

# RACIAL OPPRESSION ADAPTATIONS IN EDUCATION

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*ABSTRACT: In post civil-rights America, popular opinion is that racial oppression has either completely disappeared or is insignificant compared to a hundred years ago. But how accurate is this assumption? Sensoy and DiAngelo's *Is Everyone Really Equal* explores the fascinating phenomenon of how oppression can change its appearance to blend in with the times (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, ch. 7). This essay explores how oppression has made itself degrees more invisible to the everyday person, highlighting specific examples in the educational system. In our attempts to be antiracist, we have fallen into several pitfalls that inevitably do more harm than good. Businesses, in order to appear antiracist, market their antiracism rather than practice it. We have implemented items in the classroom that seem progressive while actually doing nothing to inform about systems of unequal power. By focusing on individual acts of racial oppression and antiracism, we obscure overall patterns of racial oppression and maintain the system at an invisible level. These new and modern forms of oppression demonstrate that older forms have been transformed and concealed rather than eradicated.*

With the groundbreaking case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court found racial segregation in the school system unconstitutional as of 17 May 1954. Today, schools around the United States celebrate Black History Month, teach Black literature, and honor Black leaders. It seems like equal access to education has progressed by leaps and bounds compared to what it was. No doubt, that is the great success story we are taught in class: with the revolutionary work of Dr. King, all racial oppression has been eradicated. Eradicated—except for those lone instances of violence. But those, we are taught, are committed by the small-minded and the hateful; *they* are the exception, *they* are the racists, and *we are not*. That is what I was taught. However, oppression is not single acts of aggression, nor can it be redressed by single (though grand) acts of justice. Oppression is systemic, eclectic, and most importantly, slippery, with a tendency to adapt to new social climates (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, ch. 7). It involves “institutional control, ideological domination, and the imposition of the dominant group’s culture on the minoritized group” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, ch. 5). Therefore

it does have acts of violence, white-washed history, unequal opportunities for success, and so forth, but none of these are entirely oppression. Oppression is all these items stacked together: synergy in its worst iteration. Now, in a time when outright and obvious oppression (for the case of this paper, racial oppression specifically) is no longer acceptable, oppression has hidden itself, making it more difficult than ever for most of us to detect and nearly impossible to eliminate. Specifically in the education system, this invisibility is extremely dangerous and is one of the strongest forces maintaining itself.

The history of education in the US is tied with elitism and classism, in which racial exclusion has had no small part. We all think of the racial segregation of schools as the first and foremost example, but that is just one ramification that *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) had (or expanded) on Black education. Post *Plessy v. Ferguson*, white persons had legal justification for treating Black persons as second-class citizens. The schools were segregated by race, Black schools were few and far between, and there was limited transportation for Black students at that time,

making Black education inaccessible as well as sparse (*Roberts v. Boston*, 1850). Not only that, but in many places it was against the law for white educators to teach Black students, citing the Virginia Criminal Code of 1847. An article by T. Elon Dancy, the associate dean of equality and justice at the University of Pittsburg's School of Education, Kirsten T. Edwards, a professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Oklahoma, and James Earl Davis, a professor of policy, organizational, and leadership studies at Temple University, explores white privilege in the university setting during colonial times, remarking on routine instances of rape, verbal degradation, and inhumane abuse from the students to the slaves working on the grounds (2018, p.9). Even after *Brown v. Board of Education*, Dancy cites incidents of targeted sabotage on Black education: "The continued defunding of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) reflects a sordid commitment to the elimination of Black enterprise. It also undergirds the relationship of trauma between Blackness and the educational system; a relationship HBCUs play a protective role in fighting against" (Dancy, Edwards, Davis, 2018, p.17). Overt race-motivated oppression like this has not completely disappeared. There are still an unfortunate number of acts of outright violence and hate, although comparatively fewer. We like to think that we have improved and that racial oppression is diminishing, but I argue that the apparent decrease we have made is not us defeating oppression but is merely transmuting it into newer less-obvious forms.

The first form that oppression has transformed itself into is a corruption of antiracist education. At its core, antiracist education is giving equal opportunity to students of all ethnicities, creeds, and identities. It is not, as many think, the process of installing a minority as a new dominant group while oppressing the predecessor (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, ch. 9). Thinking as educators, there are many methods to bring antiracism into the classroom. Jane Elliott, a teacher from Randall Iowa, came up with an interactive

lesson where she, and the brown-eyed students she encouraged, actively discriminated against those with blue eyes. Then the next day switched who gets discriminated against, demonstrating the arbitrariness of discrimination (OWN, 2020). There are less dramatic methods which convey the same point, such as teaching a more accurate, if unpleasant, US history instead of the current jingoistic rose-tinted curriculum. Alternatively, one can introduce gentler (relative to Jane Elliott's) diversity activities, or simply celebrate media and art from a variety of voices and ethnicities. However, critically, not failing to include the unequal power systems that are intertwined with those pieces, since that is the core of their antiracist message.

Antiracist education is hard to do but not impossible. The uncomfortable truth is our schools and institutions are not making curriculum choices solely as educators, but they are also making them as marketers. Procuring a full student body (as well as sponsors and good reputation) is imperative to the livelihood of our educational staff members and the success of their schools. Antiracist education is ideologically complex and therefore not easily or economically pushed on the body of consumers: parents, prospective students, reviewers, and so on. It is very difficult to advertise an abstract idea, and more so to sell something you cannot immediately see. The question changes from how our antiracist education could be most effective to how our antiracist education could be most commercial. More insidious cases even purposefully avoid real antiracism and go entirely for the appearance of antiracism while actively appealing to racists. All these cases mingle economic principles with (or more accurately, against) antiracism, diluting its effectiveness and changing it from an instructional form of education to a sellable one. Thus, the educator's dilemma.

How does this manifest in the classroom? A simple and immediate result is what we call "celebrations of diversity." There is nothing

intrinsically wrong with this; it is a vital facet of living in a multicultural society for its groups to celebrate their differences and heritages. The issue is that these celebrations fail to take into consideration the history of power imbalances these groups have faced and continue to face. In my elementary school it was a tradition for the classes to light a menorah during Hanukkah, but I never knew about the centuries of oppression the Jewish people had faced. That was never part of the curriculum; I just thought it was a fun and festive thing to do. There was no critical thinking, no conceptualizing of what I was doing or its significance. As Sensoy and DiAngelo put it:

In practice, this approach to multicultural education is the ideology of individualism applied to each unique ethnic group in a school. Celebrating diversity is important, but because it tends to occur without a study of power, this celebration actually reinforces structural inequality by obscuring unequal power between groups (2017, ch. 9).

I like to think of it as a feel-good tactic. It's a tangible, simple, fun, and obvious thing we can do as well as a juicy bullet point to advertise on, but in terms of antiracism, it just obscures the point. It is irrelevant at best. This feel-good practice manifests itself in several other forms as well. There's the fascinating phenomenon of tokenism: planting Black persons in obvious positions gives the appearance of progress, or most devious, the philosophy of colorblindness: "Seizing on one part of King's speech—that one day he might be judged by the content of his character and not the color of his skin—dominant culture began promoting the idea of 'colorblindness' as a remedy for racism" (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, ch.8). This one's layered: it's an equality-based philosophy for human interactions (congruent with antiracism), and impressively based on one of the most famous speeches delivered on the subject of race inequality in America. What is the problem? Exciting progressive motives aside,

this is a do-nothing philosophy. Pretending that racial oppression does not exist is exactly what is keeping it running. And worst of all, it is nearly impossible to say that it is problematic. If brought up, the accused would defensively say, "But how can we be oppressors? How can we, when here we are celebrating minority holidays!" How can they? What is inherently oppressing about such simple celebrations? This brings me to my next point, viewing oppression in pieces.

Viewing racial oppression in terms of single acts, both good and bad, is one of the most detrimental and counterintuitive systems to antiracism. But like every form of hidden oppression, it is paved with good intentions. As stated, the actual antiracist rhetoric is not flashy nor intrinsically motivating. How do we understand, let alone resolve, a system of control over minoritized groups that is in everything from commercials to textbooks? Where do we start? We make goals, attainable simple goals; open this, remove that. And when we rally our friends behind our cause, we say, "Look at this atrocity! *Her* baby killed! *This* man hanged! *That* woman's son in a cage!" If we subdivide antiracism into little bites, it makes progress seem a lot faster. But as this continues for some time, and we zoom out a little, we see our understanding of racial oppression begins to be colored by these examples and goals. Racial oppression, in a way, becomes these individual atrocities we read about and watch. Likewise, our image of the racist has become the nasty creatures who commit these heinous acts, distancing the majority of the dominant group from the nuance of oppression. You and I have not painted swastikas on Jewish gravesites, therefore we cannot be racists. At the same time, we pass X Reform or hold Y Rally to meet whatever ends we are aiming for, and think that because we have met Z, therefore racial oppression has ended (or is so much closer to ending)! This makes us think that it would undermine the effect of all our accomplishments to say that racial oppression is still extant (another

justification for colorblindness and similar do-nothing philosophies). Many of us are almost scared to admit the problem is still as big as it is, even after so much work. In the words of Sensoy and DiAngelo, “The way that dominant culture focuses on individuals obscures grouplevel patterns” (ch. 7). The ‘grouplevel patterns’ are the enforced ideologies, control of institutions, and subtle socialization of the dominant culture’s authority over the marginalized groups that drive and perpetuate oppression. Focusing on single acts de-synergizes oppression into individual cruelties. By coloring the image of the racist oppressor as a deranged sadist (the same image I have in my head), it has influenced us to defensively deny any implications of racial oppression. This is detrimental because if we refuse to accept that we participate in the oppressive system, we cannot work to continue dismantling it. Likewise, if we continue to think that racial oppression is ended, we are allowing racial oppression to continue unchecked and uninhibited in the background, beyond our personal awareness.

How does this operate on the level of the school? Dancy, Edwards, and Davis looked at how higher education handles incidences of racially motivated violence: “Higher education’s insistence on characterizing anti-Black violence as incidental or anomalous functionally erases the history of trauma experienced by Black bodies on white campuses” (2018, p.18). This is the same issue as celebrations of diversity: the incident is taken out of context and treated, as the authors stated, anomalously. But the whole point is that it isn’t an anomaly—this is the progression of centuries of oppression. By excusing it as an anomaly, the subtext is that it shouldn’t happen again, but by failing to resolve the systems and the socialization that lead to the act in the first place, we are ensuring that it will happen again. The same article continues, saying, “[Institutions] frame white perpetrators as foolish and ignorant, possibly even racists, but not as terrorists enacting violence against Black life. In addition, the modus operandi prioritizes

the public image of the white institution, not the assault on Black humanity” (Dancy, Edwards, Davis, 2018, p.18). Again, as with someone being called a racist, or the widespread use of feel-good tactics, it is not about the action nearly as much as about one’s image. Condemning racist acts at school works very well at making the institution seem progressive and antiracist while failing to correct anything. It’s very difficult to say to these schools trying hard to be inclusive that they are *still* part of the problem after so much sacrifice and fighting for equality. How ungrateful of us it must seem to them, despite everything they’ve done. However there is always a way to resolve things.

I have explored two broad categories of modern oppressive practices: obsession with self-image and viewing instances of racial oppression as individual acts. But perhaps the broadest reason why oppression is still so deeply rooted in today’s society is because we are approaching a mutating problem with a static education. There should never be a single curriculum on racial oppression. What we taught students ten years ago about oppression is out-of-date today. Plenty of data show that proper education is the key, but our education has to be just as dynamic as the racial oppression it fights. Simply defining oppression and learning about it does not meet the current need because learning about racial oppression rather than experiencing it from birth is a high privilege of the dominant culture. Perhaps it is better to follow the Jane Elliott model and experience it for ourselves, even in a classroom simulation. As controversial as it is, perhaps the radical and shocking approach is necessary to deliver a message strong enough for the individual and relevant enough to match the times. Of course, such a curriculum can only be provided if institutions behave as institutions and not as businesses. Distilling economics and politics out of our schools is a very relevant and parallel conversation to the one we are having. But again, I cannot emphasize enough the detriment of rigidity. Rigidity in our thinking leads to our defensive responses. Like our

education, we should have the tools to regard ourselves as dynamic beings learning to combat oppression, always willing to listen to criticism, and always looking for instances where we might be limiting somebody else. When we say, “I don’t need to change,” we are participating in the evolution of new oppression.

Postscript:

This essay was written before the 2020 election and its aftermath. It is disheartening to see the degree to which overt white power seems to have become visible and acceptable again.

### Works Cited

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