

EXPLORING AWARENESS THROUGH RACE-BASED EPISTEMOLOGIES

MARTHA BRISEÑO

BUILDING BRIDGES FOR ALL

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ABSTRACT:

Awareness is the ultimate goal of a truth-seeking individual. Some reach that stage early on in life; however, some of us never quite get there. Yet, can full awareness ever be reached? Is it an illusion or a mirage of the human mind? This is something I cannot answer. It is up to an individual to decide what awareness or truth is and means to them and when they've reached that point (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995) if they ever do. Nevertheless, awareness or truth is not definite or a set destination, but rather a dynamic, evolving and open-ended process that occurs throughout life. It is a process of decolonization of the mind, heart and soul (Henrichs 2020) that allows us to reframe our perspectives (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and leads us to discovery, understanding, and transformation (Freire 1970).

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Awareness is the ultimate goal of a truth-seeking individual. Some reach that stage early on in life; however, some of us never quite get there. Yet, can full awareness ever be reached? Is it an illusion or a mirage of the human mind? This is something I cannot answer. It is up to an individual to decide what awareness or truth is and means to them and when they've reached that point (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995) if they ever do. Nevertheless, awareness or truth is not definite or a set destination, but rather a dynamic, evolving and open-ended process that occurs throughout life. It is a process of decolonization of the mind, heart and soul (Henrichs 2020) that allows us to reframe our perspectives (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and leads us to discovery, understanding, and transformation (Freire 1970).

As my exposure to physical, worldly, and intellectual experiences have increased a new world of understanding has opened for me. Truth be told, prior to entering a doctoral program, my mentality and views were narrow and complacent as a result of limited experiences and exposure with like-minded people in my upbringing. Although, having grown up along the Texas-Mexico border, experiencing Mexican traditions in my youth from frequently visiting relatives, and living in various cities across Texas and in the Middle East in my adulthood broadened my horizons and allowed me to develop new perspectives of knowledge and understanding. However, it wasn't until I was exposed to literature on various theories and epistemologies in education that my views expanded. This new and developing knowledge has given me a fresh and divergent way to look at the world, the people in it and their interactions. It has helped me develop a new understanding of what a life-long learner means and given me some understanding of the process of unpacking one's perspectives to understand one's behaviors and actions. In other words, it has allowed me to initiate a process of unpacking my lived experiences that have cultivated my views to decolonize and discover new ways of being (Tuhiwai Smith 1999) in a journey of healing.

Thinking back to my childhood learning experiences, I never really thought of them as oppressive, patriarchal, or colonized (Freire 1970; Kohli 2008; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; McLaren 2009). Most of my experiences and understandings were attributed to cultural and ethnic upbringing and not to an oppressive and racist society. I thought my childhood living conditions and experiences were due to my parents' lack of education, immigration status and financial deficits. Basically, this was just the way it was and that was the life we were given. However, in my naivete, I viewed life as full of opportunities ready for the taking and, those that didn't take chances were lacking in desire and grit. After all, the United States of America was the land of freedom and opportunity. All you had to do was want it regardless of your background and social status (Delgado Bernal 2002; McLaren 2009; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman 2008). It never occurred to me that as Mexican-Americans, we were products of a passively oppressed ideology that were bred to think that way. As Kohli (2008) puts it, "...the dominant culture can penetrate the way we see ourselves and the world around us" (177). Growing up, I often thought of myself as special because in my mind my overcoming of struggles was due to grit and hard work (Delgado Bernal 2002). To put it simply, you get what you work for. While that may be

somewhat true, it is also true that the system is imperceptibly built for us to feel that way. The American Dream is within arm's reach!

Exposure to critical race theory and epistemologies as a doctoral student, has evoked childhood memories, flooding me with images and feelings of insecurity, denial, shame and rejection. Although I grew up in a community where everyone looked and talked like me, there were evident differences in social, economic, and immigration status. These differences justified the treatment of students and certain members of the community as empty vessels (Freire 1970) and inferior beings (Delgado Bernal 2002) by those in authority positions. These same experiences filled me with pride most of the time, yet, also provoked shame. Even though I had pride in my Mexican heritage, culture and roots, I felt shame of where I lived, our immigration status, our lack of transportation, our lack of resources, my inability to learn English quickly enough according to my teachers, and most of all my name, Martha Maria. It was the epiphany of my Mexican-ness. The Mexican-ness that I embraced, but also rejected. Fully accepting it would be a setback to my achieved assimilation and perceived notion of Americanization. Hence, many of my insecurities as a female, a Mexican, an American, a Latina, a learner, a teacher, and a mother stem from the experiences in my schooling and the perplexity of my identity. Exposure to literature on critical race theory and related theories and epistemologies that expose the inequities of schooling, and identity have helped me understand the feelings of inadequacy I often experienced in my youth and as an adult.

Delgado Bernal (2002) stated, “although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal education settings” (106). There are many intersecting factors that contribute to a colonized mind that manifest as an individual's identity, self-worth, and values. Race for example continues to be a prevalent factor in modern-day colonization. An individual's race determines the struggles and opportunities you will face in your life journey whether they are related to education, economic or socio-cultural factors. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) race, “continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States” (48). Power is another prevalent factor that moves the world and contributes to colonization. The dominant group maintains power over other racial groups, economic, educational, and social structures in overt and covert ways. They also claim that power “...has been the central feature” in America and it involves the notion of “property rights” (53). It is often justified and unnoticed by both the oppressor and oppressed. Jupp (2021) defined whiteness as hegemonic normativity as “...the racial-ontological structuring that establishes the commonsense humanity or normality of White-skinned people against which racialized others are measured as less human or deficient” (225). It provides fair-skinned people with privileges or advantages, often unacknowledged, unconscious, and unearned, “...like an invisible knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks” (McIntosh 1988, para. 5). These factors shape traditional curricular foundations, development and practices that perpetuate the control of the power holders (McIntosh, 1988). Therefore, education serves as a “tool of

oppression” to “maintain White dominance” and “create hierarchies of power” (Kohli 2008, 179-181).

Thus, how can this master narrative of power and privilege in education be interrupted and transformed? Critical Race Theory (CRT) and race-based epistemologies challenge the traditional scholarship and dominant discourse to give ethnic minorities their humanity back. These frameworks have the ability to “...understand and improve the educational experiences of students of color” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, 109). In addition, race-based epistemologies “...speak to the failures of traditional patriarchal and liberal educational scholarship and examine the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Delgado Bernal 1998, 556). CRT as defined by Kohli (2008) is a framework developed “...to acknowledge race and its intersections with racism as a first step to combating the daily oppression of racial injustice” (181). It is a method to bring awareness about racism and inequities in education. Wing (2014) provided essential tenets of CRT in educational research, which are used to support race-based epistemologies that stem from CRT’s basic foundation.

The first is that racism is a normal and ordinary part of our society rather than an aberration. A second tenet is that the subordination existing within the white-over-color hierarchy is a critical aspect of how our society develops both psychologically and materially. Third, race is a social construct and is not a fixed or biological reality. Fourth is that race is constructed and reconstructed to meet the needs and demands of the dominant society. Fifth is that identity is unique to the individual and should be considered holistically. A sixth tenet is that there is a ‘unique voice of color’ among groups who have faced oppression. A seventh tenet is that law may be a necessary but not always a sufficient approach to resolving racial hierarchies. (164)

As researchers and educators, it is our moral obligation to unpack our experiences and our bias in an effort to bring awareness to the marginalization of minority groups by acknowledging, accepting and incorporating their lived, multidimensional and intersecting experiences in the educational curriculum and teaching practices. Critical Race Feminism (CRF), Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit), and Critical White Studies (CWS) provide an emancipatory framework that highlights students as knowledge holders and creators (Delgado Bernal 2002). Centralizing the storied individual and collective storied experience (Berry 2010), and emphasizing a “new politics of knowledge” that denounces and challenges traditional educational methods (Jupp 2021, 224) to achieve conscientization in educational research, teacher preparation program development, teaching methods, and curricular development.

By adopting a race-based epistemological approach to teaching, educators are able to use their experiences in conjunction with student’s past and present experiences to inform pedagogical decisions for the present and future. It leads into the creation of reflexive pedagogy or the ability to engage with students’ intersectionalities critically in education (Jupp 2021). Lastly, race-based epistemologies provide the framework that acknowledges and validates the susceptibility, resiliency, and multiplicity of human beings (Evans-Winters and Esposito 2010).

CONTRIBUTOR:

Martha Briseño is an Inclusion Specialist specializing in practices for children with disabilities. Martha is a graduate from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley with an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. Martha's experiences include psychosocial rehabilitation for adults with disabilities, community outreach, coaching, curriculum writing, teaching, and advocacy for special populations.

CONTACT:

Building Bridges for All: buildingbridgesinedu@gmail.com
832-586-8067

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