

Bravery Against Silence: A Composite Counter-Story of Minoritized Students

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Abstract

This study explores the ways in which racism within education influences the educational experience and prowess of minoritized students in Florida. The authors, who are also students and educators in academic institutions in the state of Florida, pose the following question: Who among us is brave enough to acknowledge, address, and overcome the silence about racism so that minoritized students are educationally unrestricted by racist ideologies? The authors analyze their experiences with racism embedded within educational institutions by constructing a composite counter-story, a tool used by critical race theory scholars to write-back as a form of resistance to majoritarian stories. The authors' composite counter-story illustrates how minoritized students in Florida face racial discrimination and racial inequities at various levels of education that deplete their sense of accomplishment. Unifying and amplifying their voices unravels majoritarian narratives. This outcome has implications for collaborative storytelling that refuses silence about racism in education as it inhibits student growth and achievement.

Keywords: critical race theory, systemic racism, educational pipeline

Introduction

The history of systemic racism dates as far back as the 1600s in the United States (Kendi, 2017). Over time, it has become material, social, and ideological reality embedded in major institutions (Feagin, 2013). Systemic racism is an expression of individual, interpersonal, and social arrangements predicated on socially constructed systems of classifying humans. One such system is biological racism involving the reliance on phenotypical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, and bone structure. This system relies on visible features (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The social construction of people into racialized classifications is evident in the American educational system and its perpetuation of systemic racism through the “undergirding of policy or legal rulings” (Closson, 2010, p. 279). This collective or shared meaning-making process of human classification continues in education through seemingly race-neutral processes that make up “kinds of people” (López López, 2019).

Educators in U.S. public and private schools (K–12) and higher education are primarily native-born, White people who speak English as their primary language. This homogeneity of educational systems is problematic in that it rests on the socio-political minoritization of others through systematic patterns of practice that determine who will navigate educational contexts effortlessly (i.e., hiring, selecting/rejecting, mentoring, normalizing). The demographic divide between educators and students in terms of racial/ethnic backgrounds and affiliations brings attention to questions about institutional commitments to diversity and advocacy for ethnic/racial justice.

Studies illustrate that schools are not systematically producing good experiences and outcomes, especially for minoritized students. The data are alarming and suggest the school personnel use

racial profiling and segregation to punish minoritized students more regularly than their White peers (Warren & Goodman, 2018). For example, schools' tracking systems impose racial segregation on students. Even in integrated schools, studies have shown patterns of racial arrangements associated with tracked classes (Burris, 2014). Educators should be aware of how such practices are expressions of their implicit biases: "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner" (Staats, 2016, p. 29). Educators' attitudes about racial groups can unintentionally affect disciplinary decisions causing academic failures as well.

Utilizing critical race theory (CRT) in problematizing the educational system as an experiential pipeline, we consider how liberal ideologies, White privilege, and power are socialized practices that further silence the experiences of marginalized minoritized students (Alemán, 2009). More attention to pipelines, from the crib to the penitentiary, from the cradle to the grave, and from the womb to work is needed to understand how patterns of racism manifest for student groups historically underrepresented in higher education but now increasing within schools, colleges, and universities (Gleditsch et al., 2017; Holmes & Menachemi, 2017). Through the use of counter-story telling, the authors seek to expose institutional racism, which limits the achievements of minoritized students by integrating literature exposing their experiences and outcomes through various levels of the educational system. Then we explain our use of CRT and present findings in a composite of counter-stories. Through collaborative reflection to tell our stories and analyze them in connection to the literature and framework, we crafted an account of one fictionalized character who mediated racism throughout the educational pipeline and within educational contexts across the following levels: college (undergraduate), middle school teacher, and as a graduate student and university employee. The fictionalized composite approach positions readers as witnesses.

As Floridian educators and doctoral students we have come to recognize the importance of utilizing CRT in education, and the arduous journey involved in becoming change agents, but we are committed. As Ladson-Billings (2013) states, "we have an obligation to point out the endemic racism that is extant in our schools, colleges, and other public spaces. We must deconstruct laws, ordinances, and policies that work to reinscribe racism and deny people their full rights" (p. 45). Confronted by a sense of urgency to work against racial oppression, we chose to end our silent suffering.

Methodology

The questions that centered our inquiry were:

1. How do we end the silence in order to work against all kinds of racism?
2. How can we advocate for equitable access to education for minoritized groups?

We have determined the answers come not from remaining silent, but from speaking up and back. The ethical compass guiding this collaborative work rests on the following stances contextualized in three cases merged into one:

1. Encouraging students to become aware of their identity and positionality to avoid limiting themselves to an aspirational identity based solely on the images and representations in courses and texts.
2. Encouraging aspiring educators of minoritized groups to resist being forced to choose between competing opportunities (i.e., attending class OR attending a study session aimed to assist in passing a program required assessment).
3. Encouraging students who are minoritized and/or have domestic and/or international status to refuse to be constantly subjected to inexcusable behaviors of university faculty that further suppress their voices (i.e., socio-political expression).

We relied on stories about our struggles, as students and educators, and our students' struggles with racism in education. We use CRT and the methodology of counter-storytelling to craft a composite narrative. Counter-stories can reflect how dominant groups try to legitimize their position through the use of an ideology that associates minoritized positionality with bad behavior (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). We integrate these stories with an interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, sociology, history, and the law to better understand those experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Qualitative data were obtained from the authors' experiences. Finding ourselves in urgency for embracing our voices and to be heard, we wrote individual case studies focusing on our lived experiences of systematic racism within the education field. Upon completion of our case studies, we met as a group to share our stories and found common themes. As these stories presented similar themes like discrimination, mental health, bravery against silence, and the importance of education, we decided to develop a thematic composite counter-story. The principal character in our story was carefully designed to embody the qualities of each of the three authors (Cook, 2013). Through a composite counter-story, which is a tool used by CRT scholars to share counter-narratives of majoritarian stories, the composite character's journey unfolds (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

We crafted a composite character around Latino/a students spanning an educational trajectory from an undergraduate student, to middle-school teacher, to an advanced graduate program with employment as a supervisor of aspiring teachers (teacher candidates). It begins with troubling experiences with racism and other forms of oppression that express the authors' lived experiences confronting racism in the education field, drawing on CRT tenets expressed by Matsuda et al. (1993), to call for a focus on social justice within academia.

A Latinx Educational Journey

Entering the Main (White) Stream of Higher Education

Growing up in Florida in a household with my family of Latin descent, I developed strong ties with those who shared our ancestry, culture, and folklore. For instance, my friends at school, at church, and on the volleyball team were all of Latin descent (Latinas/Latinos/Latinxs). We created a close-knit community. When I entered the university, I had to adjust to a new context, which felt like riding a rollercoaster of emotions and experiences. First, I did not feel comfortable speaking English since it was my second language. Second, the culture shock was unnerving then, and is still quite challenging, now, as a doctoral student. Third, when I started my first year of undergraduate studies in science, I felt isolated. I was the only person of Latin descent in my cohort. I tried to connect with my classmates, but I could feel their resistance. In addition, our social interests differed. Every time I spoke or did something, I felt judged, and, as a consequence, I began to think that everything I did or said was wrong. My classmates' reactions made me more self-conscious.

Isolation is a common feeling among minorities in environments where White people are predominant and thus dominate the culture. Minikel-Lacocque (2013) interviewed six Latino/a college students of which two reported feeling isolated when they started college. People stared at them for being the "other" and made them feel like they did not belong. The lack of diversity made the students feel unwelcome and they found it difficult to talk about these experiences with their professors. When I went to talk to one of my professors, an older White man, about not connecting with people in my cohort, he told me I did not have to talk to or be friends with my classmates, leaving me feeling as if I had no support.

Being enrolled in a STEM (Science, Engineering, Technology, and Mathematics) program and to gain experience as a scientist, I began conducting research in a chemistry lab. I noticed the lab

technician, an Asian man, did not make eye contact with me nor did he include me when giving instructions on how to use instruments or perform techniques. When we went on a research cruise, he did not talk with me about our results but explained them to the other students. I thought it was because he was rejecting my cultural identity. Later, I took a class with him and was the only Latinx in the class. He excluded me through his body language. I continued to experience microaggressions, defined by Pierce (1977) as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put-downs’ of Blacks by offenders” (p. 65). In this case, the type of microaggression manifested by the lab technician was microinvalidation as he continued to “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential realities of [me] a person of color” (Sue & Constantine, 2007, p. 138). This form of microaggression is possibly the most damaging since it “directly attacks the racial reality of persons of color” (Sue & Constantine, 2007, p. 138). A culture of racial domination does not protect people of color from reproducing the institutional culture through their interactions with other people of color who are socio-politically marginalized in the setting and the broader system of higher education.

Trying to fix the situation, I sought help from the administration in my department. A faculty member and the dean helped me verbalize what was happening to me and spoke to the lab technician’s supervisor. The lab technician apologized for his actions, although he continued to do the same. Additionally, the people I involved in this situation, the professor and the dean, never asked me how I was doing, if anything had changed, or how they could help me move forward. When the lab technician’s supervisor asked how things were in the lab, I told him the situation was the same. He then told me that the lab technician was going through personal problems and maybe that was why he had that attitude with me, but I did not accept that excuse.

Minoritized students who enroll in university-based STEM programs must overcome the challenges of these rigorous programs in addition to financial concerns, discrimination, systemic racism, and negative interactions with faculty because of their implicit biases. According to Covington et al. (2017), “Implicit biases are unconscious responses to particular social groups based on prejudices and previous experiences” (p. 151). Pursuing a STEM career is an option advertised to minoritized students, which would suggest that faculty are developing techniques to engage and support students in a way that is reflective of their cultural background; however, students are heavily recruited yet weakly supported. Baber (2015) examined institutional STEM diversity efforts using Derrick Bell’s (1980) interest-convergence:

Interest convergence stresses that social change benefitting traditionally marginalized populations occurs only when it also serves the best interests of the dominant population . . . therefore, those in power or the majority will dictate when and how social change occurs. (Baber, 2015, p. 253)

Baber found three patterns. First, the emphasis on compositional diversity, meaning that most university STEM program administrators focused on increasing the numbers of minority students rather than creating and maintaining a community for these students. Second, there was a cost-benefit approach toward diversity. For instance, the institution’s marginalizing attitudes and practices contributed to a negative experience for students. This led to students’ failure in completing the program, maintaining educational inequity. Third, there were benefits accrued to faculty (e.g., financial incentives) for increasing the enrollment of minoritized populations. Eventually, I graduated but after switching to the field of education. In the next sections, I describe experiences with racism I observed and anti-racism pedagogy I attempted as a middle school teacher and teacher educator.

Fighting the Silence in Middle and High Schools

Working in a school came with emotional highs (ups) and lows (downs), especially working within a content area with which I was not familiar. I mainly worked in Title I schools (a school that receives federal funds because of a large concentration of students eligible to receive meals at reduced prices or free). While working in cities throughout Central Florida, I began to notice racial disparities between schools that had predominantly White student bodies and those with racially minoritized student bodies. Each of the schools where I worked had been located in the poverty-stricken part of town, surrounded by gang violence, and had an enrollment in which 80–100% of students were receiving free or reduced lunch.

The school in which I last taught was particularly difficult, at times. My students and I were in need of something more than just an education. We needed love, attention, and reasonable expectations that were not limited by barriers related to our societal, economic, or geographical position. We needed to have care expressed in a way (i.e., love, positive attention) that would nurture our bodies, minds, and spirits. The school, however, lacked adequate resources and some of my colleagues did not view love and attention as part of their job description.

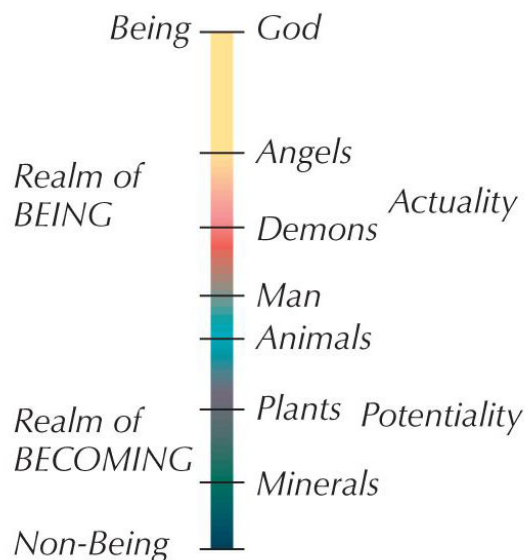
The school had a majority of students of Latin descent whose families migrated from area to area to seek employment in seasonal farm work, which sometimes meant the students arrived and departed abruptly when their families were presented with new employment opportunities. Like me, the students often faced issues in school depending on how educators responded to their racial/ethnic identities. For instance, school administration teams often assumed they were involved in drugs and gangs and used discipline-related procedures and punishments to keep those influences and students out of the school. Unfortunately, teachers also assumed the truth of stereotypes (Dillard, 2019). Based on my observations, the majority of the minoritized students felt like they did not have a voice (any political influence) in how the school operated to affect them and appeared afraid to be seen by the predominantly White administration and faculty.

Though there are many examples of how such labels impact and impede students, I can recall one incident that has influenced my teaching. My homeroom students started filling the room. They gathered their worksheets and their interactive notebooks before sitting down and eating their breakfast. I had my usual morning conversation with the students before the bell rang for classes to start. I taught 7th- and 8th-grade civics, which in Florida had an end of course (EOC) exam all students were required to pass. Due to the EOC, I tended to focus more closely on the details of government and people involved. After starting a class by answering the question of why the colonists came to America, several students answered saying things like religious freedom, an abusive king, freedom, right to rule oneself, and so on. However, there was a student who was typically vocally expressive but was being particularly quiet that day. He was the type of student that some teachers dreaded because he expressed his opinions, and he tended to ask questions that made teachers squirm. Personally, I found that his enthusiasm and curiosity helped other students explore and think about hard questions. I often encouraged his way of learning.

I continued with the class, discussing the reasons that colonists settled in America. One of my students asked, “What about the Indians?” I asked her to elaborate on her question. “Where did they go? The Indians were here, weren’t they? What happened to them?” “Well,” I explained, “the hard truth is that most of the Native American tribes died through disease exposure, were killed by the colonists, or moved to other areas.” The class seemed content with this answer, so I moved to discuss the Mayflower Compact. The young man in the back, still silent, started to squirm. Finally, after several minutes, he spoke up. “But...that’s not fair!” he said. The class all turned to face him. He continued, “They lived here first and the colonists hurt them. Why would they do the same thing to another group of people—do what they just experienced? You told us the colonists left because the king was killing them and hurting them but they did that to the

Indians? Why?” The class shifted to look at me and I felt the tension in the atmosphere thicken. I pulled up Aristotle’s Great Chain of Being (Hatch, 2007), also known as the Ladder of Being or *scala naturae*, and did my best to explain the concept of hierarchy, namely how certain beings were placed on levels of development and value. My students were clearly disturbed by the concept and made the connections with slavery, placing the persecution of Native Americans by the colonists on Aristotle’s Ladder.

Figure 1. Diagram from *Ladder of Being* (Hatch, 2007)



The young man spoke up again. “Is this how the school views us too?” I called him by his name and asked him what he meant by that statement. “Well, I’m Mexican and some of the teachers pick on me and other Mexicans but not on the White kids who talk and do the same thing. So does the school place us on a ranking system too?” This statement sent shockwaves down my spine. How can a child feel so restrained and discriminated against? This young man had the courage to speak up, to question the power, but felt the tension every day. Fortunately, as the year progressed, he found his voice and courage to fight the silence.

The Mental Picture—The Missing Voice

I was once asked by administration how I track my students’ learning progress. The administrator wanted to know if I monitor students’ standardized test scores, disciplinary backgrounds, and behavioral issues and assign them labels. My response was, “I don’t.” The students, those usually labeled by other teacher educators as the lower readers and writers, are usually the best students in my classes. Even those students with behavioral plans or numerous referrals are usually verbally loud and morally good kids. In my experience, tracking puts forth a narrative about a child that limits what other educators think are the capabilities of that child.

Though there are many examples of how such labels impact and impede students, I can recall one incident that solidified why I firmly oppose them. One Friday afternoon while waiting for dismissal, one of my students asked me if I was disappointed in him. I told him that I was not disappointed in him and asked why he posed that question. He then asked me if I knew how many discipline referrals he had. Once again I told him that I did not and asked him why. He told me that every other teacher knew exactly how many referrals he had, and his least favorite teacher made a point to remind him daily how many referrals she had written him.

The majoritarian narrative of student failure and underachievement relies on stereotypes that link people of color and poverty with “bad,” while emphasizing White, middle- to upper-class people are “good” examples; with working-class as less intelligent and irresponsible in contrast to White middle-class and upper-class people (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The dominant ideology operates to justify the treatment of the students of Latin descent; the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others justifying dominance and a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians, and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color (Marable, 1992). The result, intentional or not, is that socially-politically minoritized students are narrativized as having behavioral problems and treated as unimportant. After teaching, I decided to pursue a doctoral degree in education so I could help to prepare teachers to provide a racially just education of excellence for students irrespective of their positionality in the current social order.

Teacher Candidates—Rise Up—Speak Out

As a novice university supervisor and doctoral student, I had the opportunity to learn a great deal about the preparation of teachers in a historically White institution (HWI). At our institution of higher learning in Florida, a university supervisor serves as a university-based educator who supervises undergraduate students (teacher candidates) during their clinical field experiences. To that role, I brought 14 years of experience in the field of education with the desire to ensure students were receiving a quality education, fair treatment from their teachers, and equal opportunities. I thoroughly enjoyed my role as a classroom teacher, and I was reminded daily of why the work I engaged in mattered. It mattered so much to me that I decided to leave my position as a classroom teacher and seek a Ph.D. in education and immerse myself in the preparation of the next generation of teachers.

In the first semester in my program as a doctoral student, I was introduced to key concepts in social justice education (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and profound concepts derived from pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 2000). I was immediately drawn to the potential of embedding such concepts in the work I was engaging in with teacher candidates. Little did I know at the time that my passion to introduce the concepts of social justice and equity would incite my critical race praxis to address testing and programming barriers facing teacher candidates of color and would be met with resistance and hostility from some of the teacher candidates, who were predominantly White.

In the fall of 2018, I became a university supervisor for two sets of Level 1 teacher candidates, students in their junior year of undergraduate studies in the College of Education (COE). Early into the semester, I learned that one set of teacher candidates was experiencing difficulty in passing their high-stakes assessment in order to remain in the COE teacher preparation program. There were ten students in that group with 90% representing ethnic/racial minoritized groups: one student was White, six were Latina, and three were Black.

Throughout the semester, I would ask the teacher candidates about their assessment status. Much to my dismay, each time I asked, I learned the teacher candidates were either unable to pass the test, only passed one section, or were unable to register as planned due to the financial constraints of the retake fees. I often wondered if the critical work I was attempting to engage the teacher candidates in was “sticking” due to their larger stressor of not being able to pass this assessment. In one of my written reflections, I wrote:

I inquired about the status of the assessment and she shared that she has taken the assessment twice and has been unable to pass. She advised that she has taken the boot camp previously, but shared how they are inconveniently offered to students and they have class when the boot camps are offered. I said that I understood (We have spoken

about this as supervisors in the past. Why can't the boot camps be offered during different times?) Why hasn't a change been considered?

My student had a point—one that prompted me to explore the intersectionality of oppression and privilege embedded into organizational systems and how these systems perpetuate a cycle of White dominance (Ladson-Billings, 2013). After learning that the boot camp, which was meant to assist students to prepare for the assessment, was only offered during the day, I inquired with the department about the scheduling. I was told we could discuss this further during a supervisor's meeting.

During the next supervisor's meeting, the topic was brought up once more, and the solution for the boot camp was determined. Course instructors would excuse the students from their classes (for two consecutive days) in exchange for attending the boot camp. While this addressed the immediate need for students to be able to attend the test-preparation, I found this solution to be problematic as the students would now be missing two days of instruction; thus, creating an environment where they would be playing "catch up" in addition to attending boot camp. By scheduling boot camp during the day, the institution forced students to choose between their education and the preparation needed in order to maintain enrollment in the college of education; thus perpetuating the permanence of racism in higher education (Bell, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2013). In describing racial realism, Bell (1991) reminded us all that within the current dominant racial ideology, "Black Americans by no means are equal to whites. Racial equality is, in fact, not a realistic goal" (p. 363).

Through the mere implementation of daytime preparation for the high-stakes assessment, the higher education institution failed to acknowledge their role in marginalizing Latinx and Black student groups. Unfortunately, this confirms critical race theorists' belief that racism is the "normal" way in which society operates (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2013). With the knowledge that racism is endemic in U.S. society, I refuse to sit idly while acts of injustice surround us, especially in the education system, which is "one of the major instruments for the maintenance of this culture of silence" (Freire, 2000, p. 30).

I will never forget the feeling of anxiety I had at the end of the semester as I waited to receive a confirmation on whether my students met the college requirements to continue in the program. Did I fail my students? Was there anything more I could have done to help my students or were they institutionally destined to fail? Finally, several days before the new semester began, I received an email confirming that one of my students would continue in the program. This student passed several portions of the assessment and completed the fall semester with a "B" average. I suppose that was the university's way of acknowledging their policies and practices needed to be differentiated for their students. Another day or so passed before my second student appeared on my roster. Two students out of the original ten remained. *The two*. This was often how my colleagues referred to my group of students while in conversations. These two simple words carried so much meaning to me—broken dreams, lost hope, anxiety-ridden nights, financial burdens, generational cycles continued, feelings of unworthiness. Yet, these two also represented the future of teaching. *The two* represented a new generation of teachers who were unwilling to give up in the face of adversity because they knew that their future students needed them.

Counter-Stories from Me-Searching with Minoritized Teacher Candidates

In my attempt to disrupt systemic racism (Feagin, 2013) that impacted me and my students of color during my first semester as a university supervisor, I worked very closely with my doctoral advisor to conduct a collaborative study at my institution. The purpose of the study was to

critically examine the stories of former teacher candidates of color and their experiences in the COE, and more specifically, their experience with the college assessment requirements. In our study, we explored the following topics critically: systemic racism, teacher preparation of teachers of color, psychological implications of the incident endured, challenges experienced while enrolled at the COE, and student perceptions about marginalization. In seeking the stories of minoritized teacher candidates, we hoped to illuminate their counter-stories and share the findings with the university in order to revisit organizational policies and procedures for creating an equitable program for minoritized students. Counter-storytelling provides a platform for those typically marginalized and assists them in disrupting the dominant narratives that exist regarding students of color (Closson, 2010, Haney-Lopez, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2013). In an attempt to disrupt systemic racism, I “write back” to power (Harris, 1994) to show resistance against a system disempowering minoritized students. Through writing back, I unravel dominant narratives and move beyond the tensions existing in the meanings of “higher” in higher education and exist in the higher calling compelling me to educate others while furthering my own education.

Minoritized Graduate Students Challenged to Change the Mood

While supervising, I continued my doctoral classes. In our college, masters and doctoral minoritized students developed a success group, which was also attended by some faculty and staff, including post-docs. In these meetings, we discussed the challenges we faced as minoritized students and explored solutions. We had conversations about mental health, sexual harassment in colleges and universities in the U.S., and how to be an advocate for diversity. Although the intention of the meetings and conversations was to support our graduate experiences, we felt like the administrators and faculty did not empathize with us, and it was difficult for them to understand our experiences and views. For instance, in one of our meetings, my friend was sharing with us that she felt overwhelmed while writing her dissertation and working with her committee members. She expressed her frustrations on her journey pursuing a Ph.D., and the only Latinx faculty member asked with a condescending tone: “What are your challenges as a Latina doing a Ph.D.?” We were astonished to see this event taking place in our safe space, where we like to be honest, open to communicate our problems and advise one another to overcome our limitations to accomplish our goals. Our friend was looking for a mentor and support from fellow students and faculty who attended the meeting. The fact that the person questioning her challenges was a Latinx faculty made us feel like we do not have our leaders’ full support to navigate graduate school, especially from the ones who share the same racial/ethnic backgrounds. We concluded that speaking up at these meetings would not solve the pervasive systemic issues we faced, particularly since other students and faculty who had marginalized us had not been involved in these conversations.

As a result of these meetings, an annual diversity training was offered by the Office of Multicultural Affairs, though only mandatory for students. At the first diversity training, we placed big post-it notes on the wall with different terms: race, sex, gender, nationality, ethnicity, among others. Our task was to write a word or phrase to describe what the term meant for us. On the race post-it note someone wrote “running,” and on the sex post-it note another wrote, “Yes, please!” At the end of the training, my peers/friends and I felt some students did not take the training seriously. We talked to the dean of the college about it. The dean, a White woman, thought the comments were hilarious and suggested they were included to lighten the mood, which frustrated me. After this event my friends and I wonder about the real intentions behind these events and our monthly meetings.

We feel the pressure that comes with being in graduate school, and being ethnically/racially minoritized intensifies it. Crenshaw (1991) used the concept of intersectionality to represent how race and gender interact to shape the lives of women of color. Understanding the intersectionality

of these identifiers entails examining what cannot be depicted by looking at gender and race separately (Crenshaw, 1991). Having more interactions with people in administration does not necessarily make it any easier. We thought support meetings would improve our experience but instead, they were mostly burdensome and we seldom felt we had been heard. It was a constant battle to get the administrators to understand that their expressions and attitudes were not suitable for the academic environment and our success in it. Our goal as a “success group” was to “equip upcoming and emerging public servants, not only with technical skills but also with the epistemological lenses necessary to effectively forge racial equity in nervous classrooms deemed safe spaces” (Starke et al., 2018, p. 478).

Discussion

In this article, we found cross-cutting themes related to Latinx educational experiences and opportunities that reflect systemic inequities and marginalization spanning from middle school to higher education:

1. Minoritized students were not receiving the resources, especially the emotional resources, they needed.
2. Educators at different levels had underestimated or undermined students’ abilities.
3. Educators seldom helped students confront deficit ideologies about themselves and their communities (Valencia, 2015).

The deficit ideologies are socially constructed in school culture and manifest into the denial of information, academic and social success, and the help the students in need (Valenzuela & Rubio, 2018). These situations risk shutting down democracy in the classroom and discouraging students from being confident and using their critical thinking skills to advocate for social change. Moreover, the majority of those in leadership roles described in these cases did not support minoritized students without relying on stereotypes related to race and ethnicity. Even within their peer system, the deficit ideologies forces students to become segregated since they are viewed as different, or struggling, even if it is due to a language barrier (Valenzuela & Rubio, 2018).

The experiences shared in this counter-composite story serve as examples of how systemic racism still exists in educational systems. Minoritized students face discrimination and inequalities on all levels of education, and because of segregation they often do not receive the quality education they deserve. Due to injustices that exist, ethnic/racial minoritized students may struggle behaviorally and academically to express themselves outside of acquiescing to the school system as it is (Shalaby, 2017). Some may act-out or stop working because they are not able to move people emotionally or politically, and their assets may be neglected or misunderstood. Minoritized students and faculty can also have struggles that are not dealt with appropriately due to the stronghold of culture and racial ideologies in educational institutions, such as White supremacy, that limit access to education (Valenzuela & Rubio, 2018). These findings further confirm that White Americans still possess power over Americans of color (Feagin, 2013). This imbalance in power serves as a vehicle to continue to oppress minoritized people (Freire, 2000). It is important to give students the tools they need to break structural inequity.

Educators in K–12 and higher education faculty members who understand students’ experiences and advocate for social justice in the institution are necessary. They can work to amplify students’ voices, ensure their enrollment continues, and provide the resources they need in a timely and convenient manner. However, educators are also needed to be involved in developing students’ critical thinking abilities and modeling how to serve as allies for minoritized students by challenging systemic racism, implicit bias, poverty, and impediments to mental health. Overcoming racism in education is more likely when faculty improve their abilities to

simultaneously advocate for social/racial justice, cultural diversity, and equity. Offering courses to promote bilingualism, biliteracy, and inclusion would focus on developing a school environment that is positive and encouraging to student goals and potentials (Valenzuela & Rubio, 2018). Furthermore, recruiting and retaining minoritized faculty can boost the confidence of the students when they are not only members of the students' ethno-racial groups, but are also active supporters of those groups' educational success.

We encourage educational leaders to use the Latino Educational Leadership concept (Rodríguez et al., 2015) as a guide to advocate for minoritized students successfully. The increasing number of Latinx and minoritized students in Florida institutions must be acknowledged to deconstruct the systemic oppression existing in their educational journey. We challenge the dominant narrative to show that minoritized students' adversities are not a "minoritized issue." Positions of academic leadership must reflect the student population. When the faculty is not diverse, their absence can be interpreted as a signal that the institution rejects ethnic/racial/cultural diversity (Milner, 2015; Sleeter & Thao, 2007; Villegas & Davis, 2007). This interpretation could cause minoritized students to become overly suspicious, vigilant, and active—so much so that they fail in their programs or leave the institution when either approach (doing more/doing less) to overcome racism in the culture, practices, and policies of the institution fails. Therefore, there is an urgency for higher education institutions to serve minoritized students with a diverse cultural, linguistic, and economic background. In order to disrupt systemic silencing, we encourage minoritized groups to engage in activities and meetings in their institutions to discuss feelings that come with racial prejudice and discrimination such as inferiority, isolation, and urgency. However, these meetings must cultivate democratic, inclusive, and collaborative educational practices that promote social justice and equity (Rodríguez et al., 2015).

Bravery against silence is the praxis needed to educate people about the types of humor and violence that get masked by jokes at the expense of people of color who are minoritized politically, and positionally, and put in the position to pay an invisible tax (Givens, 2016). According to Givens (2016), an invisible tax is a disproportionate amount of time and energy students expend to mitigate their experiences with racism (i.e., anti-Blackness, anti-semitism); for instance, by organizing institutional actions (i.e., minoritized student success groups) as if paying a toll (a fee or a fine) for going through the education pipeline.

As educators passionate about social justice and equity, we speak up, acknowledge a problem exists, and continue to exhibit a sense of urgency. We are still learning the importance of utilizing our voices to amplify those society would leave in silence, but we are no longer silent within educational systems that do not advocate for minoritized students. Students need to have their voices heard and to have racial injustices dealt with in ways that encourage collaboration, student growth, and student achievement. We were and are (some of) those students.

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