

## REPARATIVE JUSTICE, RACIAL RESTORATION, & EDUCATION SERIES

### From Compton to Columbia: A Low-Income, Latinx Student's Account of Navigating an Unjust Education System

By Jeffrey Acevedo

I was raised by my single mother in a one-bedroom apartment with my four siblings, grandmother, and great-grandmother in the city of Compton, California. Growing up in an impoverished community with a predominant Black and Brown population compelled me to seek refuge in education. I attended Title I Public Schools for the duration of my K-12 schooling, which cultivated my passions to attend college and further understand the inequities I experienced firsthand. Decrepit infrastructure resulting in molded classrooms and the collapsing of ceilings, a disconnected administration, and under resourced programs were a norm to my peers within our school district. I played accomplice to the tracking that goes on with students based on standardized exams, resulting in the enrollment in honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and general education courses depending on the scores.

It was as early as third grade that I realized I was enrolled in a gifted program, which implicitly favored students in the respective track while oppressing students in the general education classes. There were stark differences in the ways teachers interacted with their students in respective gifted and non-gifted classes. The assignments that students were tasked with in AP classes uplifted student voices in writing, whereas general education courses relied on fact-based, textbook questions to gauge student comprehension. I experienced a hidden curriculum that was afforded to my peers and I who were considered "college-bound" and thus deserving of careful attention and guidance.

My family's lack of financial security, coupled with the praise I was receiving from my teachers, led me to internalize the fallacious notion that education would rid my family, and my community out of poverty. I took advantage of the resources that were at my disposal. Being a first-generation student, I had no idea how to navigate the college admissions process, therefore I used my school's one counselor and the mentorship of my teachers. My experiences making decisions on which schools to apply to were influenced by faculty glorifying four-year, selective institutions all the while discrediting community colleges. It was then that I realized the academic tracking that persisted in grades K-12 would transcend itself to the context of higher education.

Although I was admitted to an undergraduate program, my excitement was short-lived, as it became clear the next challenge would be graduating from the university. This challenge would further exacerbate the inequities I once experienced being a student from a Title I school; systemic oppressions manifested themselves in the institutional setting of higher education. Being a first year, Latinx student walking the halls of my predominantly white campus, I began to question my identities in relation to the socially constructed systems we, in the United States, are socialized to conform to.

Courses like sociology prompted students to conceptualize their lived experiences while considering identities like race and class in relation to power dynamics of privilege and oppression. I was reminded of my hometown and acknowledged that capitalism, as a system, perpetuates the exploitation of the working class and the likelihood of upward mobility is statistically low. I was faced with the fact that those who were born poor, simply die poor -- with or without an education degree or credential. It was in my Introduction to Chicano/a Studies class that informed my understanding of the intersectionality framework, as coined by Critical Race Theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, which highlights the intersections of marginalized identities, for each aspect may inherit privilege in some instances and discrimination in others. I was able to recognize

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the intersections of my queer, low-income, Latinx identities and come to understand that such identities were not imagined in the creation of higher education. In acquiring the knowledge that contributed to my development and transition to adulthood, I firmly realized the history of education was designed to favor the affluent, white male, as with other systems that structure our contemporary society.

The education system, therefore, does not exist in a vacuum. It must be considered in relation to other systems like capitalism and the criminal justice system, as there is overlap in instances like capitalist education and the school-to-prison pipeline. The lack of support and resources allocated to low income, first-generation (FGLI), Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students within my undergraduate institution reaffirmed its capitalist agenda that uses student diversity numbers for the sake of marketing their college campus as welcoming and inclusive.

Despite my undergraduate institution being a selective campus with great affinities, it was clear to me that there was no support in funding for the basic needs of its diverse student body. The lack of monetary and tangible support translates to the lack of empathy maintained by the institution, despite its generous university endowment. Students experiencing homelessness, for example, were merely offered parking spots to sleep overnight, with no consideration of students without personal vehicles. Other students, like myself, experienced issues relating to mental health, often stemmed by imposter syndrome, or the feeling of doubt, not belonging, and a fraud on a college campus. These feelings of insecurity grow rampant among FGLI, BIPOC students because higher education is rooted in white hegemony. It is clear: these students do not feel represented in the field of academia or in academic spaces.

The lack of inclusion is perpetuated by predominant white faculty occupying positions of power in administrative roles, whose decisions directly affect the student body. Often, those in power fail to sympathize or demonstrate the initiative to understand the struggles everyday students endure on a regular basis. Institutions need to be cognizant of humanizing its students. The disproportionate amount of white faculty in professoriate roles and in campus mental health resources solidify the social barrier among non-white races and ethnic groups. Although it is illegal to discriminate within higher education, there are still covert forms of racism and microaggressions which ostracize minoritized students.

I experienced a sudden loss of a friend during my second year of college and spoke with an on-campus therapist for an entire year after his passing. After a year of seeking help, I was dismissively told by my therapist that I had made no progress and was encouraged to withdraw from school indefinitely. The disconnect between myself and my therapist, I believe, was the lack of cultural knowledge that distanced us from truly connecting. I gave thought to the idea of withdrawing, but ultimately decided to continue with my academic career, and am thankful to have gotten myself to do so. In hindsight, I was able to cope with my personal life struggles and understanding my role in education and in society by immersing myself in knowledge and research.

As social activist bell hooks states in "Theory as Liberatory Practice," "I came to theory because I was hurting -- the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend -- to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing." Rather than allowing higher education as an institution to strip parts of my identity that helped define my being like my culture and queerness, I turned to scholarship to validate my identities. Curricula rooted in centering whiteness and Eurocentrism are systemic forces which gatekeep students of historically excluded backgrounds from perceiving academia as a field within their occupational trajectory.

However, it is no wonder that identities that fall out of the standard are racially and socially "othered." Students of ethnic backgrounds must succumb to acculturation, where they assimilate to the dominant culture. Such institutional practices include the standardized exams used to track students academically

and college entrance exams, both of which center the cultural knowledge that narrows its focus on the upper, middle class white experience. In order for a student to excel academically, by the rules of the game, they must adopt a vernacular that forces them to sacrifice their cultural expression in exchange for a settler colonial dialect. The formal language intentionally used to phrase questions within standardized exams inherently cater to white, European English. The education system, therefore, perpetuates social class and racial reproduction in higher education by standardizing academia to align with whiteness.

Reading literature and works written by scholars like Tara J. Yosso and Gloria Ladson-Billings during my initial exposure to research during my third year of my undergraduate career, reaffirmed my sense of belonging on campus. I informed myself of Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Model, which provided me with the lens of perceiving the abundance of capital my peers and I carry, even before embarking institutions of higher learning. In realizing the untapped knowledge that flourishes in my city of Compton, I turned to Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy to educate myself on ways to combat apathy in Title I classrooms, by centering experiences that most closely parallels the lived experiences of students from low-income communities. My undergraduate research study presents the implications that, despite power structures rendering BIPOC communities as inferior or incompetent, if presented with a curriculum that promotes critical thinking and is culturally relevant of said communities, it will promote engagement in the classroom. In realizing research can provide me with a space to delve into my passions, while also creating knowledge to inform policy making decisions within education, I found a fulfilling avenue for myself to combat white supremacy.

As a current graduate student pursuing a master's degree in Higher Education during the tumultuous period of a global pandemic, my passions for student access, inclusion and belonging burn deeper than before. I sit in on my Zoom meetings engaging with formalized knowledge that gives name to the lived realities I experienced being a working-class, Latinx student. I am reminded of the privilege I have of being equipped with tools of knowledge needed to fuel my research to promote policy efforts in striving for a more equitable, and anti-racist institution. I reflect on my journey embarking our nation's education system thus far and remain hopeful that students after me will be able to immerse themselves in a system that genuinely embraces their identities and supports their education. Research will provide me with the outlet to document my narratives and uplift voices of those who are not perceived as legitimate. I am eternally indebted to my family that cultivated my ambitions of combating the unjust, and the community that fostered my drive to persevere.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeffrey Acevedo is a rising second year M.A. student at Teachers College, Columbia University where is studying Higher and Postsecondary Education. He was raised in Compton, California by his single mother and late grandmother and great-grandmother. As a first-generation student and product of the matriarchy, Jeffrey is passionate about education inequities that relate to issues like access, retention, and support.

