



## Decolonizing education: my journey on the road less traveled

**Candiss Brooks<sup>1</sup>**

West Chester, Pennsylvania, USA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9804-0371>

[cb746468@wcupa.edu](mailto:cb746468@wcupa.edu)

---

URL : <https://www.unilim.fr/trahs/2723>

DOI : 10.25965/trahs.2723

Licence : CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International

---

**Abstract:** Education is heavily influenced by colonization from the Western World. This paper addresses the historical context of colonization around the world and highlights the creation of the current power structure, categorizing people as superior or inferior- based on race. The continuation of these systemic issues is, what Anibal Quijano calls, coloniality of power, and has caused a subconscious acceptance from the oppressed and oppressor. This seeps into every aspect of education: students, teachers, curriculum, funding, and politics. Although teachers are believed to be education's change agent, they are not truly taught how to transform the current system. They are not challenged to question coloniality of power's impact on education. This causes teachers to begin educating the next generation without a deep understanding of who they are, what they believe, and the affects this has on their teaching practices. I will share my experiences as a black woman, explaining how this has impacted my life, how I viewed myself growing up, the norms I ingested as truth, and the lack of racial consciousness I had until my late 20's. My late blooming of understanding led me to an exhaustive search for answers. In my quest, I found a solution to this oppressive pattern- the decolonization of education, a dismantling of the current power structure. If teachers are taught this at the undergraduate level, I believe we will have a more equitable educational system.

**Keywords:** colonization, decolonialization of education, coloniality of power, testimony, racism

**Resumen:** La educación está fuertemente influenciada por la colonización del mundo occidental. Este artículo habla sobre el contexto histórico de la colonización alrededor del mundo y subraya la creación de una estructura de poder actual que categoriza a las personas ya sea como superiores ó inferiores en base a la raza. La continuación de estos problemas sistémicos es lo que Anibal Quijano denomina colonialidad del poder, la cual ha causado una aceptación inconsciente tanto del opresor como del oprimido. Esto se infiltra en cada aspecto de la educación: los estudiantes, el curriculum, el financiamiento y la política educativa. Esto ocasiona que los docentes eduquen a generaciones futuras sin un conocimiento profundo de quienes son ellos, en qué creen y el efecto que ello tiene en su docencia. En este artículo comparto mis experiencias explicando cómo estos fenómenos han impactado mi vida, cómo me veo a mí misma en mi crecimiento como persona, las normas que

---

<sup>1</sup> Fourth Grade Teacher, West Chester Area School District. Graduate student, M.S. in Transformative Education and Social Change, West Chester University of Pennsylvania.

he internalizado como propias y la falta de concientización racial que tuve hasta el final de mi segunda década de vida. Mi tardío florecimiento de entendimiento me llevó a una exhaustiva búsqueda por respuestas. En mi búsqueda encontré una solución a este patrón de opresión: la decolonización de la educación, el desmantelamiento de la estructura de poder actual. Si los docentes son formados en esta perspectiva, yo creo que tendríamos un sistema educativo más equitativo.

Palabras clave: colonización, dcolonización de la educación, colonialidad del poder, testimonio, racismo

Résumé : L'éducation est fortement influencée par la colonisation du monde occidental. Cet article aborde le contexte historique de la colonisation dans le monde et met en évidence la création de la structure de pouvoir actuelle, classant les gens comme supérieurs ou inférieurs en fonction de la race. La poursuite de ces problèmes systémiques est, ce que Aníbal Quijano appelle, la colonisation du pouvoir, et a provoqué une acceptation subconsciente de la part des opprimés et des oppresseurs. Cette acceptation s'infiltré dans tous les aspects de l'éducation - étudiants, enseignants, programme d'études, financement et politique. Bien que les enseignants soient considérés comme des agents de changement de l'éducation, on ne leur apprend pas vraiment comment transformer le système actuel. Ils ne sont pas mis au défi de remettre en question la colonisation de l'impact du pouvoir sur l'éducation. Ce manque amène les enseignants à éduquer la prochaine génération sans une compréhension profonde de qui ils sont, de ce qu'ils croient et des effets sur leurs pratiques d'enseignement. Je partagerai mes expériences, en expliquant comment ces conditions a eu un impact sur ma vie, comment je me considérais en grandissant, les normes que j'ai ingérées comme la vérité et le manque de conscience raciale que j'avais jusqu'à la fin de la vingtaine. Ma compréhension tardive m'a conduit à une recherche exhaustive de réponses. Dans ma quête, j'ai trouvé une solution à ce schéma oppressif - la décolonisation de l'éducation, un démantèlement de la structure actuelle du pouvoir. Si les enseignants apprennent comment le faire au premier cycle, je crois que nous aurons un système éducatif plus équitable.

Mots clés : colonisation, décolonisation de l'éducation, colonisation du pouvoir, témoignage, racisme

Resumo: A educação é altamente influenciada pela colonização realizada pelo Mundo Oriental. Este artigo aborda o contexto histórico da colonização ao redor do mundo e enfatiza a criação da estrutura atual de poder, categorizando pessoas como superiores ou inferiores - baseado na raça. A continuação deste problema sistêmico é, o que Aníbal Quijano chama, de colonialidade do poder, e tem causado uma aceitação subconsciente do oprimido pelo opressor. Isto percola dentre cada aspecto da educação dos estudantes, dos professores, do currículo, do financiamento e da política. Ainda que considerados agentes de mudança, os professores não são adequadamente ensinados a transformar o sistema atual. Eles não são desafiados a questionar o impacto da colonialidade do poder na educação. Isto ocasiona o ensino das novas gerações, pelos professores, sem um entendimento profundo do que eles são, no que eles acreditam, e os efeitos destes aspectos nas suas práticas de ensino. Eu irei compartilhar minhas experiências, explicando como isto impactou minha vida, como eu me vi durante meu crescimento, as normas que eu ingeri como verdade, e a falta de consciência racial que eu tinha até quase completar meus 30 anos. O florescimento tardio deste meu entendimento levou-me à uma exaustiva busca por respostas. No meu caso, eu encontrei uma solução para este padrão opressivo: a descolonização da educação, uma desmontagem da estrutura atual de

poder. Se professores fossem ensinados sobre isto durante sua formação, eu acredito que nós teríamos um sistema educacional mais equitativo.

Palavras chave: colonização, descolonização da educação, colonialidade do poder, testemunho, racismo

## Introduction

Take a moment and think back to your first memories of school. Maybe they were kindergarten, maybe later. Maybe they are filled with laughter and happiness. Maybe they are the memories you don't like to think about, because it's too painful. But most likely, as is with almost every aspect of life, there is a mixture of the two. As a black woman, my educational path has not been easy. It has been challenging and race has always played a part, larger than I might have wanted to at times, but nonetheless, it is inescapable. It has been my driving factor to becoming a transformative teacher.

I believe that understanding how our experiences shape us; help us to become more self-actualized, successful people. This is my journey. These are the memories of my life throughout my years of education. Each experience led me to where I am right now- a teacher ready to embark on my *fourth* year teaching *fourth* grade. An educator passionate about racial equity and a firm believer that decolonization of education is the way to achieve it.

I will begin with explaining the role of coloniality of power and the effect it has had on the world, as well as the educational system. Then, I will use the decolonial theoretical framework as a beacon of hope, and a road map to a more equitable future in education. Lastly, I will analyze the influence coloniality of power has had on my life and shed light on how my story reflects the continuum of colonialism in education today. My hope is that as you read about my experiences, it causes you to reflect on your own, and wonder how you arrived at this space- right here, right now. No matter what role you play in the educational field, it is important to understand your story, because understanding it affects how you show up in other people's stories.

## The Blinding Oppression of Coloniality of Power

“Oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby submerge human beings' consciousness” (Freire, 1970:25). When people are oppressed for so long, they become unaware and unable to fight against the dominating behavior. The oppressor thrives on this and is able to dish out more manipulation to the point of normalcy. This normalization of maltreatment can be explained by what Quijano calls, coloniality of power:

America was constituted as the first space/time of a new model of power of global vocation, and both in this way and by it became the first identity of modernity. Two historical processes associated in the production of that space/time converged and established the two fundamental axes of the new model of power. One was the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of “race,” a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others... The other process was the constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources and products. This new structure was an articulation of all historically known previous structures of control of labor, slavery, serfdom, small independent commodity production and reciprocity, together around and upon the basis of capital and the world market (Quijano, 2000: 533-534)

Here is specific evidence that race was socially constructed for the purpose of economic gain. Those in the “inferior” race were subjected to slavery and other forms of abuse for the sake of free labor. This idea that some were superior and others inferior was the way in which capitalism could take its hold on America. Here, in the year 2020, racism still exists. This deeply indoctrinated belief has remained over generations. This current power structure is one that has seeped into the psyche of those deemed as “less than” as well as those portrayed as “better than”.

It is in the best interest of the oppressor to keep the oppressed from noticing what is happening in order to retain the current power structure. This underlying goal to uphold the Eurocentric superiority can be found in every aspect of life. One particular way in which this oppression has fogged so many minds, is the inequity of education, and the lack of diversity in teaching staff. Vasallo points out:

Feistritzer (2011) reported that in 2011, 84 percent of teachers were white and 85 percent were female. Although the socioeconomic class background was not part of the demographic report, teachers are generally believed to come from middle-class backgrounds (2017: 25).

Virtually one group of people is in charge of the education for all different cultures and ethnicities that walk through the classroom doors. Every person walking this earth has implicit biases and prejudices. So the question therein lies, if there is almost one single perspective in various schools, does this effect teaching practices? Does this influence the material deemed important and that which can be skipped over? Does this determine the narratives that are discussed in the classroom? If the majority of teachers can find themselves in the textbook, do they take much time looking elsewhere to ensure each child is reflected in content? Do they understand the importance of prioritizing this?

Teachers learn how to prioritize in their undergraduate teaching preparation program. They are explicitly taught the components of a proficient lesson plan. Differentiation, meeting the needs of all learners, is drilled into their heads. But, is race a component of differentiation? Is race defined as a social construct in teacher preparation programs? If not, then what type of unchecked baggage are teachers bringing into the classroom?

How does a teacher, who has not learned the historical context of race, perceive their students of color? All of their beliefs and values permeate into every aspect of the classroom environment. These are their norms, and left unquestioned, they will prevail. Takacs shares what norms are:

‘Norms’ are called norms for a reason. You have to first be aware that your positionality might bias your epistemology before you can conceive of a more equitable world, before you can listen to understand, before you can admit other voices and other ways of knowing the world around you. And you have no choice but to continuously examine these connections if you want a fair, pluralistic society and an enlightened, expansive view of the planet around you—and this should be a major part of what education is about (2003: 36).

Sadly, this is not a part of what prospective teachers know education to be. When addressing the word “differentiation” in my undergraduate classes, the conversation usually encompassed types of intelligences and learning styles, not race and culture. Based on my personal experience, and those of teacher colleagues, a majority of preservice teachers are not asked to reflect upon their belief system and values.

Teachers are not challenged to look at their position in the world- the privilege & power they have (or lack thereof). I wonder, why is this not a part of our preparation for the classroom? Why are we, the people in charge of helping students become who they are supposed to be, not asked to figure out our place in the world?

## Historical Context: Colonization of Education

I believe that this lack of understanding and acknowledgement of self is intentional. Allowing teachers to educate the next generation without their own privilege, experiences, and thoughts checked, upholds the current power structure of coloniality. Glazing over curriculum and standards with a blind eye toward covert racism has the potential for teachers to continue this pattern repeatedly. I believe that not knowing the past ensures that we will repeat it. Therefore, it is only right to reflect on the historical context of colonization and how it has influenced our educational system.

### Carlisle Indian School

The origins of this current power structure in America began with Christopher Columbus' first voyage here. Although he is celebrated and was given a national holiday, to indigenous people he signifies the ending of life as they knew it. His "discovery" opened the door to European settlers flooding in and beginning the process of colonialism, the economic exploitation of America by Europeans (Fregoso Bailón & De Lissovoy, 2018).

First, colonists came in and settled on the newfound soil. They began to form bonds with Native Americans, learning about the natural resources of the land. After which, they began to sell these new materials to Europeans. Next, settlers began to cause war and dissension in order to gain authority over Native American tribes. Once this power was established, they could gain the control over America they wanted. Lastly, with domination solidified, they manipulated education so that future generations would believe in and uphold this Eurocentric power structure (Fregoso Bailón & De Lissovoy, 2018). An example of how Europeans did this is the Carlisle Indian School.

Richard Pratt was a lieutenant in the Civil War who believed, and fought for, the sanctity of America. His duty was to spend a considerable time, more than most, with Native Americans. Pratt had to take captives across state lines and make sure they behaved well and did not flee. He noticed that treating them fairly, they never rebelled. According to Malmsheimer (1985), this interaction led Pratt to believe that if a few Native Americans could learn how to be civilized, they all could. He thought that instead of trying to enact genocide upon a whole nation- he could change their thinking to line up with Eurocentric values through education. This inspired the opening of the Carlisle Indian School in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Richard Pratt had a clear goal for the students that enrolled in this school. He wanted to assimilate Native American boys and girls into the American way. Pratt often said, "The Indian must die as an Indian and live as a man" (Malmsheimer, 1985: 55). He never planned for the school to be open forever, because Pratt believed- if they taught the students right- the new way of living would be ingrained in their minds and passed down from generation to generation. His goal was assimilation.

The process began very quickly. As soon as they arrived at the school, *before* pictures were taken as a way to show the world what "barbarians" they were when they entered. (Later, they would compare it to *after* pictures, demonstrating the "upstanding citizens" they transformed into once they graduated). Then, they

eradicated any external proof of their Native American identity. Their clothes were destroyed and replaced with army attire. Their long, beautiful hair was cut to the tops of their ears. Their names were changed. They could only speak English. As Standing Bear put it, "I felt that I was no more Indian, but would be an imitation of a white man." (Malmsheimer, 1985: 58).

In the beginning stages of developing this school, Richard Pratt had a lot of convincing to do to his colleagues. Many people believed that Native Americans were unable to be civilized. The aforementioned before and after pictures were displayed at various conferences as his selling point- as a way to get people to invest in his school. It seemed to have a positive effect. Malmsheimer quotes an article in a local newspaper from this time period :

...as dirty a crowd as one would wish to see. They were half clad, some with only a blanket, dirty, greasy, and all wore a scared look. If all the people who observed them in this condition and could only see them after they go through the 'civilizing process' at school all prejudice, if any exists, among Indian schools would vanish. It is wonderful the transformation that is made. Take the filthy children and after being... scrubbed, hair cut and clad in clean garments, no one would recognize them as the same beings. Those children are the sons and daughters of Indians who were a short time ago waging war against the whites (1985: 64)

Pratt formulated a strategic plan to choose which Native Americans would become students at Carlisle. Children from the "most troublesome tribes" (Morton, 1962, p.68) were selected in order to gain an advantage over the Native Americans who were most likely to resist change. Pratt also believed students would have a considerable amount of influence on their tribes once they graduated, or in other terms, had properly assimilated.

Once students were chosen from various tribes, they were separated from anyone who spoke their language. This eliminated any opportunity for Native American children to find solace in each other. They were torn away from their families, then anyone else whom they grew up with. This intentional separation forced students into learning English to communicate with one another. Not only did they use separation, the teachers at the school would hit or spank any child not speaking English (Adams, 1995). Richard Pratt also gave out awards to students that consistently spoke English, commending publicly all children who obeyed the rules-reinforcing compliance. This brought upon positive results for Carlisle. Here is a letter to Pratt, from a student apologizing for speaking her native language:

Dear Sir Capt. Pratt: I write this letter with much sorrow to tell you that I have spoken one Indian word. I will tell you how it happened: yesterday evening in the dining-hall Alice Wynn talked to me in Sioux, and before I knew what I was saying I found that I had spoken one word, and I felt so sorry that I could not eat my supper, and I could not forget that Indian word, and while I was sitting at the table the tears rolled down my cheeks. I tried very hard to speak only English. - Nellie Robertson (Adams, 1995:141).

This is an example of how Native American children were conditioned to abandon whom they were at their core, in order to gain acceptance. They had to strip away their identity in order to fit into the "civilized" one.

Another tactic used to assimilate the native children was to create a historical narrative that would paint their families, traditions, and values as “savage”. Take, for example, this excerpt from one of Carlisle’s history books:

While the tribes differed from one another, all the Indians were in some points alike. They were brave, but they were treacherous. They never forgave an injury. They could bear hunger and torture in silence, but they were cruel in the treatment of their captives. They were a silent race, but often in their councils some of their number would be very eloquent. (Adams, 1995:147).

This portrays Native Americans as having noble qualities but being inherently savage. The Carlisle Indian School would be the savior from their evil nature and turn them into civilized citizens. Thus, any punishment that Native Americans suffered from colonists was only for their best interest, in order to make a true man out of them. These are the lies that Native American children were given to eat, swallow, and regurgitate.

This is an example of the role colonization had on the foundations of our nation. The most significant thing to take away from this time in history is that cultures and values that differed from the typical Eurocentric view would not be accepted or even tolerated. This shows colonists had a clear understanding of education’s power to change a group’s mindset. All that is needed is a stripping away of self, which leads to a belief that who you were told to be cannot be acceptable. You must get in line with the principles of this culture in order to be successful.

This example of coloniality of power is overt, calculated, and uninhibited. Since these horrendous experiences no longer occur, Americans can delude themselves into believing that colonization no longer has an effect on the world. That is not the case. This process is ongoing. It is important to keep this practice in mind as current educational policies and procedures are introduced. There is an underlying goal to uphold the Eurocentric superiority, and it is pertinent that educators stay on the lookout for this.

## Privatization

Take, for example, Milton Friedman, an infamous American economist. He believed in neoliberalism and advocated for a change in the education system. Friedman deemed the government had entirely too much power. In order for citizens to have more freedom, education needed to be privatized. Although his thinking earned him the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1976, I strongly believe Friedman’s efforts were not for the good of all people. I surmise his “student choice” campaign’s underlying goal was to give a better education to wealthy people, at the expense of proper education for poor students.

Let us use the effects of privatization in Chile as a case in point. In 1973, this country’s government changed under the rule of Dictator Augusto Pinochet. His leadership suffocated the strength of public schools and gave room for privatization to weasel its way into the system. Families were able to make a choice of whether to keep their students in public schools, or to send them to private institutions. This resulted in fifty percent of Chilean children attending a private school. Once these students left, so did funding that provided free, sufficient education for all children. Now, half the educational budget was taken from the public school and outsourced to private institutions (Elmore & Simone, 2015). This demonstrates that privatization and student choice do not promote equality, but actually keep those in



power at a greater advantage. Poor students are left behind with less-than adequate education.

How does this uphold the current power structure of coloniality? Looking at statistics, there is a clear trend of who is more likely to live in poverty. “In the United States, 39 percent of African-American children and adolescents and 33 percent of Latino children and adolescents are living in poverty” (US Census Bureau, 2014). This is double the rate of whites who are in poverty. Race plays a pivotal role in socio economics. But what exactly is race? It is a social construct created by the Western world in order to keep Eurocentrism as the dominant culture. Quijano states that “when we look in our Eurocentric mirror, the image that we see is not just composite, but also necessarily partial and distorted” (2018:556). Racism keeps the current structure in place.

Racism legitimizes the belief that the Western way is the best way. All other lifestyles and belief systems are devalued and trivialized. Racism has certainly left its mark on education. In America, up until the mid-1900’s, segregation was considered a fair and valid practice. In 1954, *Brown v. Board* changed that. The goal of this legislation was to eradicate *de jure* segregation, which was more common in the South where discrimination could be pinpointed and terminated. Unfortunately, the North was operating in a more *de facto* manner. They had sly and subtle methods such as zoning regulations, gerrymandering, building schools next to all black projects, along with refusing to hire black teachers (Patterson, 2001). This was (and still is) harder to fight. Therefore, although this legislation was passed over 50 years ago, there are still immense implications of the racial disparities in education. “More than half of the nation’s schoolchildren are in racially concentrated districts, where over 75 percent of students are either white or nonwhite.” (New York Times, 2019).

This does not only happen in America, but there are examples of this type of segregation across the world. Take, for example, South Africa. Just as America has an abhorrent past of racism, so does this country. The Dutch are responsible for the colonization that took place in South Africa in the 1600’s. In 1948, the colonizers had full control and enacted laws, much like Jim Crow, upon the South African people. This apartheid was legalization of the separateness based on race (Clark & Worger, 2016). Much like civil rights activists, people in South Africa protested against this discrimination until they received the change they sought.

In 1946, Act 108 declared that all forms of racial prejudice in educational institutions would cease. Although this felt like a victory, true change did not occur. Many covert policies kept the colonization system in place. For example, most white families spoke Afrikaans, and a majority of blacks spoke Zulu. Many prestigious schools required that any child admitted must speak Afrikaans (Ntoshe, 2009). Because the word “race” is not explicitly used, no laws are being broken, and segregation can continue as usual. Other inconspicuous segregation practices were zoning policies, busing, and fees, which were too high for lower class South Africans. (Ntoshe, 2009).

This is an example of how laws are no match for the ingrained, indoctrinated Eurocentric belief system in our nation. Instead of eradicating the current disparities in education, these laws do the opposite. “It recreates and implicitly promotes the continued segregation of schools” (Ntoshe, 2009:100). These examples can give educators, and families, a feeling of hopelessness. However, there has to be a way to right these wrongs. There must be a road map for future educators to deconstruct the current power structure.

## The Solution: Decolonization

A solution to the inequitable education dilemma is decolonization. This theory recognizes the power of the Western world. It points out two groups colonization creates- those who are superior and inferior. It acknowledges that the education students receive comes from one perspective that withholds these beliefs as truth. It interprets the danger of this one perspective. In a Technology, Entertainment, and Design (TED) Talk, Ngozie shares the single story danger:

That is how you create a single story. Show a people as one thing over and over again and that is what they become. It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power... How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is not only the ability to tell the story of a person but to make it the definitive story of that person... Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans and not the arrival of the British and you have an entirely different story (2009).

In order to obtain this different story, there must be an action mindset for change. There is a solution. Insurgent curriculum “suggests a proactive protagonism of creation, construction, and intervention” (Fregoso Bailón & De Lissovoy, 2018). The proactive nature includes bringing other perspectives of history to the table.

It is difficult to find examples of this in progress because decolonization is “moving towards a different and tangible place, somewhere out there, where no one has really ever been” (Sium, et al, 2012:11). However, a few brave soldiers are trying their best to implement decolonization. Pete, et al. (2013), are putting decolonization into practice, just using a different name- “indigenizing curriculum.” The authors of this practice are indigenous people who have conducted qualitative research within their communities, to share an accurate narrative from a perspective that is absent from textbooks. These first-hand accounts allow students to open up their minds to what colonization has done to our world. Pete, et al. give us hope for the future. Work is happening, and change is occurring.

It is my personal goal to find ways to infiltrate the current system and decolonize education, specifically at the undergraduate level. I believe that teaching future educators how to decolonize curriculum before they have their own classroom will drastically increase the likelihood of true change. In order to do this effectively, I think it is pertinent that these future teachers first look within themselves to see how their experiences have shaped them. In the next section, I will model this by reflecting on my experiences. Later on, I will analyze how these moments are evidence of the role coloniality still has in our educational system.

## Racial Identity

The first few years of my life, I went to public school in the city of Coatesville, Pennsylvania, United States. I fondly remember my kindergarten teacher, a kind black woman who I believed truly cared for me. I loved going to school- it was my happy place. It was my escape from the sadness of home, as my father was fighting lung cancer, changing in appearance and vigor every day. After he lost a five- month battle with this disease, school continued to be my solace. So much was changing, and yet I could depend on consistency with Ms. Jenkins. Her warm smile, her loving- yet stern demeanor. It made me want to come to school every single day and be the best I could be.

Two years later, in second grade, my school experience drastically changed. My mother, now raising my 5-year-old sister and me alone, decided that a private Christian school would be beneficial. A strong woman of faith, she wanted to add a layer of protection from the world, and have a place that could instill Christian values within us. The two schools could not have been more different. Now I had about 15 other students in my class, unlike the almost 30-student class size at public school. Along with those changes, now I was the only black girl. I went from one of many, to the only one. No one else looked like me.

I learned to adjust and was comfortable being the only black girl. I was smart and I stood out. I felt one-of-a-kind. I felt unique. Teachers saw something special in me and I thrived in that environment. Then in 5th grade, a new girl arrived. Her name was Raven. She was a black girl. At first, I was excited about the prospect of having someone else that looked like me. However, that excitement quickly transformed to something gray and foreign. I could not put this feeling into words. I noticed how the other girls interacted with her, how cool she seemed to everyone. I also recognized her intellect. She was very smart, and I could not shake the feeling that the comfortable world I was in, was now changing.

My attitude began to shift. I started to goof off and put forth less effort into my work. A few months after her arrival, our teacher gave us time to study for an upcoming test. A classmate was quizzing me. As she asked me the answers to questions, I feigned ignorance. I said that I did not know the correct answer, even though I did. I laughed and made funny noises instead of answering. I even said aloud, in earshot of my teacher, that I had not studied. This was completely atypical behavior, and my teacher noticed.

Mr. Kramer, my fifth grade teacher, asked me to come out in the hallway with him. To me, that automatically meant I was in trouble. I figured he would sternly tell me that I needed to study and not be so disruptive to the class. However, something very different happened. I slowly walked out into the hallway in trepidation of the punishment I would receive. He looked at me with a serious disposition. Instead of reprimanding me, he had figured me out. He said to me with complete certainty, “you are intimidated by her. You’re just as smart as her, you just have to try.”

I did not have the words to explain, but Mr. Kramer gave them to me. At the age of eleven, I had enough racial consciousness to understand Raven’s presence threatened my own. She stole my oxygen. She crowded my space. I truly believed that this place was not big enough for the both of us.

How, at the age of 11, did I realize this power structure? How did I determine that Raven and I were inferior because of our skin? Why did I believe there could not possibly be two brilliant black girls in one space? Because, even at the age of 11, I knew what the definition of race was. I certainly could not put it as eloquently, but this is what it was to me: “A system of advantage based on race” (Tatum, 2017: 87). As much as we like to believe that children do not notice color, studies show that children as young as three years old notice racial differences (Tatum, 2017). I was no exception to that rule. It showed up in television, at restaurants, on vacations, in the grocery store. All those interactions led me to believe that I was at a disadvantage because of the color of my skin.

My understanding of race’s social construct distorted the way I saw Raven and I. If black skin meant we were disadvantaged and less than, then a smart black girl was an anomaly. If Raven was (by my observations), smarter than me, then *she* was the diamond in the rough. In my recognition of this, I chose not to compete. I accepted my skewed perceptions and allowed her to be the unique, smart, black girl. I would

diminish myself and be the goofball who didn't care about school. These were not conscious thoughts, but subconscious internalizations that profoundly changed my behavior.

My white male teacher did something very empowering for me. He pointed out what I could not put into words. He did not ignore my behavior. He did not try to pass it off as something else. He knew the power structure of race. He knew the battle I was fighting in my mind. That day, I walked away with a new sense of pride. Mr. Kramer made me believe that who she was did not take away from me. We were individuals. I did not have to shrink myself in order to make room for the both of us. Mr. Kramer actually gave me more space, more oxygen, to be my true authentic self. It is something I have never forgotten and has largely shaped the view I have of myself.

## Hegemonic Assumptions

With that invaluable lesson tucked away in my treasure chest of memories, I was off to a completely new educational environment- public school. My mother noticed the lack of diversity at the private school and wanted me to grow up with kids who looked like me. Therefore, in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I made the drastic transition back to the rough terrain of public school.

I definitely experienced culture shock (I would even come home crying because kids were cursing), but I got used to it all. I especially loved seeing familiar faces every single day. Friends that I grew up with would greet me in the hallways and show me the ropes of public middle school. I loved the new atmosphere. I loved feeling like one of many. I had my people. I was safe.

Unfortunately, I did not see as many familiar faces in my higher-level classes. Yes, there were definitely a few friends here and there, but mostly, I was surrounded by whiteness. It did not bother me, though. I was used to this environment. My private school experience prepared me to be comfortable with being the minority. Besides, it was not so bad when I would sit with friends in the cafeteria and joke around in the hallway. I could maneuver between both worlds, so life was sweet.

But I was about to experience something that would shake that sense of security. In my classes, students began calling me a monkey. I hated it and tried my best to stand up for myself and tell them to stop. Most of them did, except for Lisa. She called me a monkey every day for what felt like forever. This name-calling was more than the average bullying. It carried a considerable weight to me, because it had a racially charged connotation. In the past, blacks were called monkeys as a racial slur that dehumanized and portrayed them as animalistic.

I hated being called this name, and no matter how I said it, Lisa would not stop. One day, in social studies class, she whispered it in my ear, and I had had enough. I screamed, "STOP!" This jolted Ms. Green's attention, and I was immediately sent out to the hallway. I could tell from her body language that she was very angry. But I knew I just had to state my case and all this would be settled. I tried to explain myself, but Ms. Green shut me down. She told me she did not care and refused to allow me back into the classroom. So outside in the hallway, I cried a waterfall of tears all alone. I was hyperventilating. I could not catch my breath. I was not heard. I was not believed. It did not matter what brought me to this boiling point. It did not matter how many times Lisa called me a monkey. I acted out and I, alone, received punishment.

That is until mama bear stepped in. When I came home with tears in my eyes, she called the school and advocated for me. She spoke with the principal, gave her a history lesson, and demanded this white girl be punished for her behavior. As a

result, Lisa was given one day of ISS (In School Suspension). After her single day in solitude, she walked up to me in the hallway, and without saying a word, handed me a crumpled-up note that said: “Sorry for calling you a monkey.”

Holding that crumpled up slip of paper in my hand, I felt my worth was tucked inside of there- battered, small, and not valuable. That experience taught me, *you might be here, but you do not belong. We see your differences- you are not the same as us.* This message stuck with me and I carried it as truth for many years to come.

I assumed that this was the way the world worked and that the best way to be successful was to fall in line. “Hegemonic assumptions are those that we think are in our own best interests but that have actually been designed by more powerful others to work against us in the long term.” (Brookfield, 1995:14). The system was designed to be a glass ceiling. I believed I could do anything, and as long as I did not offend or step into any of my white peers’ space, I could firmly hold tight to that belief. However, as soon as I caused any discomfort, my body was catapulted at that ceiling, leaving a bruise that would cause internal damage. An injury that I would not, and could not, forget. This was my true place. I had a seat in the honors classes, but I was to sit still, not make noise, and go unnoticed. I was to be happy to just have the ability to be here- nothing more, nothing less.

## College Graduation

I did my best at playing the role of the black girl that did not cause too much attention but could keep her spot at the table. This pain stayed with me throughout the rest of my time in high school and lingered throughout college. I chose a career in elementary education, ready to make a difference in the lives of the children I would teach. Once again, I was inundated with professors and fellow students who looked nothing like me. Here I was, a black dot in a sea of white. This was my reality, though. This was my norm. I was now completely comfortable in white spaces. I went through my four years of college unbothered by the lack of representation. I was concerned about keeping a high-grade point average and getting resume boosters so I could teach at the school of my dreams.

Then the day had finally come- graduation day. With my cap and gown donned, here I was, ready for the next part of my life. The Dean of Education called my name and I proudly walked across the stage with my diploma. However, as I made my way back to my seat, I noticed something unusual. Almost my whole graduating class was white. There were only a handful of other black prospective teachers that I could see. *How could this be?* I pondered. *Where were all the black teachers?*

It was as if something in my conscious awoken and I could not put it back to rest. I looked back at my childhood, and realized I only had four black teachers my K-12 experience and one black professor in college. How did this become my norm? How was I just now, questioning this reality? Something had sparked in me that could not be dimmed. I needed the answer to the question. *Where are all the black teachers?*

The answer to this question is what led me to this place in my life. It compelled me to research the lack of diversity in education. The black prospective teachers were stifled, quieted, and prompted to find other avenues of success after the *Brown v. Board* legislation was passed. The homogeneity of the teaching staff was purposeful in keeping the power structure permanent. I looked deeply into the current makeup of our educational system. It was through this research that I stumbled upon coloniality of power and analyzed its significance throughout my life story. Coloniality of power made me believe, in fifth grade, that I was inferior. The social constructs defining race caused me to internalize that being intelligent was not

usually in my genetic makeup, and there was no way two black girls could be similar in this way. I realized that my horrible experiences in middle school, being called a monkey, were racist comments that made me feel less than based upon Eurocentric standards of beauty. Coming to my awakening of the lack of African American teachers the day I graduated college, is further evidence that coloniality of power was ingrained and normal. The lack of questioning is an example of my blindness to oppression.

My story signifies the stronghold colonialism still has on education. These experiences shaped who I became and how I viewed myself. If I had teachers who were trained in decolonization practices, I wonder how my story would be different today. I imagine the pride I would have in my culture if black narratives were constantly added to the curriculum. This curiosity drives me to empower teachers to find ways to add these practices to their classroom now.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I have discussed the role that colonization and coloniality of power have taken in our lives, society, and educational system. Next, I delved deeply into the historical context of racism in the United States, and how education was used to assimilate all other cultures into a Eurocentric way of living. This act meant the purposeful removal and omitting of all stories, ways of thinking and learning, that did not match up with the superior ideals. Then, I offered an operationalization of decolonization at the undergraduate level as the solution. Lastly, I shared my story, illustrating how colonialism is still alive. However, just because coloniality of power is thriving, the decolonial turn *can* occur.

The time is now to change the role coloniality of power has had on our educational system. In order for teachers to be prepared to deconstruct the current colonized education system, they first, must be encouraged and empowered to understand their place in the world. They need to discover how their racial experiences created them to be who they currently are. Next, they must be introduced to decolonization practices at the undergraduate level. This work cannot, and should not, be left to minority educators who take the time to research and share their ancestor's narratives. All future teachers should receive explicit instruction to identify when only one perspective is present. They should be knowledgeable about how to retrieve other narratives for their students. They should learn how to identify the role of Eurocentrism in education (textbooks, curriculum, teaching staff, etc.). They should be willing and capable to move the stories of those usually left to the sides, front and center.

This is how we deconstruct our current system. This is how we build up a generation that no longer only finds value in Eurocentric ways of life. This is how we empower students to feel complete and whole with who they are. This is the path to equitable education.

The path starts with us. The journey begins when we are willing to go back to the beginning. Not to linger there in despair, but to understand how that formulated who we are now. The reflection of our lives will revolutionize our future selves. It is time to do the hard work of leaning in and inspecting the past for the good, the bad, and the ugly. It is time to fight for a fearless understanding of ourselves. It is time to reach a point of courageous vulnerability.

If we, as educators, continue to ignore our own stories, we will undoubtedly uphold the patterns we have learned. Taking an in-depth look at ourselves will transform our lives and the lives of the future generations we teach. The time is now to be

brave. The time is now to understand your story. The time is now to find your place in the world and fight for it to be in equal standing with everyone else.

## References

- Adams, D. W. (1995). *Education For Extinction: american indians and the boarding school experience, 1875-1928*. S.l.: Univ Pr of Kansas
- Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Elmore, J. M. & Simone, D. M. (2015). "The neoliberal agenda for public education". In: M.Abendroth & B.J. Porfilio (Eds.), *Understanding neoliberal rule in k-12 schools* (pp. 197-220). Information Age Publishing.
- Fregoso Bailón, R.O., & De Lissovoy, N. (2018). Against coloniality: toward an epistemically insurgent curriculum. *Policy futures in education*, 17(3). 1-15.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury Press.
- Clark, N. L., & Worger, W. H. (2016). *South Africa: The rise and fall of apartheid*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Malmsheimer, L. M. (1985). "Imitation White Man": Images of Transformation at the Carlisle Indian School. 11 (4), 54-75. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol11/iss4/5>
- Meatto, K. (2019). "Still separate, still unequal: teaching about school segregation and educational inequality". *New York Times*, May
- Morton, L. (1962). "How The indians Came To Carlisle". *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, 29(1), 53-73.
- Ntoshe, I. (2009). "A review of comparative education, history of education and educational development". *South African Review of Education*, (15-2), 85-104
- Patterson, J. T. (2001). *Brown v. Board of Education: a civil rights milestone and its troubled legacy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pete,S., Schneider, B., O'Reilly, K. (2013). "Decolonizing our practice. Indigenizing our teaching". *First Nations Perspectives*.5(1). 99-115
- Quijano, A. (2000). "Coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and latin america". *Nepantla: View from South*, 1(3), 533-574.
- Sium,A., Desai, C., Ristkes, E. (2012). « Towards the tangible unknown: decolonization and the indigenous future". *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education, & Society*. 1(1). 1-13
- Takacs, D. (2003). "How Does Your Positionality Bias Your Epistemology?" Thought & Action 27. *The NEA Education Journal*.
- Tatum, B. (2017). *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Revised Edition. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- TEDTalks. (2009, October 7). *The danger of a single story: Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie*. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/D9Ihs241zeg>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2014). *U.S. poverty report*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2014.html>
- Vassallo, S. (2017). *Critical educational psychology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.