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# Disrupting the Ideology of Settled Expectations: Forging New Social Movements to Dismantle the Educational Racial Contract

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## Abstract

*This paper draws on the concepts of settled expectations and the educational racial contract to provide an analysis of the current social movements calling for the improvement of teacher salaries and work conditions in K-12 schools. This paper argues that some teacher unions' lack of centering race in their advocacy to ameliorate educational inequities will not radically transform how teachers are treated in the profession, unless there is an increase in motivation to fully recognize the humanity and educational needs of Students of Color in American society. The author calls for teacher activists to reject the false consciousness of their own settled expectations and work on equal footing with Communities of Color to co-author an emancipatory educational contract on the basis of relational equity, respect, and sympathetic touch.*

*Keywords:* teacher activism, sympathetic touch, teacher expectations, teacher union, whiteness

Historically, some teacher unions—especially those situated in an urban context in the United States—have greatly contributed to labor organizing with commitments to improve the lives of educators and to connect their activism to broader issues of educational justice (Siddle-Walker, 2005; Weiner, 1996). These historical contributions have included working in solidarity with Communities of Color to resist a neoliberal agenda that subjugates local neighborhoods to school closures, privatization, and inequitable conditions in the classroom (Gutstein & Lipman, 2013). As an organizing space, teacher unions present the promise of bringing people of all backgrounds together to call for social transformation. In particular, Gutstein and Lipman (2013) stressed that not all unionisms are the same and identified *social movement unionism* as a type of community organizing that calls teachers to the forefront for social justice struggles. As exemplars of such unionism, these researchers point to the British Columbia, Honduran, and Oaxacan teachers for their anti-oppressive stances and coalition building with families, galvanizing much-needed grassroots movements to counteract the ongoing assault on public education.

Since 2018, national and state organizing among tens of thousands of disgruntled teachers, social workers, substitute teachers, librarians, counselors, and psychologists have led to large-scale protests calling attention to their working conditions, salaries, and lack of resources for their students and families.

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Many of these protests have culminated into a new movement for the United States to reimagine education. Following what began as Red for Ed—which is not a union in of itself, but a grassroots movement developed by Arizona Educators United—teachers across the nation have since adopted to organize their own walkouts to spur a national outcry regarding teacher salaries and the lack of support for student learning (Sandler & McCrory, 2018). These calls for change have elevated teachers’ voices to raise consciousness, increase democratic participation, and build a platform to advance the political and economic interests of the broader community.

This moment of possibility holds the potential for a true democratic, multiracial movement to bring together a new class of change agents across race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, birthplace, and other politically constructed difference. This new vision for racial justice can serve as a counternarrative to the dominant narratives well-documented in labor history, wherein organizing efforts peddled Whiteness by advocating for White workers’ rights, ignoring Black workers’ struggles against racism (Roediger & Esch, 2012), and promoted anti-immigration policies to maintain the racial advantages of White laborers (Olzak, 2013). Typically, the construction of the image of a united, working class has largely centered on the experiences of White workers at the expense of recognizing the racial and economic struggles of People of Color (Nelson, 1996). Hill (1996) noted,

Labor historians committed to the belief that racial conflict among workers is a consequence of class relations or an expression of “false consciousness,” celebrate the episodic occurrences of interracial solidarity while ignoring the overall historical patterns [of racism]. (p. 190)

Teacher unions are not immune from operating within this legacy of Whiteness. Some unions tend to protect ineffective teachers (Brill, 2009; Kristof, 2009), a dynamic that disproportionately impacts urban schools staffed with those who are often underqualified to teach in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Many teacher unions have not supported the removal of ineffective teachers, therefore costing districts upward of \$400,000 to challenge these protective measures (Kristof, 2009). To effectively actualize a counternarrative of racially just unionizing, teacher unions must foster a new unionism to dismantle Whiteness and align their anti-racist organizing efforts to their classroom practices.

### **A Historical Relationship Between Whiteness and Labor Organizing**

Labor organizing history in the United States can be traced to 1673 when Virginian White settlers became concerned about a potential uprising from a class of discontented African and European slaves and indentured servants known as the *giddy multitude* (Takaki, 2008). Because these settlers were outnumbered, they feared that the rebellion would erode their colonial powers, economic interests, and rights to land ownership. To maintain their oppressor status and labor supply in the tobacco plantations, they deployed Whiteness as an ideology to create the false consciousness of White racial superiority, through which European-born slaves were socialized to recreate their class as White people. Within this belief system, White slaves would align with the landowning settlers to work against their own economic interests. They operated under the assumption that they could secure their freedom through racially constructing the inferiorities of Black slaves (Takaki, 2008). Despite the fact that White supremacy had long predated the giddy multitude through Western conceptions of Orientalism (Leonardo, 2018; Said, 1985), this particular historical moment represents a missed opportunity for Whites and People of Color to work collaboratively in a multiracial struggle against settled colonialism.

This example illustrates how labor organizing in the United States has historically centered around the interests of White workers. These class-based struggles have typically presumed that People of Color would equally benefit from organized labor without considering how race is a central organizing principle in the axis of oppression that has stratified labor through Whiteness. To this day, Whiteness continues to serve as the dominant ideology of social institutions. It has an *oughtness* quality in everyday life that is both seen and unseen by those willfully participating in or fighting against the racial hegemony. As a racial project, Whiteness informs one’s construction of an identity that also conceives the racial subordination of People of Color. That is, one’s construction of the racial Other can powerfully affirm the knowledge of the self as a human being to determine one’s consciousness (Allen & Liou, 2018). Harris

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(1993) noted that Whites have come to rely on Whiteness in the form of *settled expectations*, which are manifestations of the racial contract in the United States—including anticipated assumptions, privileges, and benefits—that reinforce their consciousness and status as a people. Over time, these expectations become legitimized through the myths of individualism and meritocracy and through laws that protect these systems of advantage. This dynamic of racial othering as racial selfing (Allen & Liou) is the basis of the hierarchical human intersubjectivities that activate settled expectations at every level of social institutions (Harris).

According to Mills (1997), the American racial dictatorship operates on the assumption that the social contract—defined by the implicit and explicit arrangements that people agree upon to advance societal interests—is fair, equal, and universal. However, Mills (1997) clarified that this supposedly race-neutral contract is a part of the false consciousness written by the powerful that fails to account for the consequences of Whiteness in the creation and distribution of knowledge, materials, and opportunities. In schools—even though all children have access to an education—many educators still operate through the default assumption of racial and economic classifications as key predictors of students’ intellectual capabilities (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2016). Teachers’ inequitable expectations of students serve as a sorting mechanism (Weinstein, 2004), where Students of Color are disproportionately negated to a substandard education, a structure known as the “educational racial contract” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 605).

### **Aligning the Praxis of Activism and the Classroom**

The purpose of this reflective essay is to provide an alternative framework to call for teacher activists to reject the false consciousness of settled expectations and to work with Communities of Color to reconstruct an emancipatory educational contract. The recent teacher activism may have been inspired by historical social movement unionism to work toward broader issues of educational justice (Gutstein & Lipman, 2013), but the teaching force remains largely White and epistemologically, economically, and geographically disconnected from Communities of Color. Through my correspondence with Berkeley researchers, they have observed Red for Ed activists—in places such as Los Angeles and Oakland—ameliorating conditions associated with Whiteness and the educational racial contract in the school system. Additional research is still needed to document these practices and their impact in schools and communities.

The educational inequities that exist inside schools demonstrate that work still needs to be done to desettle educational expectations in the classroom so that teachers can build a broader coalition of activists to work toward multiracial democracy. Delpit (2012) emphasized,

If we are serious about democracy, if we are serious about providing equal opportunity for all citizens, if we are serious about equity and justice, then we have to undo any model that obliquely serves to replicate a racist past. (p. 119)

The significance of colonialism and the giddy multitude provides the premise for this paper to argue that desettling expectations (Bang, Warren, Rosebery, & Medin, 2012) and breaking the educational racial contract (Allen & Liou, 2018; Leonardo, 2013; Liou & Rojas, 2018) are necessary preconditions for social movements to fight for justice. This paper presents a form of solidarity between races based on relational equity in a co-constructed multiracial democracy.

### **The Moral Imperative to Address the Educational Racial Contract**

Because not all teacher unions consider themselves to be social movement unions, these organizations cannot be viewed and understood monolithically or as a cohesive voting bloc. In 2017, *Education Week* conducted a national survey of 1,122 teachers and discovered that 41% of the respondents considered themselves Democrats, 30% identified themselves as Independents, and 27% reported as Republicans (Klein, 2017). In each state, teachers unions’ capacity for community organizing also varies in resources and membership, engagement in politics, scope of bargaining, state policies, and perceived influence (Winkler, Scull, & Zeehandelaar, 2012). Not all Red for Ed movements progressed at the same rate at the local level, and their willingness and abilities to call attention to racism in education also varied. From

this perspective, teacher unionism may have made an impact with their verbal stance to improve education at the national level, but whether these teachers truly embrace and embody their espoused anti-racist goals must be understood by their actions in the classroom and the communities of students and the families they serve.

As a part of the educational racial contract (Leonardo, 2013), many White teachers function as missionaries with savior mentalities or have negative expectations for Students of Color (Matias & Liou, 2015). To this day, many teachers, including some Teachers of Color, are more likely to exaggerate the verbal and physical expressions of Students of Color—leading to racial hostilities in the classroom and perpetuating disproportionality in constructing the school-to-prison pipeline (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Further, settled expectations have continued to manifest in the educational system in the form of using racial classifications to hierarchically rank and sort students into ability-based classrooms. Once there, the curriculum is positioned outside the epistemology of Students of Color by reinforcing White and middle-class value systems (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016), often disempowering their abilities to learn and create knowledge (Bang et al., 2012). That is, when White and middle-class ways of knowing become the default intellectual foundations for teaching and learning, the process for producing knowledge is then constructed hierarchically to marginalize those who come with worldviews and life experiences that are deemed as less important to what is being taught in school. Such a dynamic is one of the manifestations of settled expectations and ways that hierarchical human intersubjectivities are fostered in the classroom.

### **Arizona Red for Ed: A Case of Colorblind Educational Racial Contract**

Therefore, we must question the underlying ideology of these organizing efforts and their intended goals to fully reimagine another wave of social movements that bring together a critical mass of workers, women, young people, the elderly, and the disenfranchised. The way the Red for Ed movement was initially envisioned in Arizona did not explicitly challenge the entrenched relationships between race and education or offer a race-based analysis to argue that teachers' work conditions are largely influenced by the educational racial contract that requires Students of Color to be educated in substandard conditions. The movement in Arizona has always been about teacher salaries and funding for public education. Yet, there is a pressing need for Red for Ed in Arizona to critically challenge the inequitable treatment of undocumented students, longstanding restrictive language policies, the racial disproportionality in school discipline, and the persistent colorblind racism where many White teachers actively question the value of diversity in their schools. To this day, I am still waiting for Arizona teachers to utilize Red for Ed as a platform to collectively denounce the persistent settled expectations and educational racial contract in the system.

I argue that teacher unions' advocacy to ameliorate educational inequities will not radically transform how teachers are treated in the profession, unless there is an increase in motivation to fully recognize the humanity and educational needs of Students of Color in American society. According to Leonardo (2013), the "economization" on the oppression of racialized subjects is not enough to offer a racialized class analysis, nor does it provide an accurate class-informed analysis of White supremacy (p. 48). I posit that the Red for Ed movement is making an important argument on how to best support teachers, but that the economic analysis of educational inequities reinforces a race-neutral understanding of the problem and fails to spark a national conversation about the racial hegemony.

Most problematically, the movements in places like Arizona have not clearly stated their accountability to the most marginalized populations that these teachers serve on a daily basis. For example, in Arizona, the teachers union has not taken actions to intervene on behalf of Students of Color on issues like disproportionality in school discipline among other instructional issues, such as deficit thinking and teachers' negative classroom expectations—two of the biggest challenges in urban schools (Milner, 2010). These are systemic challenges that unions currently have direct influence over, and yet racial beliefs and disbeliefs about students' intellectual capabilities continue to be deeply entrenched in school norms. Many of the organizing efforts with Communities of Color have been conceptualized around supporting the teacher union's agenda, participation in walkouts and protests, and solicitation for

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the support of public officials. It is unclear how such relationships are reciprocal and whether members of the movement are actively reshaping the material realities of families that are perpetually marginalized. From a contractarian perspective, the leaders of these movements are still the primary authors of the educational contract, where families and community activists are expected to play their roles to support their organizing efforts.

In places like Arizona, Families of Color have reported that teacher unions have not elicited leadership from students and family members to collectively reject the status quo and draw upon Communities of Colors' epistemologies to construct a new anti-racist educational contract. On April 11, 2018, in the midst of the Red for Ed movement, a group of Black parents and family members attended a school board meeting in Chandler, Arizona. These Black leaders were there to bring attention to several racial incidences that had occurred to their children in school (Chandler Unified School District, 2018, p. 2). As reported by one of the parents who attended this meeting, another Black parent decided to call out a group of teachers wearing Red for Ed apparel to voice support for their students. To their surprise, these teachers did not respond to these families' request. Instead, they sat quietly and waited for their turn on the agenda to request board members' support for their Red for Ed initiative (Chandler Unified School District, p. 3). In this meeting, the teachers were there to discuss the ramifications of a strike as they looked to find solutions to the state's funding problems for public education (Chandler Unified School District, p. 3). For this reason, Communities of Color have every right to be skeptical of social movements that purport to have their interest. It is uncertain whether everything will return to the status quo once these unions accomplish their intended goals.

### **Oregon Education Association: A Case of Settled Expectations**

Given that social institutions operate in the context of White supremacy, the teachers' unions are also not immune from practicing settled expectations in their organizing efforts. The Oregon Education Association (OEA) is the second most active educators' union in the country (Winkler, Scull, & Zeehandelaar, 2012), with 44,000 members spanning K-12 schools and community colleges (Severance, Tierney, & Johnson, 2019). In 2019, OEA published a report linking teachers' work conditions to students' "disruptive behaviors" (OEA, 2019, p. 6) and called it a "crisis" (OEA, 2019, p. 3). Speaking to the media about the report, elementary school teacher Cindy Honma observed, "generally, we're unable to teach because there is so much behavior, sometimes from the morning until the end of the day" (Severance et al., 2019, p.1). This negates research that argues that a safe learning environment is the school's responsibility and that such issues are usually related to classroom expectations and disciplinary practices (Noguera, 2003).

The OEA report also places blame on the students for teachers' workplace injuries. For example, Salem-Keizer School District—the second-largest district in Oregon with 42,237 students, 60% of whom live in poverty and 20% of whom are multilingual (Salem-Keizer School District, 2019)—reported that 404 out of a total of 551 teachers' injuries were caused by students. The teachers union's position depicts the problem as one of student behavior and a lack of resources to address it (OEA, 2019). Their public campaign to bring attention to this issue negates the extensive research that has demonstrated the significance of teacher-student relationships in establishing conditions of positive classroom expectations (Weinstein, 2004). The OEA's report shows that teachers may be working in untenable positions with little support, but these images and narratives also create false consciousness and demonize rather than humanize the people the teachers purport to serve.

The examples in this case show that settled expectations have retained their essential characteristics in dictating the educational racial contract to students. These include: (a) the use of negative expectations of students as a mechanism to control the educational narratives of Students of Color and low-income students; (b) the denial of teachers' responsibility for developing positive relationships with students and families based on mutual equity, respect, and justice; and (c) the trafficking of meritocracy to maintain race and class privilege and domination. Even with the best intentions, the OEA organizing practices do not reflect their espoused concerns for students as a key principle to rally the public to advance their goals

of higher pay and classroom support. They also fail to question the colonial system of education, instead reinforcing the well-worn schooling ideologies associated with the educational racial contract: teacher-student power dynamics, zero-tolerance disciplinary practices, and racial hierarchies. Therefore, before joining forces with any kind of organizing effort to support teachers, there needs to be a sense of clarity on locating the systemic problem and determining whether their concern is a matter of work conditions or the educational injustices committed against their students.

### **Social Movements to Destroy False Consciousness and Hierarchies**

In order to break the educational racial contract, teachers must decolonize their educational spaces with unsettled expectations, repositioning themselves from gatekeepers to activists that repudiate the ideological process of Whiteness. Even though Whiteness and racial othering are forms of false consciousness, they do not present notions that can be destroyed without intentional and sustained efforts. The first step is to disrupt the false consciousness of being White and middle class. In my work and research efforts in schools over the last 26 years, I have heard many teachers associate themselves with a middle-class status as a method to epistemologically, culturally, and economically disassociate from their racialized Title 1 students. Given the rise in student debt and rapid teacher turnover at the national level, many educators are surviving on beginning teacher salaries of under \$40,000 per year, and the teacher pay gap with other professions demanding comparable levels of education and years of experience is 79 cents on the dollar (National Education Association, 2019). This is an opportunity for the majority-White teaching force to decolonize the false consciousness of the White middle-class status to recognize many of their economic challenges as a manifestation of Whiteness and settled expectations (Harris, 1993).

### **Sympathetic Touch as a Framework for Desettling Expectations**

To counteract the coloniality of education, Du Bois (1935) reminded us of how important it is for teachers to cultivate the practice of “sympathetic touch” (p. 328) as a method to pursue racial justice through solidarity and equitable relationships with Students of Color. He argued that teachers must base their educational expectations on the understanding of Black Americans’ political struggles as a method to prepare them for their own emancipatory projects and democratic engagement. To counteract settled expectations, Du Bois defined sympathetic touch as a state of emotional congruence between students and teachers to underscore one’s expectancy practices (see Liou & Rojas, 2019). Wispé (1986) argued that sympathy is the representation of internal reactions to another person’s life struggles and the willingness and ability to take immediate actions to ameliorate these systemic oppressions through the epistemologies of the oppressed. Social movements start with a transformative stance for political organizers to reject the hierarchical centering of their epistemology so that the people they purport to serve can reclaim their humanity instead of becoming the object of their domination.

To this end, teachers must frame their activism as part of the struggle against White supremacy and other intersectional oppression by centering the racial histories, epistemologies, and voices of communities in their organizing efforts. This Community of Color, epistemological approach to organizing for racial justice includes the following tenets: (a) See and feel the world through the eyes and hearts of students at the intersections of race and other politically constructed difference, (b) emotionally invest in a mutual project of racial justice, (c) critically interrogate the normalcy and ideology of White superiority, and (d) have a critique of racial hegemony and commit to working toward systemic change as anti-racist and anti-oppressive activists (Matias & Liou, 2015). To counteract the dynamics associated with racial othering as racial selfing, social justice starts from within as a state of mind and a way of being.

This inside-out approach to social transformation must be accompanied by intentional efforts to build broader coalitions with Communities of Color. These efforts should include organizing endeavors that expand beyond teacher-focused political agendas to advocate for the use of racially and linguistically affirming curriculum in the classroom, such as ethnic studies (see Douglas, 2017). This is an important starting point to disrupt the ideological process that produces the false consciousness of White superiority,

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as well as to establish new curricular expectations for students to reposition themselves as authors of their educational contract. In doing so, both the teachers' and the students' social being can inform their consciousness of the false consciousness and vice versa.

### **Ethnic Studies as Framework for the Anti-Colonial Educational Contract**

My personal experiences with the history of ethnic studies also provide a perspective on a potential movement that can desettle the educational racial contract. In 2010, Arizona banned the Mexican American studies program in Tucson Unified School District, accusing the teachers of teaching anti-American values in the classroom (Romero, 2015). I was a graduate student at University of California, Los Angeles, at the time and assisted my advisor, Dr. Daniel Solórzano, in organizing an ethnic studies conference that brought Tucson educator Dr. Augustine Romero to speak to hundreds of young people spanning from elementary school to college. The conference led many attendees to think about ethnic studies as a tool for popular education and mobilization.

In 2015, I was unexpectedly appointed by the superintendent of public instruction, Diane Douglass, to serve on the culturally inclusive practices committee at the Arizona Department of Education. The committee consists of a diverse group of educators from across the state tasked with developing a set of culturally inclusive teaching guidelines (Liou, 2017). Though during that time the legal system had not yet determined that the ethnic studies ban was unconstitutional, many of us in the room saw the committee as an opportunity to expand the ideas underlying ethnic studies across the state and to identify a set of practices that can reaffirm students' racialized histories and life experiences.

Currently, I continue to serve on the committee and have since expanded my role to develop three-way partnerships between the Arizona Department of Education, the local educational agencies, and my institution to both examine and provide professional development on the significance of culturally inclusive teaching guidelines to rewrite the educational racial contract. This three-way partnership has not only offered new hope for many educators, but the conversation has also evolved into the centrality of educational equity in this work. This is a slowly developing movement by design because, as a graduate of the Asian American Studies Program at University of California, Berkeley, I understand that social transformation does not happen overnight. My undergraduate coursework and previous leadership role at the Asian American Theme House have taught me that social movements need to center the visions and perspectives of the marginalized, and that effective community organizing must convene people across race and other intersectional identities to collectively challenge the racial hegemony and transform dominant narratives and practices. These efforts require intentional and sustained strategies to keep the conversation alive and to take a one-day-at-a-time approach to steadily develop a statewide network of social justice educators.

There have been times when activists perceived these efforts as not being critical enough—especially because the idea of community organizing is often defined by protests with people taking their issues to the streets. However, I argue that social movements also need people working quietly behind the scenes, and that it requires a multifaceted approach to address change from the inside out. History has shown that we must not only fight for our survival, but that we have the responsibility to illuminate the alternative to bring new visions into fruition. To forge a new social movement, I call for Red for Ed and other teacher activists who are fighting for higher wages and more resources to join this push for ethnic studies in their classroom and beyond. Given the historical lessons of the giddy multitude, educators at all levels of education must build and sustain infrastructure to fully advocate for educational justice *with*—and not *for*—their students and families.

### **Author Biographies**

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