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Notes From the Field

A School of Education Curricular Response to Anti-Blackness

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Abstract

In this article, the authors share the inspiration for and development of a new concentration in a doctoral program at the University of San Francisco. The concentration, Racial Justice and Education, is grounded in four pillars of knowledge, love, solidarity and justice. The concentration allows doctoral

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students to study critical race theory and critical Whiteness¹ studies. In addition, students take two ethnic studies courses that focus on the educational experiences of different racial and ethnic groups, as well as relational histories and shared solidarities across groups. During multiple pandemics that disparately harm Black communities (including state-sanctioned violence against Black communities and health and environmental pandemics), the launch of this new concentration is timely.

Keywords: anti-Black racism, doctoral programs, higher education, race theory, racial justice

We are deeply grateful for this invitation to write, in this moment, about the efforts at the University of San Francisco (USF) School of Education to develop a doctoral concentration in Racial Justice and Education. Though the development of this concentration preceded the present political moment, the concentration is rooted in a recognition that anti-Black racism is enduring and, in fact, one of the foundational structures of White supremacy. The Racial Justice and Education concentration acknowledges that the violation of the human rights of Black people is historical, ongoing, entrenched, and everyday. It is, as critical race theorists note, endemic in the US. The Racial Justice and Education concentration at USF is an expression of the School of Education's broader commitment to public scholarship and praxis to combat anti-Black racism and the violation of human rights. Yes, in this moment, the subjection of Black people to state violence is made more

¹ Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

visible (and, all the more appalling when a White supremacist president actively encourages vigilante killings of Black people). And, this moment is a continuation of a longer and ongoing disregard for the wellness and lives of Black people and Black communities.

In this article, we provide both an overview of the Racial Justice and Education (RJE) concentration as well as our process of creating it. In line with both the principles of Human Rights Education and Black Lives Matter, we write this article with an acknowledgement that both the outcome and the process matter. That is, what we choose to do in our work and how we go about that work both matter to the world that we hope to create. It was equally important to us to create a concentration that names race and racism as worthy foci of study as it was to create it in a way that “embod[ied] and practice[d] justice, liberation, and peace in our engagements with one another” (Cullors, 2020, n.p.).

We first provide context to the development of this concentration. RJE emerged in a department that had previously established a program in Human Rights Education (HRE), as well as a sequence of Ethnic Studies courses and foundational courses in Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies. Thus, the department was ideally situated to create a concentration in Racial Justice and Education. Next, we share the process for the development of the RJE concentration. This process involved the use of several protocols to ensure equitable voice among department members, the soliciting of feedback from students, and researching programs in other schools of education to ensure that we were not duplicating efforts. It is our belief that our work should not compete for students, but rather work in concert with colleagues’ efforts across universities. We also share the details of the RJE concentration with hopes of inviting a dialogue with other schools of education who have similarly decided to provide opportunities for students to engage in dialogues about race, racism, and racial justice. What can we learn from each other, what can we offer to each other, and how can we support each other in this work? And, finally, we discuss our vision for ways to grow the program in exciting new directions.

Context

The seeds of the Racial Justice and Education concentration were planted many decades ago by the (predominantly) Women of Color faculty who founded the department which houses the RJE concentration—the International and Multicultural Education (IME) department. First established in 1975, IME was centered on Freirean thought and praxis. Several of the founding faculty were either colleagues or students of Paulo Freire who wanted to create a program grounded in critical pedagogy at USF. The goal of the program was to create access to empowering graduate studies for those historically marginalized and excluded from institutions of higher education. For over 45 years, the work of the IME department has been rooted in this tradition, focused on the important work of understanding and dismantling social/racial inequity and injustice in both local and global contexts. Our goal has always been, and continues to be, to prepare graduate students who are equipped with both a language of critique and a language of possibility and imagination—those who see the roles of public scholar, advocate, and practitioner working to advance educational and racial justice as critical.

The department, at its founding and in its present iteration, has remained committed to creating counter-hegemonic academic spaces rooted in critical pedagogy. Yet, IME has also changed over the years in important ways from its initial Freirean focus of “reading the word and the world” to a more explicit focus on language and culture, human rights, and racial justice within an internationalist tradition. For example, in 2008, IME introduced a Human Rights Education concentration to our existing graduate programs. This was followed by a stand-alone Master’s degree program in 2013, the first of its kind in the United States. Both the Human Rights Education doctoral concentration and the Master’s program offer students a rigorous understanding of the “promise” of rights guarantees, while focusing on the often large gaps between these rights and material everyday realities. This addition to IME follows a long history of Freirean praxis that centers the transformative power of Human Rights Education, with an explicit focus on individual and collective agency. It allowed us to

name an important part of the larger work of our department, namely a focus on human rights and collective agency in local, national, and international contexts. Such changes reflect our desire to remain responsive and relevant to the specific socio-political context of each moment.

One practical and theoretical commitment of IME has been to work to disrupt binaries that position local concerns in one arena and international concerns in another, or rather that situate social and racial justice as localized concerns and human rights as “international,” above and outside of the United States. In adding the Human Rights Education framework to IME, we found an opportunity to explore and unpack the ways that HRE and racial justice educational models are positioned in relationship to each other, reminding us that these fields are not separate but rather inform each other. The two are enriched when we see them as overlapping models of educational praxis we so desperately need. HRE then became a powerful tool in furthering our work of “advancing justice through education” while linking local struggles with global social justice and anti-racism movements.

By adding the HRE doctoral concentration and Master’s degree to IME, the department was able to grow in important ways, including the hiring of new faculty and recruitment of students from various parts of the country and the world. Yet, it also made clear that there was another fundamental part of our collective work that was yet to be named. In the following sections, we share the process by which we developed a concentration on Racial Justice and Education (RJE). This new concentration not only makes explicit links to HRE but also allows us to continue to explore both how schooling has been a site for continued racialization and racism and also how critical forms of education can challenge racial injustice in educational institutions and beyond. Formally naming this new concentration allows us to draw upon IME’s long history of racial justice work as well as center the important task of racial justice and education in our current political moment. The work of racial justice—particularly in this time of national uprisings for Black lives and the inequalities exposed by Covid-19—is also the study of power, intersectional solidarities, and imagining and building towards new futures. It is our hope

that the RJE concentration will offer students valuable tools to help them more deeply integrate racial justice into their own teaching, research, work, and lives.

Development of the Racial Justice and Education Concentration

We began this process by closely examining our existing departmental course offerings along with the scholarly interests and work of our faculty and students. It felt important to acknowledge the ways that our scholarly community already centered race theory and its applications in coursework, research, and activism while also identifying the shortcomings in our department. We examined our courses, curricula, faculty areas of expertise and interest, as well as student interests. We found that, in part, we already had many of the necessary ingredients for this concentration, but had not done the work of naming and framing how disparate parts of our curriculum held together as a concentration. We had not articulated goals for a trajectory through a series of courses and experiences that focused on racial justice.

One important aspect of this process was to survey our current students, many of whom had expressed a desire for a concentration related to race and education, in order to gather their thoughts and feedback on what was lacking in their study of race. The survey showed that students expressed overall excitement for a concentration in race and education. Many clearly stated that the concentration should center anti-Blackness and distinguish between anti-Blackness and racism (the two are intertwined, but different phenomena). Surveys also indicated that coursework should include a study of the couplings of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and White supremacy as lenses of analyses, but de-center White privilege and the study of White people. Students did not want Whiteness to be inadvertently further highlighted in the study of power and race.

We also did a survey of other local and national schools of education, conducting a textual analysis of descriptions of their programs in race and education. We wanted to both understand how schools of education were thinking about race and racism in this moment and to consider what we

might add to this unstated dialogue among programs. It was important to us that we added to this dialogue without duplicating the contents of the conversation. This work should be a collective effort toward racial justice, not a competition for students in what neoliberal articulations have termed a ‘market.’

With this data collected, we turned to developing the Racial Justice and Education concentration through a series of subcommittee meetings. This subcommittee first identified desired program-level goals that were the expression of our best vision for racial justice in education. We framed these goals, or outcomes, by utilizing the four main pillars of knowledge, love, justice, and solidarity. One learning outcome of this concentration is grounded in the concept of knowledge, where students both gain new knowledge and also engage in knowledge production based on their own lived realities and experiences. In RJE, students will gain a fluency and familiarity with diverse race theories that define race and racism and that explain race-based injustice in the US and globally. We want students to graduate with a theoretical and practical understanding of the social construction of race and racial groups, anti-Blackness, White supremacy, power and racial oppression. With this fluency and familiarity, it is our hope that students will then be able to develop their own racial theoretical frameworks that provide a lens through which they see, understand, and analyze educational institutions.

Another learning outcome is for students to develop the ability to lovingly engage others in dialogue about race, racism, and racial justice. Using a pedagogy aligned with intergroup dialogue (Nagda & Maxwell, 2011) and social justice education (Adams, et. al, 2016), we practice, for example, multipartiality to generate a “productive and healthy environment for dialogue”—one that “challenges the master narrative, supports the target narrative, and invites the agent group’s experiences to be a participatory element...” (Maxwell et al., 2011, p. 50). We also use norms chosen to encourage expansive (Aguilar, 2018), active, and resonant listening among students.

The third learning outcome is for students to hold not only a theoretical understanding of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and White

supremacy as rooted structures and their implications for everyday life, but also for them to have a practical understanding of these structures and to take reflective action against racial oppression to create racially just spaces for youth. This goal reminds us that while theory saves lives (hooks, 1994), reflective anti-racist action as praxis is critically important to changing the material injustices that act as co-morbidities in communities of color.

Our fourth and final learning outcome is for students to be able to analyze, compare, and contrast the educational experiences of different communities of color through a lens of shared solidarity and relational histories. Students gain an understanding of the ways that racial oppression plays a role in the experiences of students in schools and the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunity. In addition, while students gain a theoretical and historical understanding of the ways that race and racism are rooted into the fibers of our society, and inform policy, law and everyday lives, we also explore the many ways that communities come together to build power. To that end, we explore the many brilliant examples of movement building that reach across borders and nation states, and that struggle towards our collective liberation.

An Overview of the Racial Justice and Education Concentration

Launched in Fall 2020 and drawing on the department's rich legacy of building new possible futures, the Racial Justice and Education concentration is framed by these learning outcomes which we articulate to students as the pillars of the concentration: knowledge, love, solidarity, and justice. As noted above, students in the concentration examine issues of power, resistance, refusal, and solidarity with respect to racism and its intersections with other structures of oppression. The concentration includes two foundation courses that center race theory and the history of racism in education. Combined, these courses establish a deep knowledge base of racial theories, problematize race and racism in education, and look toward justice and change.

In the first foundation course, students develop their racial theoretical frameworks drawing from the work of scholars such as Omi and

Winant (2015), Tatum (2017), and critical race theorists in legal and educational studies. They also study epistemological and methodological considerations in the study of race in the field of education. The subsequent foundation course offers a critical engagement and critique of White supremacy, anti-Blackness and settler colonialism. In the study of Whiteness, we contrast notions of White privilege with White supremacy and discuss origins of Whiteness as a structural reality and concept with material impacts. We consider anti-Black racism and settler colonialism while also revealing the ways that, taken together, ultimately dehumanizes us and renders all of us un-whole. Finally, this course also pays specific attention to anti-racist movement building and directs our imaginations toward collective liberation.

Once students complete the foundational year of study, they then have the option to choose two of four Ethnic Studies courses. Each Ethnic Studies course focuses not only on the racialized and educational experiences of one identified racial group but also pays specific attention to shared solidarities and relational histories between and among groups, as well as intersectional coalition building. Below is a listing of the courses in the concentration:

Foundation Course A: Critical Race Theory and Praxis
(semester-long)

Foundation Course B: Whiteness, Power and Privilege
(semester-long)²

Ethnic Studies Electives: These courses focus on the racial and educational experiences of youth from one identified racial or ethnic group. All courses include an overview of the field of Ethnic Studies they experience differential racialization against other groups, relational histories and solidarities across groups and theories, epistemologies and methodologies specific to that scholarly community. Students select two from the following:

² We are in the midst of ongoing discussions about changing the titles of these courses to better reflect the content.

- **Ethnic Studies with a Focus on: Latinx Education**
- **Ethnic Studies with a Focus on: Asian American Education**
- **Ethnic Studies with a Focus on: African American Education**
- **Ethnic Studies with a Focus on: Indigenous Education**

Looking Forward

As we continue to dream and build this concentration, we now look toward how to prepare our students to take anti-racist action in educational spaces. Two students in the concentration, for example, dreamed up an online school called *Making Us Matter* this past spring semester (see also Hamilton & Jenkins in this special issue). During discussions in the Whiteness, Privilege and Power course, they realized that in this space of remote instruction due to Covid-19 and in this moment of public awareness about anti-Black racism, a remote school that focused on a celebration of Black lives and the structures that oppress Black people is particularly important. They launched a remote school with Black faculty and a curriculum that is cutting-edge, asking critical questions of students about race, racism, and anti-racism.

We plan to prepare our students to contribute to community learning about race, racism and racial justice, as well. Our department offers continuing education courses to K-12 educators and parents who want to learn how to talk about race and take inspired anti-racist action in their schools. These continuing education courses generate funding for our concentration. With these funds, we offer small grants to students in the RJE concentration to pursue collaborative anti-racist actions in partnerships with schools and community organizations. Our hope for the upcoming year is to create additional coursework to train our students to teach these continuing education courses, thus building our students' racial literacy pedagogical skills.

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