

Introduction to the Special Issue of the *Florida Journal of Educational Research* on Education Research for Equity and Social Justice in Florida

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Abstract

From pre-K to university, education can confer a host of personal and societal benefits to individuals and the nation. Because of the vital importance of education to civic and economic participation, democratic societies must ensure all citizens have equal and equitable access to education. However, despite broad support for the democratic ideals of equality and equity in education, minoritized populations, particularly in Florida, continue to face inequities due to multiple types of oppression, including racism, sexism, classism, and others, and their intersections in schools. We asked educators and researchers in Florida:

1. What are the most pressing social justice issues in Florida schools today, and how is education in Florida continuing to reproduce and reconstitute systems of oppressive power, no matter how unintentionally?
2. How do we address and redress social inequities?
3. What innovative programs, curricula, and community partnerships are being conducted in and with Florida schools that lead to increased social justice and emancipation?

We are inspired by our colleagues who are champions of social justice, whose activist scholarship highlights and undermines systematic forces of marginalization in Florida's schools, colleges, and universities. We highlight their impactful work in this introduction, and we encourage you to share and apply the insights and recommendations contained in their policy critiques, program descriptions, literature reviews, research studies, and commentaries in this special issue.

Keywords: social justice, pre-k–12 education, post-secondary education, critical race theory

From a Perplexing Past...

In the United States, culture, politics, and education are inextricably linked. In 2008, the joy of President Barack Obama's election ushered in, what many hopefully presumed would be, a post-racial America. There was a sense of joy and optimism that the United States' election of its first Black chief executive in its 232-year history would sweep away the last racial barrier in American politics with ease. The future of America appeared bright. In fact, for many Americans, their faith in the integrity of our democracy was restored. Unfortunately, the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump seemingly reversed the progress so many had come to identify with our country. This was evident in the early 2021 insurrection in the nation's capital where the clash of culture and politics led extremists to ransack the Capitol building and terrorize elected officials at the

appeal of the White House occupant. Meanwhile, educators in elementary to university classrooms across the nation scrambled to make sense of the events in their learning spaces as the ugliest and most damning events of modern history unfolded in real time.

All the while the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the factors that perpetuate a variety of systemic inequities in the country. Despite the ongoing challenges associated with the pandemic, today's overwhelming post-election feeling can be most closely described as a collective sigh of relief. We find ourselves on the other side of a tumultuous and divisive administration that many would consider a pandemic in itself. Just as America stared down the barrel of yet another term of the Trump administration's expansion of charter school access (code word: privatization of public education) and the promotion of "patriotic education" (code word: omit or downplay racist, sexist, or otherwise unattractive parts of American history), support for inclusion and equity in education returned to the highest office in our land. For the first time ever, a president has acknowledged the existence of institutional racism (Biden, 2021).

Expectantly, many Americans are looking to the Biden-Harris administration's expansive pro-teacher platform to advocate for the resources and individuals in our educational system that have been ignored for so long. The influence of Dr. Jill Biden, wife of President Joe Biden, a former high school teacher and community college instructor, has no doubt helped to inform his political views on education. Biden's key priorities include making community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, and minority-serving institutions tuition-free for families earning less than \$125,000 per year. Biden's plans include eliminating student loan debts during the pandemic. Biden even plans to advocate for early education by establishing universal prekindergarten.

As this pandemic has highlighted, teachers, administrators, school staff, and parents are vital to the educational ecosystem and must be protected and supported for the good of America's students. We recognize that the educational policy stakes are especially high here in Florida, the third most populated state in the country. Many educational decisions made in the three largest states—California, Texas, and Florida—influence education policy and practice across the nation. We are even more optimistic that, with support at the highest levels of government, our fellow special issue co-authors' proposals, programs, and implications for policy and practice can be implemented on a larger scale.

In This Issue

The papers in this special issue address three major themes: (a) the socio-emotional counter-stories of minoritized voices in learning spaces; (b) the role of purposeful programming in empowering those systemically disenfranchised in academia; and (c) the vehicle that literacy has become in driving the social justice narrative forward during these very critical times. The authors in this issue explore the experiences of various populations such as Black single mothers, Black male student athletes, and educators in order to highlight the importance of analyzing how racism is embedded within educational spaces. Through the use of composite counter-stories, a strategy often used by critical race theory scholars (see Cook & Dixson, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), the authors in this issue choose to *write-back* as a form of resistance to majoritarian stories.

Authors in this issue also propose how purposeful programming may be used to empower students in learning spaces. One such program explored the role of campus housing in being spaces of injustice for Black students. Another, the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE) of Florida State University, has created early college access opportunities for low-income, first-generation college students. By narrowing the socioeconomic college enrollment disparities between underserved students and their counterparts, CARE has

strengthened the college pipeline for first-generation students. Furthermore, additional authors propose how inspiring sets of college courses, programs, and seminars may help to combat and dismantle systemic racism, raise retention rates, and strengthen academic outcomes for Black students.

Finally, papers included in this special issue address the theme of critical literacy and its connection to social justice, particularly here in the state of Florida. The North Florida Freedom Schools, a culturally relevant summer reading program, is an exemplar of community partners coming together to combat summer reading loss, promote social justice, and foster life-long readers. Authors also discuss how using strategies in teacher education programs have the potential to impact social justice in K–12 reading classrooms across the state of Florida.

...Into a Cautious Future

The present time has forced us to reimagine the way we educate. Previous policies, procedures, and ways of knowing and learning simply will not work moving forward. In order to reform those policies and procedures, we must look to the front lines. Teacher assessment, standardized testing—teachers have long since identified the challenges of these tools; COVID-19 has forced everyone to listen because traditional assessment practices have not been possible. The pandemic has deepened the divide between administration and teachers and has further illustrated the rift that exists between the practitioners and those who are assessing practitioners and influencing policies. Moreover, as we look toward a reimagined model of assessment and learning, it is imperative that our elected leaders rely heavily on the expertise of those who have been designated as essential education workers for guidance to answer the many questions regarding policy and meeting the needs of Florida’s P–20 students.

The contributors to this special issue are on the front lines. They are the researchers and practitioners who are doing the work. They are in the classrooms, and their hearts are in the profession. We, the editors, strongly urge elected officials and policymakers to read these manuscripts and speak to the authors about their work. They *are* the essential workers. And it is, indeed, an honor to share the incredible work that they do as it relates to equity and social justice in education in the state of Florida.

Socio-Emotional Counter-Stories of Minoritized Voices in Learning Spaces

Myers and McMiller evaluated the effectiveness of a Safe Zone training program at a Florida HBCU. Approximately one million individuals identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer in Florida alone, so the Safe Zone training is vitally important. Thacker reviewed literature highlighting how multiculturalism, social justice, and liberation are linked in counseling and provides suggestions for training future counselors. Fisher used a narrative inquiry method and the tenets of settler colonialism as a framework to explore how a Florida middle school was re-segregated following the creation of a charter school district.

Marsh and his colleagues used a youth-led participatory action research project to address adverse childhood experiences at a Boys & Girls Club; working closely with the authors, older club leaders were empowered to develop and implement an innovative social and emotional curriculum for younger members. Williams and Tani focused on the role that economic values may play in HBCU students’ academic performance, highlighting the important but often overlooked role of colleges and universities in supporting students’ financial wellness. Scott, in his qualitative study, explored the successful learning experiences of African American male student-athletes who participated in revenue-generating sports at Division I colleges and

universities in the state of Florida to understand their successful learning experiences, and those salient leadership experiences that influenced them.

S. Moore's literature review on university, school, and community partnerships culminates with a model for collaborative partnerships within a social justice learning ecosystem. Based on a case study of alumni from an academic leadership program, Beatty et al. champion social justice being centered in academic leadership programs in order to stop perpetuating systems of oppression. Perez et al. explored the ways racism in education influences the educational experience and prowess of minoritized students in Florida by applying critical race theory as a lens and constructing a composite counter-story.

Lane et al. also applied a critical race theory framework in their phenomenological study of Black resident advisors to address racism in campus housing at one Florida university. Fleming and Johnson amplify student voices to improve curriculum at a Florida HBCU. Coming full circle to show how historical oppression has been perpetuated across generations, Rowley et al. provide a historical view of the impact negative stereotypic images have on mothers and the adverse effects they then have on the academic achievement of African American youth. They provide important implications for educators, school counselors, and administrators.

Programming That Empowers Those Who Are Systematically Disenfranchised in Academia

Using a university and community partnership, Pierre-Williams describes how the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE) of Florida State University provided a continuity of academic provisions—creating early college access opportunities for low-income students through afterschool programs. Morris et al.'s inquiry to understand Florida parents' perspectives on the decision making and outcomes associated with IEP meetings provides insights about the who, how, and why of IEP decision making and the power dynamics that impede equal, meaningful participation and partnerships. In Keeler et al., the authors propose an inspiring set of college courses and programming to help combat systemic racism and advocate for anti-racism education. Wilkerson et al.'s interviews with First Year Seminar instructors at three HBCUs clarify the way academic agents incorporate social justice in their classrooms. Purita's review of college promise programs in the United States provides recommendations for expanding the benefits for economically disadvantaged students.

Literacy as a Social Justice Pathway

Mesa et al.'s results of a culturally relevant summer camp focused on literacy highlight the potential for reducing summer reading loss and persistent educational inequities. Ha et al. explore how the same North Florida Freedom Schools may empower young Black students through social action and opportunities for reading engagement, thus supporting their reading motivation. In addition, Davis and Bush's mixed-methods study shows how literature circles can be used with preservice teachers to improve their ability to facilitate literary discussions about social justice issues.

Editorial

We close this special issue with an editorial by L. Moore, a College of Education professor, researcher for marginalized urban communities, former assistant principal, and mother. She provides insightful suggestions for actions that will enhance the collaborative efforts of policymakers, school district personnel, and communities to reform our school systems and defeat the institutional racism that plagues us all.

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