

# The Discourse of School Dropout: Re-centering the Perceptions of School-based Service Providers

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study is to qualitatively re-center the perceptions of school-based service providers in the discourse of school dropout. Interviews were conducted with a teacher, a dropout prevention counselor, an assistant principal, and a district dropout prevention counselor, all of who work or have worked with one urban middle school in California (pseudonym: UMS). Through a case study design, I analyze how Foucauldian ideas of power and truth emerge from the experiences of these service providers. Results show that although their answers reflected the dominant discourse of school dropout, the actions of the school-based service providers resisted that narrative. They did this by constructing counterstories within and outside the classroom, by valuing and putting effort into qualitative modes of education like relationships and student voice, by attempting to diversify a culturally irrelevant curriculum, and by accepting personal responsibility for their students.

**Keywords:** education; school dropout; critical race theory; Foucault

## Introduction

The US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics tells us every year in the United States our public school system produces over 1 million dropouts (2012). A disproportionate amount of these dropouts are students of color (UCLA, 2007). According to the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, which analyzed cohort data for high schools across the nation, the graduation rate for white students is 75% while students of color (Black, Latino, and Native American) have only about a 50% chance of graduating with regular diplomas in four years (Orfield, 2004). One in four African American and one in six Hispanic students attend a high school "dropout factory" while only one in 20 white students attend such a school (Balfanz et. al., 2013, p. 18).

In the urban area I will be studying, the current dropout rate is about 26% according to the California Department of Education. The middle school at

which my subjects work, UMS, feeds into a high school which has historically had one of the city's highest dropout rates, averaging around 40%. Based on grades, test scores, and behavioral patterns, the assistant principal at the middle school estimates that 30-40% of the students currently enrolled at UMS are at-risk for school dropout. This school had a student population of over 2,000 at the time of this study and was 99% Latino.

Michel Foucault's ideas have been used to examine how knowledge, truth, and power construct our discourses in education (Jardine, 2005). Foucault believes that knowledge is not based on fact, but rather is a constructed truth that varies based on historical and political contexts. It is key for those in power to continuously legitimate their version of truth by maintaining control over the discourse of various social constructions within education, politics, religion, sex, and the economy. Maintaining control of the narratives that underlie the tenets of American culture allow for social control. The apparatus of schooling is one way that the discourse of education is sustained. Law and politics, by way of educational policy, are other ways that the regime of truth is maintained and regulated (Foucault, 2001; Jardine 2005).

Conceiving of education as a contested space of knowledge forces us to examine the dominant discourse of dropout as failure. In my own experience as a dropout prevention counselor, I found many of my students demonstrated high levels of critical thinking, insight, and conceptual knowledge during our one-on-one and group interactions; however, they consistently tested poorly and received failing grades. From a Foucauldian point of view, the quantitative assessment of students is not neutral, rather it reflects a space in which "any so-called fact would point to a coherent regime of knowledge in which it counts as a fact," (Jardine, 2005, p. 86). Critical race theorists take this a step further, arguing that education's invalidation of qualitative data in favor of a numbers only approach has perpetually marginalized minority students (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

Critical race theorists believe that researchers should "look to the bottom" in order to re-center counterstories that expose the racial privilege inherent in the educational system (Matsuda, 1995, p. 63). The purpose of this case study is to qualitatively re-center the perceptions of four minority school personnel in the discourse of dropout. In their experiences working at UMS and other urban, minority schools, how do issues of power and truth influence their service provision to and experiences with students? What, if anything, do they believe needs to change in education in order for it to adequately address the needs of urban, minority students at-risk for school dropout?

This study intends to re-center the individual participants as the subjects of educational policy development. It aims to recognize the agency of the service providers and give them a platform on which they can voice their opinions about how national policy affects them and the students in their high-need school. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how the frustrations expressed by school-based staff can be interpreted as a reaction to the institutional racism inherent in the US educational system.

## Literature Review

Foucault argued that knowledge is created “to serve the interests and circumstances of the human beings in each era” (Jardine, 2005, p. 81). We see this demonstrated in the Progressive Era, a period of time from the late 19th to early 20th century that institutionalized many tenets of the public school system that we currently accept as true or necessary to schooling in the discourse of education. During the Progressive Era, increased industrialization, urbanization, and immigration caused leaders to reassess the cultural practices of the United States. Reformers took Horace Mann's idea of the common school and expanded it to create an institution that would assimilate incoming immigrants and train them to participate in society. Reforms such as the professionalization of school boards, compulsory attendance, standardization, and the cultural role of schools as places of social assistance are all examples of educational policy implemented during the Progressive Era that continues to sustain the foundation of urban public education today (Mattson, 1998; Jeynes, 2007).

The hierarchical approach of the US public education system has largely worked for students who have the same cultural background as those in power, white middle and upper class children. However it has consistently failed to provide adequate services to urban, poor, minority students. Various works of educational history have documented this failure (Katz, 1968, Cuban, 1990; Ravitch, 2001; Apple, 2001; Kozol, 1992, 2006; Reese, 2005). David Tyack's *The One Best System: A History of Urban Education* (1974) argues that by relinquishing control of school districts from community boards to “expert” boards, schools gave up control to state regulators. This shift from rural to urban, community controlled to state controlled, took away the plurality of education. He maintained that “the search for the one best system has ill-served the pluralistic character of American society” and that if there is to be true change, Americans need to admit that the universal public school system has systemically failed in its attempt to teach the urban poor (p. 11).

Using the historical context of the Progressive Era to illuminate the current issue of urban minority school dropout helps to clarify how Foucault's ideas can be useful in articulating the root cause of the dropout epidemic. It is clear from the historiography that the discursive formation of education was shaped by Progressive Era reformers. This discourse has been maintained by the regime of truth through schooling, educational policy, and cultural beliefs and norms. Foucault believed that “the achievement of ‘true’ discourses is one of the fundamental problems of the West” (1990, p. 112) because, as educational historians have argued, it establishes one point of view as the norm and mandates all others to conform to that view. If others do not conform, they are disciplined, punished, and/or marginalized. Foucault's ideas then—that knowledge is subjective, constructed, sustained, and enforced by those in power—force us to consider how the constructions of power and truth in the educational system may be affecting urban minority students.

The field of critical race theory in education offers ways to further analyze Foucault's concepts by looking at how the construct of race and resulting racism have and continue to shape the educational system. Studies have shown that state-approved education textbooks are written mainly from a

traditional White male perspective that tacitly perpetuates a heterosexist, patriarchal point of view (Applebee, 1993; Sleeter, 2007). These textbooks “are likely to oversimplify the interplay of race, culture, and social class” (Johnson, 1999, p. 258). The presence of racism in textbooks is quite easily identifiable, though, compared to the racism that is institutionalized through educational policy laws.

Legal scholar Cheryl Harris describes how “the legal legitimization of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline” has masked the white privilege and domination that oppresses alternate truths, values, and cultural norms held by minorities (Harris, 1993, p. 1715). One example of this legal legitimization of white privilege is the legislation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which mandated evaluating and categorizing students based on testing goals. Schools that did not achieve test score benchmarks that officials deemed as “Adequate Yearly Progress” were financially penalized under NCLB. Historically, the performance of English Language Learners (ELLs), a majority non-white group of students, on these tests is low and “usually shows little improvement across many years” (Abedi & Dietel, 2004, p.782). Therefore, schools which have a higher percentage of ELL students (read: students of color/minority students) had an increased chance that they would be denied funding compared to a majority white school, simply based on their higher population of ELL students.

The effect that subgroup underperformance has on minority students and their schools is cited in scholarship: “Although well-intentioned, NCLB’s subgroup accountability policies have the unintended effect of unfairly and disproportionately sanctioning schools serving the most disadvantaged minority students” (Kim & Sunderman, 2004, p. 39). However critical race scholars would argue that statements like this succumb to the rhetoric of the regime of truth. The policy is not “well-intentioned” at all, but actually legislated white privilege. By assuming that the policy is well-intentioned, racism goes unexamined in determining solutions to the problem. ELL students' failure is looked at as a quantitative fact based on test scores. Blame for their test scores is placed on teachers and individual students as evidenced by the innumerable strategies which are provided to help improve classroom instruction and student learning (Abedi & Dietel, 2004).

Though the field is relatively young and still emerging, critical race theory (CRT) uses several different constructs to examine racism in education. One is voice. “Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color” using personal narratives to counterbalance the narrative of the dominant discourse (Dixson & Rosseau, 2005, p. 9). CRT also problematizes commonly accepted truths such as “neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy” asserting that these ideas were constructed by white people in power and are maintained through dominant discourses of truth and power (Dixson & Rosseau, 2005, p. 9). By creating the assumption that these constructs are somehow “great equalizers” laws and policy (such as the aforementioned NCLB) are not interrogated through race. This results in the establishment of cultural norms and a status quo that denies its ability to marginalize.

CRT examines whiteness as property. It argues that “US society is based on property rights” and that white identity is the apex of property, possessing inherent value and privilege even if one has no money or land (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48). The idea of individual rights is largely a ruse, as evidenced in school desegregation efforts. Though *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruled that separate was not equal when it came to black and white schools, whites' resistance to school integration and bussing and the resulting phenomenon of white flight from urban areas demonstrated that the law guaranteeing equality was merely symbolic. Whiteness then, awards one with special citizenship status which allows them “rights to use and enjoyment” (e.g., of their suburban schools without minorities bussed into them) and “the absolute right to exclude” (e.g., from schools or Advanced Placement classes based on rules of meritocracy) (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 15).

The historiography of education is rife with Foucault's conceptions of power and truth, however many authors shy away from explicitly calling the US educational system racist. Institutional racism is a term that has historically existed to describe overtly prejudiced acts such as redlining and segregation, however as times have changed, so have manifestations of this form of racism. Beverly Tatum argues that a person or an institution need not be intentionally prejudiced in order to perpetuate racism, stating that racism is “not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices...In the context of the United States this system clearly operates to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color” (1997, p. 7). Tatum additionally specifies the difference between active racism, in which prejudice and power are intentionally wielded in order to oppress someone, and passive racism, which, as Tatum describes, is “more subtle” (p. 11). It is seen when we avoid “difficult race-related issues” and attempt to pass off these problems as “business as usual” (p. 11). The aforementioned example regarding No Child Left Behind and others such as the continued practice of out-of-school suspension (Losen & Martinez, 2013) are evidence of that these “business as usual” policies disproportionately affect students of color. By using a Foucauldian framework and employing critical race theory as an interpretive lens to my data, I hope to shed light on how power, truth, and race still matter and are leaving our most high-needs students suffering.

## **Methodology**

### **Type of Qualitative Inquiry, Justification, and Research Procedure**

In this case study, I conducted individual in-person interviews with each participant, which lasted approximately one hour each in length. According to Creswell, case studies allow for “a wide array of procedures as the researcher builds an in-depth picture of the case” (Creswell, p. 132). In order to stay true to the “bottom up” approach that critical race theory advocates, the flexibility of a case study worked for this project.

Interview questions were developed with the conceptual lens of Foucault in mind, however to ensure that the focus was placed on eliciting authentic narratives from the participants, a semi-structured interview format was

followed. According to Maxwell (2005), structured approaches “help to ensure the comparability of data” while unstructured approaches allow for flexibility and emergent insight (p. 80). This semi-structured approach, then, gave me the structure to examine the hierarchical relationships between the participants, yet it also allowed them space to voice their perceptions, tell stories, and relate experiences.

To select my specific participants, I used stratified purposeful sampling because this method “illustrates subgroups and facilitates comparisons” (Creswell, p. 127). In order to get a more comprehensive picture of the issues of power and truth that play into the discourse of dropout, I felt it would be important to interview staff members who served students in different capacities. I was able to interview a teacher, a school-based counselor, a school-based administrator, and a district-based counselor. The diversity of positions within this group of service providers allowed me to compare and contrast their views of the dropout discourse.

I also used elements of convenience sampling since in selecting participants I first thought about who I already knew and who I thought would be interested in being interviewed: “individuals who are not hesitant to speak and share ideas” (Creswell, p. 133). Because this was a brief project, I felt it would be best to have pre-established rapport with all of my interviewees. The first people I identified were Kay, Selena, Joe, and Javier (pseudonyms). I gave them each an outline of the project along with a consent form. Throughout the informed consent process, I let them know that this was completely voluntary and that they were under no expectation to participate. After establishing consent, I went to their place of work and asked for their verbal consent to audio-record the interview. I did three interviews in one day (Kay, Selena, Joe) and one interview two days later (Javier). Participants were asked to participate in an interview inquiring about their general perceptions and specific perceptions about the dropout epidemic, dropout prevention strategies, and students at-risk of dropout.

### **Participants**

My first interview was with Kay, a 33 year old Asian-American female. She worked as a Dropout Prevention Counselor (DPC) at UMS for two years. Her position was cut due to a change in funding allocation at the district level. She was subsequently transferred and is now a DPC at a high school. I selected her because she is the only counselor who worked directly with students at-risk of dropout at UMS. She is also one of the few DPCs who stayed in the unit after they reorganized, despite political pressure to reclassify to an attendance counselor or academic counselor. Her decision to stay with the unit has made her one of the most experienced DPCs in the district. I worked in the same unit as Kay for three years, so I have built a rapport with her as a colleague.

My next interview was with Selena, a 36 year old Latina. Selena works as a Dropout Prevention Counselor at the district level. She helps to oversee the work that the Office of Pupil Services (which recently merged with the Office of Dropout Prevention and Recovery) does with students at risk of dropping out. She is responsible for developing district-level programming in order to help these students. I selected Selena because she is the only district-level counselor

who was formerly a DPC at a middle school. I felt that her experience at the middle school level as well as the district level would give her unique insight into the discourse surrounding our at-risk students. I worked in the same unit as Selena for three years, so I have built a rapport with her as a colleague.

My third interview was with Joe, a 37 year old Latino. Joe is an 8th grade English, Journalism, and AVID teacher at UMS. AVID is a program designed to specifically target students who are treading the line between success and failure in school. The goal of the program is to put them on a college-going track. I selected Joe because he is a teacher who is involved in his students' lives and is an advocate for their needs. Also, it is important to my study to interview a teacher. Teachers are with students for over 6 hours a day and they are the only ones (other than the students) who know the complete story of what is happening in the classrooms. I have worked in Joe's classroom several times over the past year. I have been able to establish rapport with him as a colleague.

My last interview was with Javier. Javier is in his fourth year as the Assistant Principal over Counseling at UMS. I selected Javier because he has a unique perspective—he has been a teacher, a counselor, and now an administrator. I knew his comprehensive understanding of student needs from multiple perspectives would help shed light on the discourse surrounding youth at-risk of dropout. Javier also has worked for another district as a teacher. I felt that this experience would also enrich his perspective in terms of how different districts address students' needs. I attended graduate school with Javier and have worked with him though UMS at least once a year for the past four years, so we have established a good rapport as colleagues.

### **Personal Subjectivities and Validity**

I believe that my pre-established rapport with my participants as well as my own experience as a service-provider to youth at-risk of dropping out of school has allowed me to go deeper into this topic and extrapolate more complex themes from the data. However I can also see how this could compromise the study's validity. As Creswell states, I certainly have a particular “stance” in the dropout discourse, which may keep me “from acknowledging all dimensions and experiences” (p. 139).

The fact that I have a “vested interest” in the site at which I am performing this research may also limit my ability to “develop diverse perspectives on coding data or developing themes” (p. 139). For instance, though I sensed a tension between Joe, the teacher, and the administration, I did not explore that theme too explicitly. One reason is of course because personality issues are not the focus of my study—if there is tension with a superior, I am more interested in examining it as a structural issue perpetuated by hierarchical roles in the educational system. However there are additional issues at play. I work at the school and have established rapport with the administration. I would not want to publish something that disrespected them in any way, even if I am using pseudonyms. I honestly coded what was said, but did not use any incendiary quotes. In that way, I was able to maintain the integrity of the data while avoiding any harm that could be caused.

### **Coding System and Data Analysis**

After conducting the interviews, I filled out a variation of Miles and Huberman's Case Analysis Meeting Form. This served as my memo of the interview experience and was my first step to discovering themes. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed the interviews I had completed.

Foucault's ideas of discourse, power, knowledge, and truth served as my theoretical lens. Defining "power" as "what enforces knowledge" I used Foucault's theory to identify all of the things used in the educational system to enforce knowledge: grades, standardized tests, attendance laws, hierarchical relationships, discipline, and dissemination of information to parents through meetings or mailings identification. Defining "truth" as "what constructs knowledge" I identified things like standards, curriculum, cultural views of education, and research/expert data as being used to construct knowledge in the educational system (Foucault, 1995).

I coded my data using Nvivo9, a qualitative analysis software program. "Power" and "Truth" became what Nvivo refers to as "Parent Nodes" and the subcategories of each became "Child Nodes." In order to preserve the semi-structured balance, I also identified and coded additional emergent themes as I read through the interviews.

After reviewing the interviews and coding the data, I performed word frequency queries and relationship queries in Nvivo to construct themes. Because of the patterns I saw, I decided to use Critical Race Theory to shape my analysis and themes. As themes and key quotes emerged, I conducted member checks in order to ensure that my participants understood and agreed with how I used their data.

### **Results**

The participants' perceptions of the dropout discourse resulted in several themes. First, they placed great importance on student voice. Second, they described a constant struggle to balance quantitative educational approaches with qualitative ones and saw quantitative mandates as contested cultural spaces. Third, they all attempted to establish counternarratives to the dominant quantitative educational approach in their work with their students. Lastly, they value relationships above all else when assessing the success and effectiveness of their own work with students. These themes greatly overlap. In order to convey the totality of the participants' messages, I will not overtly demarcate different themes.

Participants repeatedly discussed how student voice is essential to the learning process. They felt that the current state-mandated curriculum and standards needed enriching to make up for their cultural irrelevancy because although the "truth" that students are being taught may be factually accurate, it does not represent the totality of minority student experience. Participants echoed the tenets of Critical Race Theory, discussing how the curriculum should be more inclusive of their students' own narratives. Here, Joe, the 8th grade teacher, describes how using the student voice in the curriculum can motivate students and contribute to positive relationships between the student and

teacher. He finds just as much validity in students' qualitative experiences than he does in "commonly known" literature.

Joe: We have not fully made a conscious effort to really change or tie in more of that cultural environment into our curriculum. I think we're so set on sometimes teaching literature that is so commonly known but we don't really look at "Is there anything else we can teach now?" Why not use their own stories to teach you know? I think sharing personal experiences, it's one of the greatest ways to really motivate these kids. You know that's one thing I like to do is that I always like to share personal experience where I came from and where I am and hopefully, eventually they start opening up, which I think they do. They eventually start opening up and that becomes our discussion, that becomes our literature and then we write our own pieces from there.

Selena, who currently works in the district's administrative offices as a dropout prevention counselor, is attempting to bring the student voice into her macro-level dropout prevention interventions.

Selena: I'm currently working on a program called A Student's Life where we get students' stories...students that have struggles...I feel like if you would only know their stories and if you would only know the barriers that they faced, if you would only know the shoes they have to walk in every single day maybe you would just have a slighter ounce of compassion. Maybe you would give that student a second chance if you knew what they are up against. And so this documentary series really does that. Its goal is to create awareness. It's to create awareness for teachers. It's to create awareness for administrators, for parents, for community members, everybody to help them understand some of the struggles that these young kids are going through and despite these struggles they continue to maintain...If we can create an awareness about that I think that it's just the beginning to have a culture shift of the way that we perceive these students that they are not all gang bangers. That they're not all drug dealers but that the student actually has a voice and has a story and that's a story he brings it to school every day.

The approach that Joe and Selena are detailing, centering the minority student voice in education, is constructing what critical race theorists call a counternarrative, or counterstory, that is "a means to counteract or challenge the dominant story" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 11). In Joe's case, the students' voices present a counterstory to the narrative represented in "commonly known" literature—the literature authored by majority white writers who are labeled in the curriculum as important, classic contributors to American literary culture. Selena's documentary project is constructing a counterstory to the dominant dropout discourse that dropouts are individually responsible for their inability to succeed in school. Selena points out that we need a cultural shift away from categorizing dropouts as "drug dealers" or "gang bangers" towards a narrative of compassion, insight, and understanding.

Interestingly, when asked about what their perceptions of the root causes of school dropout were, none of the participants mentioned institutional racism. Their answers reflected the dominant discourse of school dropout being caused by factors outside of the school's control, such as poverty and parent support.

Kay: I think with the schools that I've been at, low-income schools, I think first and foremost it has to do with parent participation. I think more parents that are involved in their student's lives not just in school but in their personal lives probably can minimize their at-risk situation.

However upon further inquiry, it was clear that Kay's reasoning went deeper.

Kay: Parents have to work. I mean you have parents that have multiple jobs and I can't tell the parents, you know what you have to quit your job so can come to school and meet with me. You know that's the hardest thing, it's like they know they have to come but they can't...I think there are very few parents who just don't care...The district, the state, the federal government, everybody wants to increase the graduation level rate and they see the data. They see "Well if you do X, Y and Z less with this program and with these resources then why not, why wouldn't it work?" But they don't look deeper into the issue because at the school level we're dealing with more than just "Well I have laptop for you if you just go to school." You know, why can't you come to school? Why aren't you coming to school? What's preventing you from coming to school? They don't see anything like that or even if they do they ignore it. They think that it can be fixed, if we put more personnel in that school or we give them more stuff or we give them more money to buy more stuff, you know. So I think that's a huge disconnect and I don't know if that'll ever be fixed.

So although initially Kay states that schools are not responsible for student dropout, her actual beliefs show a far more complex set of factors at play in the educational system: a system that does not accommodate the needs of the working poor, a hierarchical power structure out of touch with the challenges their urban, poor, minority students face, and a stubborn commitment to the interventions developed by the dominant population. The belief is that if these interventions are quantitatively proven, evidence-based strategies, then they should work with urban, poor, minority students. Critical race theorists would say that the hierarchical power structure that Kay is describing is exemplifying a "restrictive understanding of the nature of equity" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, 14). This understanding fails to identify the distinction between the equality of process versus the equality of outcome.

Selena further illustrates this idea of equality of process versus equality of outcome.

Selena: I believe the student attendance goal is at 96% so they really want the kids to understand and parents and families to know the goal is less than seven days a year. I know that they based that goal based on the research that has come out in the recent years...and basically shows that students with less than seven days attendance do better – that attendance is linked to student achievement.

Here, Selena reiterates the dominant discourse: that dropout is an individual and family matter and that if students simply attended school they would not dropout. However later in the interview, Selena strays from the party line as she reflects on her own experiences with students.

Selena: In my experience in working with dropout prevention there is that one type of student...when you see a student that's having

attendance problems you're going to see lots of other things that are going on and barriers to that student getting their education. But there's another type of dropout which is one of the ones that really bothers me and it's kids that come to school every day, but they're failing all their classes. And how can you have a student that comes to school that has perfect attendance, that is failing six classes? That student will be a dropout. Because they won't be able to accumulate credits, they won't be able to continue through the grades. How is it that schools are not picking up on those students? How is it that they are being allowed to just continue semester after semester after semester failing everything and nothing is being done? ...I mean what can we do as a school, as a district to, to figure out why, why is it that they're failing through and figure out what are the causes? If it's not attendance then what is it? It has to be something.

When Selena reflects on her qualitative experience as a service provider to describe the needs of students at risk of dropping out, as opposed to reflecting on the quantitative measure of attendance, she paints a picture of a system that is not paying attention to the needs of its students. One that does not always educate the students, whether they attend everyday or not. She also points out though, that admitting that the system has and is failing its students would create a public relations problem for those in power.

Interviewer: Why do you think that it is acceptable to have a district wide campaign for attendance but maybe not a district wide campaign for push outs (dropouts who are pushed out not because they choose not to attend school, but because they have too many fails or are not wanted at school due to poor behavior)?

Selena: Well I think because that's not something that, it's not something that I'm sure that they want to advertise. It's not something that they want to bring to the limelight. It's something I'm sure that would be better to be addressed in the top down approach. It's not like they want to have an immediate campaign saying "Hey this is what we've been doing all this years and let's fix it." I think that there's a lot of political things going on there. And I'm not sure that that would be the approach or the solution to it anyways. I feel like that through attendance it [is addressed], because it is a form of attendance because when most kids are pushed out they're not attending. So it does in a way address that issue without explicitly, you know, advertising it. But I think that the educating and creating awareness and then having the support from the top down and creating accountability I think that will be, that's the best.

The idea that major tenets of education such as school curriculum, policy, and law (specifically attendance laws) are color-blind instruments that are enacted through an equitable process is fundamentally flawed according to critical race theorists. They maintain that these constructs are culturally specific ways of enforcing white privilege. The number of dropouts in the United States proves that these tenets of education do not result in an equal outcome for students of color. However those in power refuse to stray from the dominant discourse. Here, we see that the dominant discourse has infiltrated the schema of minority

teachers and counselors as well, despite the fact that their experiences reinforce a counterstory to this narrative.

Javier, the assistant principal at UMS, describes how the inflexibility of the educational power structure trickles down from law to student/teacher relationships. In this case, we see how good administrators can use laws (such as the compulsory education law) to mitigate power struggles that emerge between students and teachers.

Javier: There's a sense of entitlement from the teachers that they can demand certain things and expect certain things that they wouldn't expect of themselves. Or their children you know? Like I had a teacher who was saying, "Oh I don't want this kid back to my classroom because she hasn't written me a letter of apology and I want a letter of apology because she was rude to me." Where's her right to that? Discipline policy? Where is that in the ed code, that you can deny a kid his public education because you want a letter of apology? "Oh he called me a fat bitch." I was like "Whoa, sorry." How many times have I been called a bitch, have I been called an asshole? And if I demanded a letter of apology do you think that that's gonna happen? And then I said "Do you think a police officer demands a letter of apology from a suspect? That he's entitled to have a letter of apology? He's not." (laughs) He's not.

In this example, Javier has created a counterstory to the dominant narrative where compulsory attendance laws are used to simply ensure an equitable process: that all students are expected to come to school. By re-centering the student above the teacher in this power struggle, he used the law to ensure not just an equitable process, but an equitable outcome. Using his own power and agency, he set his own standard that we cannot create the pushouts Selena referred to. According to the law, we must educate them, even when it's hard.

Javier further demonstrates his method for turning racist practices that hide under the guise of equitable access into counterstories that demand equitable outcome:

Javier: Each classroom is different. You don't teach them the exact same thing, each class is going to have a different group dynamic...you have to adjust and I think that that's what a lot of teachers don't like – that they have to change. They think they are doing it all right all the time and the reality is they are not doing it right all the time or half the time. Or you may be doing it right if you're teaching college students. But you're not teaching college students, you're teaching 11, 12, 13 year olds...And there is that pressure – we do have to teach, there is certain amount of stuff that you have to teach. There is that pressure of yeah I have my standards, I have this and there is that expectation but you do have that opportunity to adjust, you do have that opportunity to make it work...but you have to adjust and you can't just be fixed in your way of like..you know "These kids can't learn."

Like the rest of the participants, Javier states here and throughout his interview that urban minority students at-risk for dropout are indeed capable of learning. Javier in particular believes that students can learn the dominant curriculum. However it takes a creative teacher and administration to create an environment

that supports this cultural pluralism. Like Joe, he believes that it is the responsibility of the teachers and administrators to adapt the dominant methodology to the lived cultural experiences of their students.

Every participant agreed that when it came down to measuring effectiveness, quantitative measures count for very little—it is the relationship that matters.

Javier: Apart from teaching them how to be good citizens and good adults, I mean it all stems from just the relationships we have with the kids...I've worked really hard to try to create positive relationship with kids and model and really work at talking to them and saying "Hi" and "Good morning" and doing those sort of things and trying to bring people here to school who are going to help our kids and try bring resources and and try bring other leaders on the campus to help our kids be successful and try to help try to build capacity and try to just do things differently because I know that it wasn't working before.

Kay: I don't even look at them [quantitative assessments of her students] because they don't even mean anything. Because at the end of the day you can't control whether or not the child is gonna do their homework or pass his class. You do your best [as a counselor] right? And then with all the different formulas they use and all of the different things like I don't know what's what. But I think people know, or a lot of people know, that it is just bogus. Like, it means more to me if a child reaches out to me or a parent. Yesterday a parent says "I'm really glad I came tonight. I learned something new," and that's what you're there for. That's why you want to do that more...the reality is you can't always depend on the numbers because they're not always accurate.

Selena: It's all about relationships and I go back to that like this whole [process of] disengagement from school. I really do think that it has to do with not having relationships at the school site. Not having positive relationships, not having someone to say "I know you came to school today, good job." You know sometimes just having students knowing that they have somewhere that they can go to when they're having a bad day. Having students know that someone knows their name. There're so many little things that can happen, that you can do that can make a difference in how that student feels about school. And I think it all boils down to relationships and us knowing our kids. Knowing that they're gonna make mistakes but believing in them that they can do better, and that they will do better.

Joe: I mean numbers can be forged, numbers can lie you know And I think reaching my kids and really establishing that relationship with them is much more important...If they walked away from my class better than what they were when they walked in, that would be a step forward regardless of what level they were at when they walked in or what level they end up; as long as they can produce more. If my kids can walk away from this level of education being able to get along socially and be

respectful to others? That's good education. If a child comes to me not really wanting to learn or not really caring about learning, but at least walks away with some curiosity? I think that's a good education. If my kids walk away feeling proud of who they are and where they came from? That's good education. I wouldn't care what the numbers say if they walked away with some confidence in who they are...They can learn to read, they can learn to write, but if they don't have the motivation, if they don't have that self-worth they're not going to do anything about that. Because even now I have kids that are so bright but because nobody has ever told them that they can do it, or that it's worth something, they still don't care for it. So I think those things would be great education.

Each participant placed much greater value on their qualitative relationships with students and parents than they did the quantitative performance standards. Interestingly, many of them regarded quantitative assessments and curriculum as culturally-contested constructs ("bogus" "numbers can lie" "don't mean anything"). They did not dismiss the academic necessity of standards, though. Rather, they maintained that qualitative educational approaches and assessments were necessary counterparts or precursors to quantitative success. But balancing the quantitative and qualitative approaches in an educational system so focused on the "numbers game" can be a defeating experience for both student and teacher, as Joe articulates:

Joe: I would like to believe that I am effective but in terms of feeling that way, sometimes I feel good about this, sometimes I feel like a failure. A lot of times, especially when it comes to giving grades, sometimes I feel like, you know, when I see so many Fs and...It's simple if I could give a child a grade based on the way we have discussion in class, but if I don't have anything concrete to show that they're producing, I can't give them that grade. So there's times when I'm feeling that I'm failing kids because I wish I could reach every single one of them. Show every single one of them that they can succeed, that there is opportunity.

In examining these interviews from a Foucauldian perspective, four major, overlapping themes emerged that tell us how these service providers negotiated issues of power and truth in their work. These themes demonstrated a resistance to the dominant discourse of school dropout, which centers the failure of the individual and family. First, the service providers placed great importance on student voice. Second, they described a constant struggle to balance quantitative educational approaches with qualitative ones and saw quantitative mandates as contested cultural spaces. Third, they all attempted to establish counternarratives to the dominant quantitative educational approach in their work with their students. Lastly, they valued relationships above all else when assessing the success and effectiveness of their own work with students. These results show that although participants' verbal answers often reflected the dominant discourse of school dropout, the actions they described taking with their students resisted that narrative.

## Conclusion

Throughout this study, we can see the challenges that service providers face in adapting the dominant curriculum to urban students of color at-risk of school dropout. In critical race theory, their struggles with curriculum, equality of outcome, and quantitative modes of education and assessment serve as examples of how white privilege and therefore institutional racism are encoded into the U.S. public educational system.

It was surprising to me that none of the participants explicitly recognized these constructs as inherently racist. Critical race scholars may say that by ignoring racism, they are missing the root cause of the issues they struggle with and perhaps even complicit in it. However it is clear that each participant demonstrated that they are fighting institutional racism every day, whether they acknowledge it or not. By constructing counterstories within and outside the classroom, by valuing and putting effort into qualitative modes of education like relationships and student voice, by attempting to diversify a culturally irrelevant curriculum, and by accepting personal responsibility for their students, they act against the social injustices of racism every day. They do not do this because they have to, in fact, the dominant discourse does not reward them for these efforts (unless they result in higher test scores). Their courageous actions, unbridled creativity, and commitment to educating ALL of their students is, within this climate of education, nothing short of heroic.

Though Michel Foucault's ideas of power and truth guided my study and critical race theory helped me to analyze it, both theories, to some extent, believe that true progress is difficult, if not impossible, while caught in Foucault's panopticon or CRT's institutional racism. These service providers, though, demonstrate that resistance to oppression does not have to be a pre-meditated, politically motivated act. Rather, it can be motivated by emotions. Each participant conveyed that they genuinely love children and that they are willing to try anything to help them be the best people they can possibly be. Certainly this does not mean that their work is easy. As John Dewey stated: "The path of least resistance and least trouble is a mental rut already made. It requires troublesome work to undertake the alternation of old beliefs" (1986, p. 136). It is no wonder then that the teaching profession has such a high rate of burnout, especially in high need urban areas. For this reason, intentional action in student organizing and teacher and administrator training will be essential elements to bringing about lasting systemic change in our educational system.

There is much hope for such systemic change. Grassroots and student-led organizations have recently been leading efforts for more culturally relevant curriculum, advocating for access to ethnic studies classes (Nelson, 2015; Szymanski, 2016). The pushback against such efforts by many in power only draws more attention to the need for such organizing. Administrators, counselors, teachers, and teacher preparation programs have been and can continue to support these efforts by seeking out professional development in critical, anti-racist pedagogy. Incorporating an interdisciplinary approach into school-based work will allow them to understand the impact historical context and societal factors have on the public school system, school dropout, individual schools, and communities. Teachers can also work from the bottom up by

advocating for more qualitative measures of formative assessment throughout their courses in order to construct more holistic summative assessments of their students.

If we understand our educational institutions as socially constructed spaces, it is a very real possibility that we could have another era that (re)shapes our public school system as much as modernity and specifically the Progressive Era have. As we observe the various educational reform debates of today (charter schools, vouchers, privatization, de-centralization, unions, Common Core), it is important to reflect on issues of power and truth. Where are the urban, minority student voices and the family voices in these debates? Where are the voices of service providers in these debates? Who is representing the interests all of these parties? The academy must continue to help urban, minority students at-risk of dropout by "going to the bottom" and conducting more qualitative studies that center the perceptions of service providers, students, and parents. Such scholarship will give us insight into the discourse of dropout, but tough questions regarding systemic issues such as power, poverty, race, and equality in the United States must be asked. Everyday heroes such as the participants of this study deserve to have their voices heard. And their students deserve an educational system that is equal not only in process, but also in results.

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