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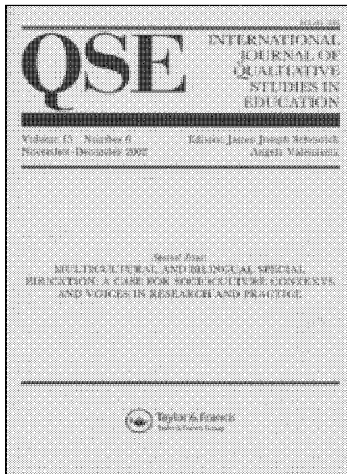
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Commonsense understandings of equality and social change: a critical race theory analysis of liberalism at Spruce Middle School

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Drawing on data from an ethnographic study in an urban district in the state of Utah, this article highlights how liberalism shapes educational policy and practice in particular ways that ultimately reproduce and legitimate the status quo of whiteness. I employ critical race theory to analyze two aspects of liberalism that are especially pervasive among US educators: first, formal equality, and second, the notion that change is either unneeded or, at best, should be incremental. Both of these liberal tenets result in racialized patterns within schools that become common sense despite their destructive nature.

Keywords: critical race theory; liberalism; inequity

A paradox seems to plague discussions of education, diversity, and equality in the USA. Even though there has been widespread recognition of inequality in schooling between and among racial, social class, linguistic, and gender-based groups of students, efforts to remedy these inequalities have, in general, failed. For example, state-sanctioned racial segregation in schooling was ruled inherently unequal in *Brown v. Board of Education* and schools were ordered to integrate. However, 50 years later we still have both racially separate and unequally funded schools for children from different racial backgrounds (Kozol 1992; Orfield 2001; Tushnet 2009). More recently, achievement gaps have been widely recognized as indicative of unequal schooling, yet the standardized one-size-fits-all efforts to remedy this problem have resulted in little progress towards closing those gaps or paying off our cumulative educational debt (Ladson-Billings 2006; Lipman 2004; Sleeter 2005). I want to suggest that we find ourselves in this paradox largely because of the liberalism that is shared by most educators and thus shapes the ways we choose to approach the dilemmas of diversity and inequality in education. In this article, I focus on two aspects of liberalism that are especially pervasive among US educators: first, formal equality, and second, the notion that change is either unneeded or, at best, should be incremental.

To highlight the ways these tenets of liberalism shape educational practice and reproduce the status quo, I share the story of Spruce Middle School. Spruce is widely regarded as both a high-quality and a fairly typical school in terms of its student population, organizational features, and curricular and extracurricular offerings. I

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situate my argument about liberalism, formal equality, and the slow pace of social change in this particular school because experience and theory tell us that it is in these 'normal' and 'average' contexts that some of the most subtle and yet destructive forms of marginalization and domination occur (Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Dixson and Rousseau 2006; Gillborn 2007; Leonardo 2009). Further, a full analysis of racism requires attention to both the marginalization of people of color and the privileging of White people (Fine et al. 1997). Thus, it is precisely in spaces like those occupied by Spruce that we must turn a critical eye and rethink new approaches.

Liberalism and critical race theory

My work here is grounded in critical race theory (CRT) and draws on data from a year-long ethnography in an urban school district in Utah. In this article, I focus on one middle school, which I describe in detail in the next section. Theoretically, I employ some of the analytic tools offered by critical race scholars to shed light on the patterns I observed at Spruce. CRT offers educational researchers a number of conceptual tools to *both* better understand processes in schools *and* suggest alternative strategies for educators committed to equity. These analytic tools include interest convergence, the critique of liberalism, colorblindness, counter-storytelling, and whiteness (see, e.g., Bell 1980; Castagno and Lee 2007; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Frankenberg 1993; Gotanda 1995; Harris 1993; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Lee 2005; Matsuda 1987; Solórzano and Villalpando 1998; Taylor 1999; Vaught 2009). Use of some or all of these tools centers and clarifies the ways race and racism permeate every aspect of schooling in the USA. Although CRT's tools have been effectively applied to examine the legal system, the application of these tools in the field of education is still in its formative stages (DeCuir and Dixon 2004). Thus, I hope to add to this growing body of scholarship in order to advance the analytic capacities of CRT in education.

One of CRT's tools that has been underutilized in the field of education is its pointed critique of liberalism. Before outlining this critique, I will briefly describe some of the predominant, and most relevant for my discussion, elements of liberalism in the USA (see, e.g., Cochran 1999; Dawson 2003; Locke 1690; Mill 1869; Olson 2004; Starr 2008). At the heart of liberalism is the notion of the individual and individual rights. Individuals provide the foundation for laws and societal norms, and institutions exist primarily to further the goals, desires, and needs of individuals. An individual's rights are of utmost importance under a liberal framework, so rights such as freedom of speech, thought, conscience, and lifestyle are viewed as fundamental and worth protecting at almost any cost. Equality of opportunity is another liberal mainstay. Value is placed on ensuring that individuals have equal access to various opportunities in society, but liberalism is not concerned with ensuring equality of outcome since it is assumed that individuals can reasonably decide if and how to capitalize on opportunities presented to them. And finally, liberalism generally opposes too much government regulation, but this can be a point of contention since government involvement is sometimes required to ensure the stability of other core liberal values. As is the case in schools across the nation, many of these tenets of liberalism significantly shape the policies, practices, and discourses at Spruce Middle School.

Critical race theorists are highly suspicious of liberalism and the impact it has had both historically and in contemporary times. CRT's critique of liberalism stems from a number of factors, but it is primarily centered on liberalism's understanding of

racism and its inability to address the most common forms of racism, its understanding and approach to difference, its reliance on the concept of individual rights, its privileging of a narrow understanding of equality, and its acceptance of a slow pace for social change (Bell 1987, 1992; Crenshaw 1988; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Gillborn 2007; Harris 1993). These elements result in a system of whiteness that grants power and privilege disproportionately while purporting a level playing field. Because CRT is most concerned with the subtle, everyday, and business-as-usual forms of racism, it has little patience for liberalism's inability to address anything but the most blatant and crude forms of racial injustice. Liberalism's focus on freedom of thought, speech, and conscience; individual rights and liberty; and minimal government regulation all contribute to this inability. As Delgado and Stefancic explain, 'rights are almost always procedural (for example, to a fair process) rather than substantive (for example, to food, housing, or education). Think how our system applauds affording everyone equality of opportunity, but resists programs that assure equality of results. Moreover, rights are almost always cut back when they conflict with the interests of the powerful' (2001, 23). Indeed, even more progressive forms of liberalism maintain that acknowledging race is impolite and increases social divisions (Castagno 2008; Guinier and Torres 2002). In other words, liberalism allows 'nice, White folks' to feel good about supporting 'diversity' and 'equality' even though inequity and systemic, institutionalized racism are maintained and, in some cases, strengthened (Applebaum 2005; Thompson 2003). Overall, CRT maintains that liberalism actually serves as a key mechanism for sustaining and defending the status quo of White supremacy.

In order to illustrate the impact liberalism has in some school contexts, the next section provides a thick description of Spruce Middle School that is uninterrupted by analysis or reference to the extant literature. After sharing the story of Spruce, I analyze the data through a CRT lens and examine the various ways formal equality and the assumed slow pace of change permeate the school. While I realize this separation of data and analysis is not typical for ethnographic research, I hope the article's organization allows readers to more fully understand the school context and consider the degree to which it is, as I suggest, a fairly typical school. Only after this consideration can we grasp the extent to which CRT problematizes these sorts of contexts.

Spruce Middle School: a 'good', 'normal' school

Spruce Middle School is one of four middle schools in an urban district in the state of Utah. The district serves approximately 25,000 students – 39% of whom are designated as English language learners (ELL), 51% of whom are students of color, and 60% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. The district at one time had a magnet model for its middle schools and Spruce served as the district's magnet for ELL students and services. Thus, although it is located in an overwhelmingly White, middle and upper-middle class neighborhood, for many years, ELL students from around the district were bussed to Spruce and provided an education in a setting with a critical mass of teachers who were both trained in and committed to the education of linguistically and racially diverse students. About five years ago, and only after many heated conversations and much advocating on the part of the districts' more elite constituencies, the magnet model was disbanded and all the district's middle schools reverted back to 'neighborhood' schools where students attended the school that was

nearest to their homes. This shift resulted in a number of dramatic and immediate changes to Spruce, including a significant drop in the numbers of ELL and students of color, a significant drop in the number of teachers who were knowledgeable about and committed to diversity-related issues, and a (re)newed focus on the ‘neighborhood kids’ who were largely White, middle and upper-middle class, and from families with parents who had higher educational credentials.

In its more recent role as an ‘eastside neighborhood school’, Spruce is widely regarded as one of the top middle schools in the district, and Spruce educators are committed to providing what they perceive as an excellent education to their students. What this means in practice is that students are exposed to a fairly traditional curriculum that emphasizes core curricular areas but also includes creative outlets and diverse pedagogies. Although this excellent education seems to be appealing to and meeting the perceived needs of the majority of White, middle class students at Spruce, it is not meeting the needs of the ELL students nor is it moving towards greater equity within or outside of the school. Instead, excellence seems to be defined by educational practices that maintain the status quo – a status quo that privileges the majority of White, middle and upper income families served by Spruce Middle School.

The mark of excellence among Spruce educators is an education that is both academically oriented and creative. During most of my classroom visits, I witnessed what appeared to be fairly typical lessons: graphing linear equations in math, tectonic plates in science, verb conjugation in a language class, poetry in language arts, and westward expansion in US history, for example. The majority of the teachers I observed facilitated their classes with a high level of organization and order, and students were engaged in activities such as reading from texts, worksheets, note-taking, group work, and correcting homework. Furthermore, most teachers seemed to maintain a high level of consistency from day-to-day through the use of the same general schedule. The classes I observed also appeared to closely follow the state’s core curriculum and assigned textbooks. While they followed these guides closely, however, there did seem to be a fair amount of creativity in terms of how lessons were taught and the types of educational activities in which students were engaged. Social studies classes, for example, regularly did projects such as writing ‘historical fictions’, designing imaginary ‘road trips’ through Utah, and constructing newspapers for a particular historical period. A math class designed restaurant menus to learn about combinations and proportions, a language arts class wrote letters to students around the country, science classes researched scientists to learn about their lives and discoveries, and a world language class designed and carried out interviews in Spanish with native-Spanish-speaking students and staff at Spruce.

The frequency of creative assignments and class projects was mirrored in the extracurricular activities offered as well. This focus on creativity and the arts highlights an important component to Spruce’s understanding of what counts as an excellent education. The arts were a major extracurricular focus among most teachers and administrators at Spruce. This was particularly salient when the Parent Teacher Association and a selected group of educators from Spruce decided to produce a ‘Broadway musical’. Although almost 200 students were involved either through orchestra, drama, dance, or choir, I only observed six students of color and no students who were in the English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes.

Spruce’s approach to meeting the needs of ELL students is also indicative of the school’s priorities. In general, the teachers who were ESL-endorsed and worked with the small group of ELL students at Spruce felt that although they were doing what

they could to support these students, there was a significant lack of support from other teachers and administrators at the school. At Spruce, the four designated ESL teachers at the school provided strong academic and social support within an ESL-framework for this particular group of students. Spruce's approach to educating their ELL students centered the rapid acquisition of English. None of the ESL-endorsed teachers were fluent in a language other than English and all instruction occurred in English. These teachers did allow students to converse in their native languages during 'free time' and when it was intended to explain a concept to a peer who was not understanding the English explanation, but the overwhelming emphasis was on English language learning – with little or no efforts being made to ensure that students maintain and/or improve literacy in their native languages. Thus, although the ESL teachers at Spruce cared deeply about their students and wanted to provide them with an excellent education, they clearly saw their goal as mainstreaming ELL students into the English-speaking dominant culture of the school. This is consistent with the school's reputation and mission of preparing students for higher education, but it relies on a deficit model of ELL students rather than an additive bilingual model.

Although the ESL teachers regularly met to check in about the progress of their ELL students and to strategize about ways to better serve them, they had concerns about the level of support for these students outside of their own classrooms. An issue that arose late one year highlights the tension many of the ESL teachers felt at Spruce. Although the school was once the district's magnet middle school for ELL services, ELL students currently made up just 15% of the total student population at Spruce. This change in student demographics has been accompanied by changes in personnel and course offerings. The year I conducted research, Spruce offered separate, specialized ESL courses in seventh- and eighth-grade language arts, seventh-grade math, seventh- and eighth-grade science, and seventh- and eighth-grade social studies, but this would be significantly cut for the next academic year. Although I heard various explanations ranging from lack of funding to low enrollment numbers to an unwillingness to modify the master schedule to accommodate these classes, the end result was that the next year Spruce would only offer seventh- and eighth-grade ESL language arts and the ELL students would thus be 'mainstreamed' for all other subject areas.

When the ESL teachers found out about this change, they were upset and scheduled a meeting with the school administration and district's Alternative Language Services Director. They learned that Spruce was only required to offer two courses in ESL language arts in order to be in compliance with federal and state laws. Although this was the ultimate plan for the following year, there was still some unrest among the small group of ESL-endorsed teachers who felt that their school was overly interested in offering more advanced and honors-level courses for 'the neighborhood kids' at the expense of serving ELL students who were, for the most part, 'bussed in'. In speaking about this incident and other similar examples, one teacher conveyed the following:

There's a feeling sometimes that the administration isn't as supportive of the ELLs and are more interested in focusing on the, you know, neighborhood kids. And so I think a lot of people, including me, were uncomfortable with that. I felt like there really were sometimes when neighborhood kids got priority ... I would like to feel more supported and a little more interest like from the principal and from the counselors. I'd like to have them in the classroom more often. I'd like to have them know these kids better, all my kids but particularly my ELLs. I'd like to have them know more of their concerns and you know, maybe I need to be stepping up and expressing that more but I just think

we've gone a little bit back to focusing so much on neighborhood kids and mainstream kids and you know, the top kids – the kids that don't cause problems – and we kind of lose sight of some of the other kids.

In a similar conversation with another teacher towards the end of the school year, I was told that the administration is 'not in the classroom; I haven't seen anybody here yet'. While on some level these teachers appreciate the trust and assumption that everything is going well, they are more concerned with what they perceive to be an uninterested and uninformed administration when it comes to meeting the needs of this particular group of students.

But it was not just the administration that the ESL teachers worried about, they were also concerned that the majority of teachers at Spruce had minimal interest in supporting ELL students. In reference to the majority of teachers, one ESL teacher said, 'I just think that there is this wall that they just want to teach the students that they want to teach'. Another teacher recalled an incident when a colleague approached her one month into the school year and told her 'I gave this test to so and so and I don't think he understood it at all'. The ESL teacher went on to explain that 'the person [this teacher] was referring to had been in the country just since summer; he read English a little bit but I hadn't been able to have a conversation with him at all. He just had no, or very limited, oral language skills. And it kind of made me smile that here we were like four weeks into the term and this teacher was just realizing that this kid doesn't speak any English'. It is striking that this teacher failed to realize his student's level of English proficiency until after he had given an exam four weeks into the year. This example illustrates a larger pattern of how most teachers at Spruce continue to ignore the diversity among their students and assume that they are 'an eastside school' serving 'neighborhood' families.

My own observations throughout the year corroborate with these concerns of the ESL teachers but also add another dimension that was not mentioned to me by any Spruce teachers. Within the dominant White, middle class culture of the school, there was little official recognition of any variance from this hegemonic culture. An example of this occurred one day when a student from the main office brought notes into an ESL classroom I was observing. The teacher looked at the notes and upon seeing that they were letters describing the up-coming Spring break for parents, she sent the notes back with the student and asked for some in Spanish instead. The student returned a few minutes later and told the teacher, 'we don't have them in Spanish anymore'. Just as Spruce failed in this case to recognize and accommodate non-English-speaking families, the school also failed to represent these and other diverse families in its hallway décor, multiple signs posted around the building, newsletters, and other correspondence. In fact, aside from a single bulletin board designed by one of the world language teachers describing a project where students interviewed native-Spanish-speaking students and staff, a visitor on any given day when students were not present would probably assume that the school served *only* White, middle class, English-speaking students. It is important to note that changing these things is not enough to 'fix' the situation, but they certainly are indicative of the larger problem that at least a few ESL teachers acknowledged.

And finally, a number of teachers talked about previous years when there were 'younger' teachers in the school who organized and facilitated various 'multicultural activities' and ensured that issues of diversity were part of school-wide activities. However, the general feeling was that once those teachers left Spruce, nobody else

took on that role or seemed interested in figuring out a way to maintain some of what had already been set up. One teacher explained:

When we had a bigger population of students from different backgrounds there were more teachers and there was more pressure from the district. And I think, I think that maybe there were some teachers and some people that were more, um, vocal and maybe a little more adamant in their, you know, expression of the need for multicultural education. I don't think I'm that way. I think sometimes I'm pretty willing to just do my own thing. I'm not political at all.

In saying that she wasn't 'political', this teacher later explained that she did not 'rock the boat' or bring up concerns to her colleagues or the administration – even when she believed that her students' needs were not being met in the best possible way. Another teacher talked about how she used to be involved in planning the annual 'multicultural assembly' but when she and a few other teachers could no longer lead that effort, Spruce simply stopped having the assembly because nobody else took on the responsibility. And still another teacher described how there had been a significant decline in dialogue about issues of diversity among teachers and especially at faculty meetings. She noted how they rarely talked about multicultural education or diversity 'unless someone brings it up, but usually nobody ever does'. This last point illustrates an important theme related to the everyday practices at Spruce – namely that there is a pervasive tendency towards maintaining the status quo or the perceived status quo.

Central to Spruce's identity as a school is the perception that it, as many teachers told me, 'is just a regular school' that prides itself on providing 'a good, high-quality education to students'. As opposed to its former identity as a magnet school for ELL students, educators and the local community were clear about the normalcy of Spruce and, at the same time, the level of excellence it offered compared with other local middle schools. Maintaining this perception and reputation was of utmost importance to the administration and most teachers at Spruce. Importantly, there are multiple ways liberalism shapes the policies, practices, expectations, discourses, and overall culture at Spruce Middle School. In the next two sections, I employ CRT to examine two key tenets of liberalism that are evident at Spruce: understandings of equality and beliefs about the nature of social change.

Formal versus substantive equality

Critical race theorists draw our attention to the difference between formal/restrictive equality and substantive/expansive equality (Crenshaw 1988; Vaught 2008). Whereas formal equality is based on the sameness of a rule or policy, substantive equality looks to the results or outcomes of rules and policies. Another way to think about this is to consider the difference between inputs and outputs in a given situation. While some critical race theorists use the language of formal versus substantive equality, others use the language of restrictive versus expansive. In her analysis of antidiscrimination law, Crenshaw (1988, cited in Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 38) explains the distinction between a restrictive and expansive view of equality:

The expansive view stresses equality as a result, and looks to real consequences for African Americans ... The restrictive view, which exists side by side with this expansive view, treats equality as a process, drowning the significance of actual outcomes. The primary objective of antidiscrimination law, according to this view, is to prevent future

wrongdoing rather than to redress present manifestations of past injustice. 'Wrongdoing', moreover, is seen primarily as isolated actions against individuals rather than as societal policy against an entire group.

Furthermore, formal/restrictive equality stresses that like cases be treated the same. The focus here is on sameness in treatment between and among individuals and groups who share similar characteristics. When comparing characteristics, those who advocate formal/restrictive equality stress that the comparison must be made based on actual characteristics and circumstances, rather than stereotypical or assumed characteristics and circumstances. Ideally, formal/restrictive equality would produce overall equality, but critics charge that this rarely occurs because characteristics and circumstances between and among groups and/or individuals are rarely the same. Substantive/expansive equality recognizes that cases are very rarely alike because of the historical and persistent differences in social conditions between and among various groups. Thus, substantive/expansive equality stresses results and outcomes that are fair or just, qualities which are not always easy to determine or agree upon.

The distinction between formal/restrictive equality and substantive/expansive equality is a key element to CRT's overall critique of liberalism. Liberalism's focus on equality is solely based on formal/restrictive equality, but critical race theorists have critiqued the standard of formal/restrictive equality on a number of grounds. These critiques include that its focus on sameness is limited because of the persistent and pervasive social construction of difference based on race, class, and gender; that although it can remedy the most extreme and shocking forms of inequality, it can do nothing about the business-as-usual, everyday forms of inequality that people experience constantly; and that it masks substantive/expansive and pervasive inequality. In its reliance on formal/restrictive equality, liberalism privileges equality of opportunity over equitable outcomes, processes over results, colorblindness over race-consciousness, and individual freedoms over group experiences. Furthermore, as Bell reminds us in his analysis of the *Brown* decision,

the danger with our commitment to the principle of racial equality is that it leads us to confuse tactics with principles. The principle of gaining equal educational opportunity for black children was and is right. But our difficulties came when we viewed racial balance and busing as the only means of achieving that goal. At a much earlier point than we did, we should have recognized that our tactic was making it harder rather than easier to reach our goal. (2004, 189)

In a similar way, liberalism's commitment to formal/restrictive equality shapes policies, practices, and discourses at Spruce Middle School and thus limits the pursuit of substantive/expansive equality.

There are at least three instances where the dominant liberal understanding of equality is obvious in the example of Spruce. The first instance is when the school transitioned from being a magnet school serving ELL students to a neighborhood school. The rationale behind this change centered ideologies of equal opportunity, color/powerblindness (Castagno 2006), and individual rights. The predominantly White, middle and upper class parents who advocated for this change relied heavily on the appeal of providing all students the same educational opportunities close to home, and they critiqued the magnet model as infringing on these opportunities and, therefore, on individual students' and families' rights to good local schools. This discourse is intimately tied to colorblind and powerblind perspectives that view

students as individuals with few, if any, distinctions that have any relevance to the schooling they are offered. If students are simply viewed as students, not as students of color or ELL, then it follows that the schools to which they are assigned should simply be schools, not specialized schools designed to meet particular and specific needs. And finally, liberal understandings of equality are clear in the emphasis on the process of schooling that assumes neighborhood schools will serve all students equally well – as opposed to critically examining the results and outcomes that follow from this process to determine whether the process is moving towards greater equity.

The second instance where liberal understandings of equality predominate is in the overall culture of Spruce Middle School. Everything about the school exudes White, middle class, and English-speaking norms – from the décor, to the curriculum, to the arts and extracurricular offerings. Furthermore, there was little overt awareness that the school permeated these particular cultural norms and no discussion around the expectations of assimilation to those cultural norms that students likely experienced. Again, it is clear how formal/restrictive equality shapes the way students are viewed and schooling is done. There is an assumed norm that centers students as individuals unaffected by particular identities and who, as a result, ought to be equally impacted by what is perceived to be a neutral and high-quality educational experience. As long as Spruce educators maintain the excellence they believe forms the foundation of their school, any student who enters the school doors has the same opportunity and likelihood of success as any other student. This understanding is connected to deficit beliefs because when students do not succeed, it is themselves, their families, and their communities who are assumed to be at fault (Gorski 2006; Hyland 2005; Powell 1997).

And the third instance where formal/restrictive equality is manifest at Spruce Middle School is in its reliance on an ESL model and narrow goal of mainstreaming ELL students who are proficient in English. Like the previous examples, this approach to education privileges sameness and perpetuates the ideal of equal educational opportunity. The assumption is that if ELL students learn English as quickly as possible and are mainstreamed with their native-English-speaking peers, they will have all the privileges of the high-quality education Spruce offers and thus benefit from those opportunities in the same ways their peers do. This belief ignores the fact of racist schooling at every level of the educational system. Furthermore, the ESL model relies on a cultural deficiency framework that assumes students whose first language is not English are lacking and need remediation (Valdes 2001; Valenzuela 1999; Yosso 2005). Formal equality and deficit models are, therefore, two sides of the same coin.

Thus, as is clear in these examples at Spruce, because formal/restrictive equality is often the default position and one most often applied, the unequal and inequitable circumstances that it obscures continue to go unnoticed, ignored, and unaddressed. Indeed, ‘remaining faithful to the racial-equality creed enables us to drown out the contrary manifestations of racial domination that flourish despite our best efforts’ (Bell 2004, 188). Thus, I advocate for the notion of substantive/expansive equality over that of formal/restrictive equality. My colleagues and I have written about this elsewhere (Brayboy, Castagno, and Maughan 2007) and have used the language of equality versus equity, where equality is understood to be formal/restrictive equality and equity is understood to be substantive/expansive equality. When using the standard of equity, we should ask ourselves what characteristics or circumstances are significant in this particular case, what results or outcomes are fair and just, and what specific strategies are most likely to lead to the desired results or outcomes.

Beliefs about social change

The ways equality is understood and valued at Spruce Middle School are directly related to educators' ideas about the nature of social change in schools. When equality is understood as equal treatment and equal opportunity, unequal and inequitable outcomes are not a catalyst for action (Rousseau and Tate 2003). Most educators at Spruce tend towards either the conservative belief that change is not needed or the more liberal belief that change is slow to come (Crenshaw 1988). The teachers and administrators at Spruce who ascribe to the more conservative ideology believe that the school is doing a good job meeting the educational needs of its students. For these teachers, any change towards greater equity or even recognition of diversity is unnecessary and may, in fact, only serve to create divisions among the faculty and perhaps the larger school community. The small group of ESL teachers at Spruce, on the other hand, seemed to ascribe to a more liberal ideology that although some change may be needed, it will be a slow process. Critical race theorists have critiqued the liberal acceptance and expectation of the 'long, slow, but always upward pull' of this country's struggle for equitable rights and privileges afforded to all citizens (Bell 1980, 7). Within this popular ideology, Whites tend to naturalize and normalize injustice through the belief that things are better than they were before the Civil Rights movement and that they will eventually be even better. The problem lies in the fact that this ideology allows for inaction because of the way change is positioned as slow but purposeful. So although a small handful of teachers at Spruce believe some changes should occur at their school in order to better serve the ELL students, they are content waiting for those changes to occur 'naturally'. Ultimately, however, both the conservative ideology that change is unnecessary and the liberal ideology that change is slow to come have the same result even though they stem from very different perspectives about the current situation and the need for change. Specifically, the result in both cases is that very little is done to work towards greater equity in educational settings like Spruce.

Part of the idea that change is slow, incremental, and occurs naturally includes a 'hands off' approach in contexts where the status quo is acceptable. If the context and general structure of schooling are believed to be of high quality and equally accessible to all individuals, then it is up to individuals to succeed (or fail) within what the school has to offer. Since equality of opportunity is highly valued and assumed to be the current state of affairs at Spruce, then it follows that teachers and administrators would not see an impetus for getting involved or seeking changes related to equity. The minimal interest in and focus on ELL students at Spruce is consistent with this perspective because the opportunities Spruce has to offer are formally equally available to all students and there is a general belief among the majority of Spruce educators that the ELL students are, in fact, making progress towards assimilating into the mainstream culture of the school. Students who transition out of ESL classes are highly praised and used as examples that the other students should aspire to. At the same time, there is no significant pressure from ESL teachers that this transition occurs too quickly; instead, the ESL teachers exude a high level of empathy and encourage the students to draw on the support the teachers believe they provide the students. As Delgado (1997) suggests, however, this sort of (false) empathy serves as a significant barrier to concrete and substantial change towards greater equity and justice.

The decision to reduce the ESL course offerings to just a level that would keep Spruce compliant with state and federal requirements represents another way in which

liberal ideas about social change influence educational policy and practice. In this case, all students are viewed as individuals without regard for different circumstances, and students are subsequently provided all the same mainstream classes from teachers who believe their curricula and pedagogy serve all students equally well. This is consistent with liberalism's penchant for same treatment, but it provides no other catalyst for change within the school. Here the impetus for change falls on ELL students who are supposed to succeed in courses designed to serve White, middle and upper class, English-speaking students. It is ironic that the reduction in ESL classes was paired with an increase in honors and advanced classes at Spruce, since these classes are known to serve an even more homogenous group of students than the regular mainstream classes, and since there was no indication from educators I spoke with at Spruce that there would be an effort to desegregate these classes so that ELL students were proportionately represented in them.

The ESL teacher who characterized herself as 'not political' echoed a sentiment I heard over and over again from many teachers at Spruce – that is, the idea that they teach the curriculum and do what they can to help students be successful – but that they do not get involved with 'other issues' outside of their immediate classrooms. There are a number of problems with this perspective, including that it falsely assumes students experience school in isolated bubbles of individual classrooms, that it fails to recognize that not getting involved is just as political as getting involved, and that it relieves teachers from any responsibility for the larger context of schooling. Importantly, liberalism defines what it means to be political in very particular ways; to be political would be to instigate change within a system that should not be altered. The result is that teachers believe they ought not instigate change, which preserves and rationalizes the status quo.

The language used by Spruce teachers provides another indication of the way liberalism shapes educators' discourse, practices, and expectations. Coded language such as 'neighborhood kids', 'eastside', and 'bussed in' is central to teachers' and administrators' descriptions of their work and their students. These sorts of references are clearly coded for racialized meanings and yet their power lies in the fact that they allow educators to reference particular groups of students without seeming to draw attention to descriptions of the students that are related to race and power (Castagno 2008; Gotanda 1995; Pollock 2004). Use of racially coded language is a common occurrence among educators who believe themselves to be liberal (Kailin 1999), but CRT provides a pointed critique of the way such discourses perpetuate subtle yet destructive racism in our schools. Further, racially coded language is intimately connected to liberal beliefs about the nature of change because powerblind and colorblind discourses obscure power- and color-related inequities, thus legitimating the belief that change is not needed. As long as educators believe change is unnecessary, they can be content with the current state of affairs and their own role (or lack thereof) in those affairs.

When inequitable schooling becomes common sense

None of the patterns or analyses presented here should be shocking to anyone who has spent time in schools. It is, in fact, this common sense and normalcy that CRT draws our attention to. As Gillborn asserts, these patterns of inequity 'are not only *intelligible* within a CRT framework, in some ways they are actually *predictable*' (2007, 25). Once the liberalism that permeates our educational institutions is revealed and the

foundational principles of formal equality and the slow pace of social change are understood, schools like Spruce not only make more sense but also truly begin to be expected and unquestioned. These patterns rely on liberal ideals that negate the realities of context and the likely results of that negation (Greene 1995). Indeed, 'if we assume that structural racism has been solved or has negligible impact, then we are responsible for our own lot' (Leonardo 2009, 132). It is these commonsense understandings of schooling that Spruce typifies and that permeate 'regular' schools like Spruce across the nation.

But in making this normalcy strange, we can begin to see the myriad of implications for policy and practice. Importantly, 'CRT does not deny the possibility of improvement, but it does argue strongly against any comforting belief in the essential goodness of the human spirit or a myth of automatic incremental improvement' (Gillborn 2007, 41). In other words, we cannot rely on good intentions or natural progress if our goal is greater equity. As educators, we need to be uncomfortable with the current arrangements both in our schools and larger communities. We also need a stronger sense of urgency for change and for actually making change happen. As we saw with some of the ESL teachers at Spruce, it is not enough to be aware of the present situation and hope that it will improve at some point – it is incumbent upon each of us to ensure that change occurs. Change that is race-conscious and equity-driven will not be easy, but it is necessary (Abu El-Haj 2007; Moses 2002). Thus, when structuring the changes that ought to occur, we need to center equity and substantive/expansive equality rather than continuing to embrace formal/restrictive equality. Our faith in the formal equality creed has resulted in very little substantive and concrete changes towards greater equity and justice for students and communities most marginalized by our schools. Embracing a sense of urgency and responsibility *and* shifting our perspective from formal equality to substantive equality is just one way we can be more strategic and out-manuever the well-entrenched system of inequality and whiteness that continues to plague our educational system.

Note on contributor

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