively challenging segregation laws and separate but equal. We must also acknowledge that while *de jure* (legal) segregation was ended, there is still *de facto* (by fact) segregation, as is evident by the preponderance of schools with a majority or entirely student body of color, or schools with a majority or entirely white student body. This is important to consider in the relationship between race and space central to educational equity.

Racialization refers to the association of a variety of cultural and ethnic markers to particular races. Such markers include but are not limited to language, nationality, clothing, music, customs, and manners. Examples abound: A Spanish-speaker is associated with the Latino race;[12] rhythm is perceived to be something Black communities possess in abundance to other racial groups;[13] reading books and even speaking in university-approved English—such as the style of this article—is seen as a White activity, and people of color can be accused of "acting White" for engaging in these activities.

Racism is the differentiated treatment of certain races for the advantage of the dominant race and the disadvantage of other races. There are numerous examples of racism but let us take a look at one in the context of schooling: school funding. Schools are funded primarily through local property tax. In the United States, it is also a fact that wealthier communities are predominantly

10. For example, Jean Paul Sartre provides an examination of anti-Semitic behavior in *Anti-Semite and Jew.* (New York: Grove Press, 1962); Michael Monahan explores the philosophical, political, and social underpinnings of racism in *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason and the Politics of Purity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), and Lewis Gordon examines the existential situation and (ir)responsibility that fuels racism in *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (New York: Prometheus, 1995).

11. See Sandy Grande's *Red Pedagogy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) for a more detailed analysis of Indigeneity and education, as well as her critique of critical pedagogy influenced by Marxist class analysis.

12. Much attention has been paid to both the invention of Latin America and the Latin American identity. See, for example, Walter Mignolo, *La idea de América Latina* (Barcelona: Editorial Gedisa, 2005). There is also extensive attention given to the meaning of Hispanic/Latino as a racial category. See, for example, Martha Gimenez, "Latino/"Hispanic"- Who Needs a Name? The Case Against a Standardized Terminology," in *Latinos and Education: A Critical Reader Second Edition* eds. Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 93-104.

13. See psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon´s reflections, particularly his negotiation with negritude in "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" in *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89- 119.

White.[14] In other words, if your community is wealthier and able to generate more money from property taxes, you are likely to have more funding for your education. We provide a clear monetary advantage to wealthier, White communities that translates into significant educational advantages such as increased resources and learning materials, more teachers and smaller classroom sizes, more paraprofessionals and tutors, funding for afterschool activities, funding for university preparation such as SAT and ACT prep courses, hands-on and experiential learning through field trips, and technology services as well as access to computers and iPads (even at a one-to-one student level). We must ask ourselves: why would we accept that some students deserve more money than others for their education? Is it possible that we have structured an educational system on racist practices which advantage White and wealthy communities over others?

It also seems important to briefly address a growing concern with a concept typically referred to as reverse-racism, implying that communities of color are given preference and increased opportunities at the expense of White communities. While there are a number of examples that we can also analyze to debunk a concept like reverse-racism, I will address one that is prevalent in discussions of education, particularly university admissions: affirmative action. To understand the inaccuracy of the term, we need to situate claims of "reverse-racism" in a historical context that allows us to determine its social purpose. First, though, let's begin by discussing a related yet distinct practice in university admissions: legacy admissions. Legacy admissions refer to the preference given to students in the application process whose parents had attended that university in the past. When we think of the role of legacy admissions (and affirmative action) socially, we have to consider the historical context. For example, some students have grandparents that grew up in segregated towns where they were kept away from White folks and denied many of the opportunities White communities were given. Their great-grandparents could have been forced to work for their food and a place to sleep on a White man's farm. Their great-great grandparents could have been slaves. This is all before we think about where the student and their family lives in the present (leading to inequitable school funding and the accompanying educational inequity we previously described) and contemporary racism that students and their families may face today. Though legacy admissions do not articulate a clear policy around race (meaning the policy does not explicitly state legacy admissions are for White people only), a historical analysis shows us that legacy admissions are likely to provide the most benefit to White students. The racist undertones of US history are evident in our contemporary college admissions policies.

Now let us turn to affirmative action, which consider race as a factor in the admissions process. Affirmative action does have a clear policy around race in that it attempts to provide support to students of color seeking to enter universities. However, is affirmative action reverse-racism? I argue that affirmative action is not reverse-racism, but instead affirmative action serves as an attempt to account for a long-standing legacy of racial injustice in the United States. As people of color have been excluded from opportunities that have been traditionally reserved for White communities, affirmative action attempts to provide a remedy to this challenge. Some may argue that affirmative action is not the best solution for addressing historical or contemporary racism. They may be correct in that it is not the best solution, but it is far less controversial than more radical demands such as monetary reparations and redistribution of land/property.

14. Erwin Chemerinsky, "Separate and Unequal: American Public Education Today" in *Am. UL Rev.* 52, no. 6 (2002): 1461-1475.

Race and Education

The purpose of focusing on race and racism in courses like Urban Education, Multicultural Education, and others is in great part due to the history of racism and its intersection with contemporary educational inequity. Without going into an extensive historical analysis, educational historians have unpacked the ways in which Black people were perceived as unassimilable and thus excluded entirely or relegated to the margins when developing the US educational system. Historians have also demonstrated that Indigenous peoples were originally perceived as assimilable, but only to later be treated as if their assimilation could never be truly complete.[15] The work of critical scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois,[16] Sandy Grande.[17] and Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz[18] confirm these points. As Cremin[19] argues, there is no doubt that other White Ethnic groups such as the Irish and the Germans also faced discrimination. However, Cremin goes on, these groups were perceived as having the capacity of learning to be 'American,' or capable of being assimilated into the fabric of US society. Over time, we have seen numerous efforts seeking to constrain the educational opportunities of people of color such as the use of Indian boarding schools to remove Indigenous children from their families and communities to force them to adopt European/US values and habits, the active resistance by White communities against the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which ruled that separate schools for Black and White students was unconstitutional, and anti-immigrant sentiments that result in deficit-based approaches to the education of immigrant children (which have existed since the US revolution against different groups of people and continue to the present day, particular in the case of migration from Latin America). Though racism has changed over time, it certainly has not gone away. Historically and contemporarily, racism played/plays a critical role in maintaining educational inequity.

Race and Class

Some may ask, "why do we not just focus on class when we address educational inequity?" For the analysis that follows, we can also reformulate this question to ask by centering race, are we moving away from class? The answer is both no and yes. I address each below.

On the one hand, no, addressing race does not mean we are moving away from class. The reason is that class and race are intimately linked.[20] As numerous scholars have argued, race and class are intimately related since Europeans came to the Americas in the 15th century.[21] Indigenous

15. For a more comprehensive analysis of the history of education development in the United States, see the series of works written by Lawrence A. Cremin. For an analysis specific to Black and Indigenous peoples, see his chapter "Outcasts" in *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 218-245.

16. In particular, Du Bois´ chapter "The Immortal Child" in *Darkwater* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999) offers an educational analysis that is significant today around school funding and investment in generations that come after.

17. Grande, *Red Pedagogy*.

18. Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, *An Indigenous People´s History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014). See in particular her chapter "US triumphalism and Peacetime Colonialism," 162-177.

19. Cremin, *The National Experience*, 218-245.

20. Fanon, in his essay "Racism and Culture" provides an analysis of the evolution of capitalism to suggest that racism does not disappear, but that it evolves and takes another form over time. See *Towards the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 31-44.

21. A number of Latin American decolonial scholars have argued this point. See, for instance, Walter Mignolo, "Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3. (2007): 449-514. See also Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" in

populations were deterritorialized (had their land taken away), murdered, and enslaved. Black populations were forcibly taken and transported to the Americas in order to serve as an enslaved labor force. This allowed Europeans (not just the British, but also the Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, and French) to utilize the lands of the Western Hemisphere as well as exploit natives and enslaved populations for the construction of their wealth. In other words, capitalism as we know it was possible through racism. Thus, when we examine racism, we will also examine class.

On the other hand, yes, we are doing something different when we center race instead of class. What examining racism instead of solely class does mean, though, is that how we understand life for people of color will be different than how we understand life for White people. The conditions under which people of color live are more complex than traditional class-based analyses can capture.[22] Race has different implications for our lives. For example, Lewis Gordon[23] encourages us to think about the result if class-based struggle is successful. If there is a revolution and we achieve a classless society, does it follow that we have also eliminated racism?

If the answer is no—which in all likelihood seems to be so—then that means there is more we need to account for that escapes our concerns with class. We have to think about both economic consequences and social consequences. Race points us to concerns with class inequality, but also to concerns around social relations that rely upon some being superior and others being inferior.

An example may be helpful to unpack this idea. Let's carry out the idea that the class-based revolution is successful, and it has significant implications for education. We can return to the example of school funding. If we achieved the classless society, we can assume that we have also gotten rid of a property tax-based educational funding system. Now all students are receiving the same amount of money for their education. By providing all students with the same amount of money for their education, have we solved the problem of educational inequity? The likely answer appears to be no. We still, for example, have not addressed concerns around the negative attitudes some teachers have towards communities of color.[24] There would still be an overwhelming disproportion between the number of White teachers/administrators and student diversity.[25] Furthermore, there would be more complex questions to answer around instruction: How do we move beyond a Eurocentric perspective (focus on the experiences of White Europeans and White people from the United States) in the curriculum to include the contributions and ideas of communities of color? Is English still the primary language of instruction even in communities where, for example, most of its members are Spanish speakers?

Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate, eds. Mabel Moraña, et al, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 181-224. See also Ramon Grosfoguel "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-economy Paradigms," in *Cultural studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 211-223. See also Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 240-270.

22. In traditional Marxist analysis and even in most neo-Marxist analysis, class is made central and race is examined in terms of its impact on the means of production. An example of this in education is Mike Cole's *Marxism and Educational Theory: Origins and Issues* (London: Routledge, 2008). Mignolo addresses in part the limitations of Marxist, class-based struggle in "Delinking" (2007). Also, Maldonado Torres, in "On the Coloniality of Being*"* (2007) takes up this reasoning through a philosophical analysis of existence and being in the legacy of colonialism and coloniality.

23. See Gordon, *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism*, 176-181.

24. Raible and Irizarry provide an analysis of White teachers that are able to effectively work across lines of difference in and out of the classroom. See Jonathan Raible and Jason Irizarry, "Transracialized Selves and the Emergence of Post-White Teacher Identities," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 10, no. 2 (2007): 177-198.

25. A 2016 US Department of Education investigation reported that 82% of the teacher workforce is White and 80% of principals are White. See United States Department of Education, (2016). *The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce,* https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/highered/racial-diversity/state-racial-diversity-workforce.pdf, 1-8.

We might also consider the example of legacy admissions and the history of racism in the United States. If we have achieved a classless society, does it necessarily follow that educational policies which certainly privilege White people like legacy admissions will instantaneously disappear? Do we believe if we have a classless society, we will no longer need affirmative action to address longstanding racial inequities to support students of color getting to and through college? Class certainly influences racialized educational policies like legacy admissions, but eliminating class does not necessarily mean that we have also eliminated racial concerns.

These are only a few points that achieving a classless society would not necessarily resolve. This is not to say that class-based analyses and class-based struggles are unimportant. They are. However, by centering race we attend to concerns with class, and we also are encouraged to think about some concerns with race, racialization, and racism that are imperative in working towards educational equity.

Why are Critical Educational Studies Seen as Propaganda?

Some confuse Urban Education, Multicultural Education, or other social justice and equity-based learning with leftist propaganda promoted by an illegitimate political agenda. This logic is flawed in two ways. First, it assumes that learning can occur without a political agenda. This is false. Second, it equates leftist propaganda with concern for human suffering when they are not synonymous. I address each point below.

All education is driven by a political agenda. What do I mean by this? Paulo Freire – and a number of other scholars that build from his work[26]—argue that all education is political in that it works towards a particular goal for humanity. Making decisions about the direction of our society and participating in the shaping of young minds is certainly a political activity. Whether one is conscious of it or not, all education operates with a political agenda. Some may insist that education is neutral, or that it operates with no political agenda and in no particular direction. This is untrue. We can look again at the example of school funding. It may be in the interest of the White and wealthy communities to argue education is neutral, but low-income communities of color will indicate that school funding is demonstrative of a political agenda in education. School funding itself is determined politically! For example, legislators can determine how much money they will allocate to schools, and local governments can determine the mill rate for generating property tax. We can also consider the tension between legacy admissions and affirmative action. Affirmative action policies are almost always heavily debated as influenced by biased political agendas. However, the decision to have legacy admissions is just as much a political decision as affirmative action. The difference is that affirmative action functions to redress rather than exacerbate a history of racial inequity in education. The question in education is not whether we are working with a political agenda, but instead what is the content of our political agenda?

This brings us to the second point of confusing the political agenda of critical educational studies with leftwing propaganda. At the roots of social justice work in education is concern for our brothers and sisters in and beyond the United States. Leftwing propaganda, for some reason,

26. See, for example, Antonia Darder, *A Pedagogy of Love* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Peter McLaren, *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution.* (Lanham:,Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Noah De Lissovoy, *Education and Emancipation in the Neoliberal Era.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1987), as a handful of examples.

is equated with a concern for others. "Concern for others" does not fit the definition of propaganda.[27] Furthermore, "concern for others" also does not fit the definition of "left-wing" in the sense of US politics and unquestioning support for the democratic party. Rather, "concern for others" is best understood through Lila Watson's words: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

If our liberation is bound together, yet we live under structures which subjugate some so that others may dominate, this moves us to think about two things: (a) radical political alternatives to our current systems which prioritize some groups over others, such as the rich over the poor, the White over the non-White, the male and masculine over the female and feminine, the able-bodied over the differently-abled; and (b) concerns with the immediate needs of our communities contending with these challenges daily.[28] In critical educational studies, we undertake both of these challenges. This is the purpose of our critique or of our being critical, that is, the work of taking a position which allows us to look at education differently and to (re)evaluate its purpose and how it functions. We work with our imagination in order to conceive of more equitable educational practices, and we also attempt to provide our students with what they need to survive in the present. What we think we need to provide immediately and where we think we would like our society to be are determined by our political agenda.

How do we determine our political agenda? Many approach critical educational studies with the question of what can I do right now? While this energy and urgency is important, it is also an incomplete question. What can I do right now allows us to address pressing problems of the present, but we have to determine towards what future we are working and then strategize on the best way to get there. One way of doing this is by beginning our work in critical educational studies with two questions rather than one: Where are we now, and where do we want to go? This allows us to both identify concerns of the present, imagine the yet-to-be-conceived, and to take informed action to get there.

As an example, we can take up the question of school funding and college admissions policies once more. This article provided a brief examination of the origins of school funding (mostly local property tax) and its impact on educational inequity (more funding for wealthier, predominantly White neighborhoods). The thoughts put forward on class and race in terms of school funding argued that class-struggle may result in equal spending per student, but that it will not resolve all our concerns with educational equity. Furthermore, legacy admissions continue to play a role in the college admissions process, and affirmative action continues to be challenged as reverse racism in the courts.[29] It appears to be appropriate to provide accommodations for unearned privilege in the form of legacy applicants, but the legality of providing support to historically marginalized communities in the college admissions process is constantly under political attack. We can take this analysis as an examination of where are we now?

Earlier in this article, I provided a definition for pedagogy (an orientation to the world which allow us to make informed choices in teaching and learning that work towards a humanizing

27. The popular definition of propaganda suffices here: "Information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view."

28. Charles Hale discusses this concept through *teoría anfibia,* or amphibian theory. He suggests our work involves both the exploration of political horizons that lead to a humanizing reality and addressing the quotidian needs of struggling people. See Charles R. Hale "Entre lo Decolonial y la Formación Racial: Luchas Afro-indígenas por el Territorio y Por (¿ o en contra de?) un Nuevo Lenguaje Contencioso" *Cuadernos de Antropología Social* 40 (2014): 34-35.

29. Consider, for instance, the most recent affirmative action lawsuit challenging the Harvard admissions process and its effect on Asian-American applicants.

future) that serves as a starting point to answer where do we want to go? As is clear here, there is a long way to go between an equitable education and our current reality. However, it is between the challenges of the present and the humanizing future we envision that shape the work we do in the meantime. As Antonio Machado wrote, "Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar." Traveler, there is no path, you make your path as you go along. The work of critical educational studies is, indubitably, the forging of paths from our ever-difficult present to the radically humanizing future.

Conclusion

Admittedly, this is only a shallow introduction to critical educational studies that limits itself to three overarching questions. Though I draw from transdisciplinary scholarship to advance my claims, I recognize the limitations of one person speaking for such a complex endeavor such as critical educational studies. It is with great enthusiasm that I welcome others to address this article as well as critical educational studies itself so that we may sharpen our political agenda, our reflections, and our actions as we work towards a better future. It is my hope that this article serves to peak interest into critical educational studies and also encourages others to read further—and beyond the traditional confines of the field of education—so that we may form responses to the most pressing educational challenges of today.

We all partake in the maintenance of educational systems. We are administrators, currently teachers, aspiring to be teachers, instructors of teacher education, and so on. In fact, we create, and we sustain the educational system as we know it. Institutions (such as the educational system, criminal justice system, etc.) are not independent of human beings. In other words, human beings create and sustain institutions. Let's imagine all of the administrators, teachers, future teachers, and professors of teacher education disappeared. Would there still be an educational system as we know it? Now let's imagine we all woke up tomorrow and we decided that all students would receive the same amount of funding for their education regardless of their zip code. Would the educational system be different? What if we decided students were able to learn in whatever language they wanted? What if we decided students did not have to get up when the bell rang, but instead were able to select where they wanted to be and what they wanted to learn? What if we decided that playing an instrument or dancing matters just as much as balancing an equation or identifying when an author uses onomatopoeia in their writing? What if we decided attending college/university should be free?

I leave in the appendix a learning activity, a syllabus structure, and a sociological-philosophical point of reflection that I have utilized in teacher preparation courses, but that I believe could also be used and modified for different audiences such as graduate students, in-service teacher professional development, and conversations among community members. This may also be helpful for education faculty and others seeking to facilitate learning around these topics.

Clearly, the challenges to resolve challenges around educational equity are not so simple as waking up with a different attitude tomorrow morning, but they do begin with a different disposition between our power as individuals giving shape to a collective and transformative vision of education. If we create and sustain the educational system, then we can also change it. There are numerous teacher strikes across the country where teachers, parents, students, and other community members have come together to change our educational systems. I would like to insist that you *can* do something about "it," and that you can do so not in spite of being a teacher, but because you are a teacher.

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Appendix

1. **It's just some definitions…**

One of the assumptions typically made when we attempt to learn together is that we all understand what we mean when we use highly complex terms such as justice, democracy, security, liberty, freedom, etc. What I have found to be a helpful pedagogical tool is encouraging students to formulate definitions of terms that are hyper-relevant to their learning. We can begin by addressing the very course title, much in the same way done in this work: what is the meaning of *urban*, *education*, and *urban education*? The same could be done in the case of related courses (e.g. *multicultural*, *education*, and *multicultural education*). A way to conduct the activity is as follows:

- The class is divided into four groups. Groups 1 and 2 will move to one side of the room, and groups 3 and 4 to the other. Groups 1 and 3 are responsible for generating a definition of *urban*, while groups 2 and 4 must generate a definition for *education.* They will have 8 minutes to do so and to write their definition on poster paper.
- Following this time, Group 1 gives their definition of *urban* to Group 2, and Group 2 gives their definition of *education* to Group 1 (Groups 3 and 4 do the same). Each group will have 4 minutes to review the definitions before them. Then, Group 1 will have two minutes to provide feedback to Group 2 regarding their definition, and Group 2 will have two minutes afterwards to provide feedback to Group 1 on their definition (Groups 3 and 4 do the same).
- Next, each group gets their original poster paper back and they have 5 minutes to incorporate feedback to modify their definition. They will write their revised definitions on a new piece of poster paper.
- After that, Groups 1 and 2 will come together, bringing their definitions of *urban* and *education.* They will, from the definitions they have generated thus far, take a new piece of poster paper and provide a definition for *urban education.* Groups 3 and 4 would do the same. They will have 5 minutes to do so.
- Finally, Groups 1 and 2 can place their definitions of *urban*, *education,* and *urban education* along one wall of the classroom while Groups 3 and 4 do the same along the opposite wall. Groups 1 and 2 can go and look at the definition generated by their peers in Group 3 and 4, and vice versa.
- Students then return to their seats and, both in their small groups and as a whole class, discuss the similarities and differences between the definitions as well as any questions that came about in the process.

I believe it is fruitful for students to construct their own definitions and realize the difficulty of not only generating definitions, but also constructing consensus in only a couple of words that make up the course title. Though it might seem that when a student signs up to take *Urban Education* they know exactly what it means, this exercise can demonstrate that even the course title has a more complicated meaning than we thought.

2. **Whose structure is it anyway?**

Courses addressing educational equity often build from critical writers in the field of education to address some of our most pressing concerns in schools and the classroom. In addition to these critical educational scholars, I suggest re-structuring our Urban Education (and other social justice and equity-based courses) to express a philosophical, political, or sociological question in relation to education throughout the course. The weekly course readings would be structured so that we

address a major theme of the week through both a critical scholar typically outside the traditional educational canon as well as through critical educational scholars. For example, a theme we can find in educational equity courses is the achievement gap. As a weekly theme, we can pose the question *what is achievement?* The more theoretical reading could be Du Bois' chapter "The Immortal Child" from *Darkwater.* The readings more specific to education could be Ansell's explanation of the achievement gap[30] and Ladson-Billings' conceptualization of the educational debt[31]. There could also be supplementary readings like the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) report on policy recommendations to close the opportunity gap. This weekly class structure would allow us to move away from the broad and often justice-light work of trying to tackle an '-ism' or a '-phobia' every week (i.e. sexism week 1, racism week 2, xenophobia week 3). What the weekly theme allows us to do is to engage with a concept significant to educational equity (as in achievement) and do so in a manner that allows for both structured as well as organic dialogue not constrained to the -ism or -phobia of the week.

Furthermore, my experience with such a structure leads me to believe that students are capable of developing intimate links between the challenges intellectuals like Fanon, hooks, or Marx outline in their works and the challenges we face in education. When we read authors whose work does not center on schools and the classroom, our leadings questions are *what are they trying to tell us about education?* and *how might this inform our work in education?* For instance, a Dominican student reading Fanon's chapter "On Violence" from *The Wretched of the Earth* moved her to discuss immigration, displacement, and her culturally insensitive and monolingual education in the United States in the context of colonial and racial terror in the Dominican Republic and in the Western hemisphere more broadly. Another student, after reading bell hooks' *Understanding Patriarchy,* went on to think about how he, as an aspiring elementary education teacher, could teach in a way that defies the expectations of patriarchal masculinity and works toward a deeper human connectivity. Students in the course also asked themselves these leading questions as they worked through texts in other classes. A student of political science who chose to take Urban Education of his own volition examined concerns with school funding through a Marxist perspective that highlighted the obstacles class inequality plays in education.

Thus, it is my belief that we can restructure our curricula so that it can incorporate texts traditionally outside the field of education, enable students to make connections between these other thinkers and our contemporary educational challenges.

3. **It's broken, so what do you think?**

One of the consistently frustrating experiences in my time as a classroom teacher was the emphasis on working within the system as we know it rather than stopping and asking whether we believed what we were doing was *good.* For example, professional development workshops and staff meetings often revolved around concerns with attendance, student behavior, and raising test scores. In these experiences, I never had a conversation where we stopped to ask *is this really the best for our students? What is it that we are actually trying to do here? What is the purpose of school, and what is our responsibility as teachers?*

The purpose of questions such as these is not necessarily to build consensus, but to reflect upon the assumptions under which we operate and become conscious of competing and alternative perspectives that may be of more benefit to our students. A common objection by teachers working in often stressful and even hostile climates, particularly in this era of increased standardized testing

30. See Ansell (2011).
31. See Ladson-Billings (2006).

and teacher evaluations, is that they are uninterested in ideas that do not translate into something immediate. In other words, if workshop facilitators or administrators are going to expect teachers to attend these meetings, then these sessions better provide an immediate strategy teachers can take to the classroom. While these concerns are certainly important, they fail to understand that reflection is what allows us to do something more than just survive in this current system (as we have partially discussed in the section addressing the relationship between education and pedagogy).

I believe it is fruitful to close this article with a reflection on responsibility and the construction of institutions such as the educational system. In-service teachers as well as pre-service teachers may hear a powerful analysis of the failures of education. For example, we know schools are disproportionately funded. Current and future teachers will hear this and say something along the lines of *yes, this is true, but I can't do anything about it. I'm just a classroom teacher.* However, is it true that they cannot do anything about it? I want to suggest that they can do something about it, but that we are often discouraged from doing something about it as teachers, as I clarify in the conclusion below.