

Navigating the Reframe: How Bree Picower's *Reading, Writing, and Racism* Extends Beyond Higher Education

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Abstract

Conversations around teacher education programs are highly relevant for juvenile justice facilities and programs, as the teachers trained through these programs are often the professionals employed in juvenile justice programs throughout the United States. Critically, unacknowledged or unresolved biases and white supremacist ideologies present in juvenile justice environments will impact the participants and the climates of their future programs. Therefore, the unique needs of juvenile justice programs, and the youth served by them, should be represented in teacher education curricula. To ensure this happens, juvenile justice administrators and practitioners must create collaborative and mutually beneficial partnerships with their local teacher education programs to develop resources aimed at fostering a positive and culturally informed pedagogical and rehabilitative environment. In her book *Reading, Writing, and Racism: Disrupting Whiteness in Teacher Education and in the Classroom*, Bree Picower recognizes teacher education programs as sites for anti-racist, social justice practices, and discusses how community partnerships established through Racial Justice Programs (RJPs) can critically shape the curricula and pedagogical approaches in teacher education programs and create space for teacher candidates to engage in extensive self-reflection and cultural awareness. This book review seeks to extend Picower's application of RJPs beyond the classroom and into juvenile justice programs and community collaborations to create more resources, services, and educational opportunities for justice-involved youth. RJPs may help ensure pre-service teachers are thoughtful partners with firsthand knowledge and experience regarding the specialized care and community partnerships needed to serve justice-involved youth and programs.

Introduction

The kindergarten through twelfth grade (K–12) educational system in the United States (U.S.) is riddled with issues such as underfunding, insufficient resources, and lack of diverse representation among pre-service teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2019; Matias, 2013). Patton Davis (2021) and bell hooks (1994; 2020), among others, have examined inclusive and equitable approaches in the classroom—particularly the practices and pedagogies used to support marginalized students. Such interrogations challenge the ways we understand educational progress after *Brown v. Board of Education*, which continues to remain simultaneously progressive and regressive as equitable schooling is yet to be realized (Patton Davis, 2021). As bell hooks (1994; 2020) notes, marginalized and minoritized youths' sense of belonging is greatly diminished in educational environments that employ primarily white teachers who often view these youth and their educational promise through deficit lenses. The impact of white educators who are culturally insensitive to minoritized students'

needs demands further interrogation of teacher education programs, as increased attention to racist educational curricula has spotlighted how the U.S. educational system is structured to perpetuate white supremacist ideologies rather than dismantle them.

In the juvenile justice system, the disproportionate number of minoritized youth served within this system are arguably more vulnerable to the effects of teacher education programs that do not center youths' culturally specific needs. To address this, an important starting place is establishing community partnerships and collaborative working relationships between teacher education and juvenile justice programs. These partnerships can promote culturally relevant training for pre-service teachers, contribute to facility climates that reject white supremacist ideologies, and address the educational needs of justice-involved youth—especially minoritized students—within these facilities.

So, how can significant progress be made within educational systems that seem to be anchored in slow, incremental, shallow, and ineffective

approaches to improvement? What strategies will help enact sustainable change in a system resistant to such efforts? According to Bree Picower, a solution is to start with the education curriculum used to prepare pre-service teachers for careers in K–12 schools. In her book, *Reading, Writing, and Racism: Disrupting Whiteness in Teacher Education and in the Classroom*, Picower posits that change begins with teacher educator programs that push pre-service teachers to examine their racial beliefs, reframe misinformed and biased modes of thought, and adopt social justice and anti-racist stances in their classrooms. To this end, her book provides a viable option to transform traditional approaches to community partnerships used to prepare pre-service teachers - Racial Justice Programs (RJPs). By extending collaborations to non-traditional educational environments, such as juvenile justice programs, teacher education programs can advance the professional and personal growth of teachers who may work in these environments and help to build more culturally responsive climates for the specialized populations served in those facilities.

Overview of the Book

The chapter organization of the book allows readers to explore Picower's understandings of the oppressive ideologies perpetuated in educational curricula and the methods she has used to disrupt these enactments. Each chapter explores specific aspects of how racism is continuously reproduced in the classroom, and the book advances that pre-service teachers would benefit from in-depth discussions and interrogations of these concepts. Bettina L. Love—one of the foremost Black scholars centering divergent and abolitionist teaching methodologies—wrote the foreword to this book, which emphasizes that Picower's scholarship is a significant contribution to social justice endeavors and moves beyond “stories of Whiteness in education [...] to humanizing racial justice in teacher education” (Love, 2021, p. XI), with the potential to transform pre-service teacher education programs and experiences for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students. Rather than viewing BIPOC communities through a deficit lens, Picower encourages pre-service teachers and teacher education programs to explore how white supremacy and racism have enacted harm within minoritized communities and then offers approaches to dismantle those ideas.

Yet the information in Picower's book can extend beyond teacher education programs and

should not be siloed within academic settings. For BIPOC youth served by juvenile justice programs, an examination and elimination of oppressive ideologies and beliefs held by individuals responsible for their care is especially significant and necessary given the multiple points of marginalization they often experience—troubled/problematic youth, race/ethnicity, gender, social class, and other identities. Juvenile justice programs and facilities may benefit from the diverse community partnerships described by Picower that aim to advance social and racial justice reform through collaboration guided by intensive systemic and individual reflection. The interdisciplinary environment of juvenile justice programs makes this sector an ideal partner to help teacher education programs accomplish the changes advanced by Picower.

The first three chapters of the book integrate examples of racist K–12 curriculum practices that have garnered social media outrage, with an examination of the ways these problems continue to be perpetuated in school systems throughout the U.S. Picower discusses the power of education to liberate or oppress children/youth and highlights how the current structure of U.S. education is designed to continuously replicate and solidify existing “racial hierarchies” (2021, p. 21). For example, by providing an incomplete truth of U.S. history in classrooms—including the origins of the justice system—historical accounts often exclude the counternarratives of oppressed and minoritized communities.

Following extensive discussions about the role of racism and white supremacy in school curricula in the Introduction and Chapters One and Two, Picower uses the last three chapters to discuss ways to disrupt these ideologies in schools through teacher education curriculum, which also includes the implementation of Racial Justice Programs (RJPs). Picower describes RJPs as “mission-driven programs that [...] advance racial justice by centering race, disrupting Whiteness, reframing preservice teachers' understandings of race, and preparing and sustaining candidates for anti-racist action” (p. 111). By adopting a RJP model, teacher education programs have the potential to reshape classroom climates, enrich the experiences of minoritized students, and change the trajectory of U.S. education more broadly. Given the potential benefits of RJPs to teacher education programs—which, by extension, has profound implications for juvenile justice programs and youth—this discussion will expound on the RJP model's

premise and its utility for changing institutional climate and culture.

The Role of RJPs in Pre-Service Teacher Education Programs

Picower's book provides a best-practice approach to RJPs. Through collaborative partnerships with like-minded but diverse program administrators, faculty, field supervisors, mentor teachers, advisors, and school leaders, RJPs aim to provide teacher candidates with the professional development necessary to challenge oppressive ideologies and disrupt traditional approaches to education.

Importantly, the resources used by justice-involved youth and the teachers responsible for their educational experiences are, contrary to many people's assumptions, the same as all students. Thus, juvenile justice programs include approaches and conventions common across all teacher education programs and are not exempt from the repercussions of an educational system with a history of oppressive practices. RJP community collaborations can and should extend to juvenile justice programs, as these partnerships not only meet the need for disruption inherent in RJPs, but also have the potential to influence the cultural climate within teacher education and juvenile justice programs at large.

Picower presents RJPs as an option to address the long-present deficits and deficit thinking (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Smith, 2013) exhibited through exclusionary and racist curricula implemented by teachers with unexamined beliefs about race, racism, and white supremacy. By forming collaborative partnerships with other entities, individuals, organizations, and programs committed to anti-racist teaching and curriculum, RJPs work to educate and train teacher candidates and facilitate productive classroom and facility climates through culturally reflective pedagogical practices. This programmatic stance intentionally embeds race, racial justice, culturally sustainable, and culturally relevant pedagogy throughout every program component, from promotion materials to school placements and beyond.

Undeniably, social justice work requires dedication, time commitment, and emotional resolve. Picower acknowledges that finding the right members for RJPs can be challenging, but providing ongoing critical professional development to collaborators is a method for overcoming this challenge. Such professional development serves two roles: to ensure the educators responsible for

teacher candidates remain critically conscious and practice-informed, and to maintain a cohesive team of like-minded individuals with the same goal. The social justice, service-oriented focus of RJPs aligns well with juvenile justice work and initiatives that continuously seek ways to improve the outcomes of justice-involved youth. By including juvenile justice programs on RJPs, teacher education programs and justice facilities will benefit from the exchange of specialized knowledge and experiences, all working together to improve the educational experiences of BIPOC youth and the programs responsible for serving them.

RJPs Utility in Juvenile Justice Programs

Youth in juvenile justice programs and facilities are disproportionately from minoritized and oppressed communities, and the collaborative framework of RJPs is highly relevant and applicable for this population whose educational and academic experiences take place in out-of-home residential environments. In a joint report published by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice (2014), the government agencies outlined five principles for providing quality educational opportunities to youth in secure juvenile justice settings. Within this 2014 report, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice recognize that juvenile justice programs encounter distinctive obstacles to the provision of quality, comprehensive educational services for youth in those settings. This reality necessitates extensive supports and resources from government and educational systems to minimize the challenges. While all five principles are integral to the educational services afforded to justice-involved youth, principles one and three are particularly relevant to this discussion: (1) "A safe, healthy, facility-wide climate that prioritizes education, provides the conditions for learning, and encourages the necessary behavioral and social support services that address the individual needs of all youths, including those with disabilities and English learners" (p. 8; see also Cox et al., 2011, for related discussion); (3) "Recruitment, employment, and retention of qualified education staff with skills relevant in juvenile justice settings who can positively impact long-term student outcomes through demonstrated abilities to create and sustain effective teaching and learning environments" (p. 14). Through its emphasis on meeting the specialized educational needs of minoritized youth and advancing highly qualified, critically informed, racially aware, and culturally engaged teacher candidates RJPs

can help juvenile justice programs fulfill the two principles referenced above, and juvenile justice programs can aid in a diverse training experience for teachers.

Collaborations and partnerships between juvenile justice programs, higher education institutions, and community groups is not a new phenomenon. Such partnerships, sometimes in concert with multiple agencies, have aided in the development and implementation of resources. For example, Graybeal et al. (2021), described how a collaboration between a juvenile court, university service-learning program, and non-profit organizations resulted in the development and implementation of a holistic, culturally-informed court initiative that resulted in a more meaningful experience for youth but also professional development and training for partners and community volunteers. Additionally, such collaborations have served as a vehicle for the clinical training of practitioners within social service disciplines and professions such as social work, psychology, counseling, and care staff (Jolivet et al., 2020). Primarily, behavioral and educational interventions for youth aimed at rehabilitation and reduction of their future re-engagement with the justice system dominate the focus of community and juvenile justice collaborations (Unnithan & Johnston, 2012). However, there is limited conversation around juvenile justice programs collaborating with teacher education programs and serving as sites for teacher training, immersion, and expansion of cultural awareness (see Deal, 2023, for related discussion). This collaboration—through more than just in name only (Unnithan & Johnston, 2012)—would offer opportunities to impact juvenile justice programs' climate in meaningful ways. Pre-service teachers could begin to see juvenile justice programs as partners with whom to collaborate on the education of vulnerable incarcerated youth, and juvenile justice facilities could engage with future teachers as educators who are committed to the holistic care of justice-involved youth. By establishing partnerships with teacher education programs using an RJP framework, juvenile justice programs would have opportunities to work with teacher candidates and community partners who do not view justice-involved youth through deficit lenses, but instead recognize the strengths these youth exhibit beyond the circumstances that resulted in their system involvement. Furthermore, juvenile justice programs would provide teacher candidates with

essential skills and experiences to engage with youth in a variety of settings and educational environments. Picower's book is a much-needed discussion on transforming teacher education programs to ensure the educational needs of all students are met. However, the approaches she outlined are not without challenges.

Challenges to RJP

Picower's book is a much-needed discussion on transforming teacher education programs to ensure the educational needs of all students are met, however the approaches she outlined are not without challenges. For instance, a core concept related to RJP is change: What is needed to influence lasting change, especially within a system where white supremacist ideology has been foundational for centuries? For educators, higher education institutions, and juvenile justice facilities seeking to adopt or participate in this pre-service teacher education approach, implementing system change through an RJP may raise additional questions. Whether practitioners may be working in teacher education programs without an RJP focus and wondering how to incorporate the concepts into their curriculums, or navigating administrative hurdles such as additional security protocols required in justice facilities, institutional resistance to evolution, or funding opportunities to ensure program longevity, all hinder or halt change efforts. What is the best method for building RJP within institutions that are overtly or covertly resistant to such structural programmatic changes? Or more aptly, how can socially conscious, anti-racist educators and staff utilize this transgressive pedagogical approach (hooks, 1994/2020) in their classrooms, programs, agencies, and facilities without jeopardizing their livelihood and longevity at institutions with systemically engrained white supremacist ideals?

Juvenile justice programs, under the auspices of the federal government and its regulations, have unique factors that must be examined. In addition to security protocols, juvenile justice facilities must also consider how RJP involvement may impact program scheduling, staff training, and government funding. As mentioned earlier, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice have previously expressed a commitment to improving the educational experiences of justice-involved youth, in addition to youth in traditional educational environments. However, recent condemnations of Critical Race Theory, efforts to ensure equitable services to diverse individuals/communities,

and general aversions to discussions of race, racism, and white supremacy are being expressed by political figures, parents/guardians, and educational boards (Florido, 2021; Graff, 2021; Shivaram, 2021). These negative public discussions pose significant challenges to social justice and reformative endeavors. Unfortunately, but understandably given the specialized needs associated with various settings and programs, Picower's text does not provide a step-by-step guide to execute an RJP teacher education model, especially not an approach that involves juvenile justice programs. While the book provides helpful insight into the primary tenets of RJP, it does not expound on start-up implementation nor methods to ensure that pre-service teachers sustain RJP principles throughout their careers, which may include experiences in juvenile justice programs. A discussion on the logistics and realities—especially in this contentious political and educational climate—could have helped to assuage concerns or provide methods to circumvent roadblocks that social justice and anti-racist teachers may likely encounter. Despite these considerations, the potential benefits of RJP for justice-involved BIPOC youth and juvenile justice facilities may outweigh the obstacles that could ensue because of such efforts. Without adequately addressing the racist ideologies embedded within U.S. systems—specifically education—it is likely those ideas will continue to be reproduced in curricula and practice, and ultimately impact climate within juvenile justice facilities.

Conclusion

Picower takes great care in recognizing complexities associated with identity and critical self-reflection, and she astutely outlines one main issue that informs existing K–12 curricula: a foundation of white supremacy. Her work examines the reasons why white supremacist ideologies continue to be perpetuated in education, discusses how to challenge those ideals, and explores the role of pre-service teacher education programs in establishing more equitable and culturally-informed academic environments. When unexamined, systemic racism and oppressive frameworks will be perpetuated across generations, ensuring the ideology continues (Matias, 2013). As Picower states, subversive tactics are used to maintain power and control because the racial hierarchy upon which white supremacy depends “relies on remaining masked in order to maintain the ideology of an equitable and democratic society” (Picower, 2021, p. 7).

The juvenile justice system and the individuals who work within it are not immune to biased and racially insensitive educational practices, but that does not mean these negative foundations must be continuously perpetuated. Knowledge and education are among the first steps to address the impact of historical racism in the U. S. education system, and to implement anti-racist education (Matias, 2016). Picower's book is a useful resource to begin “transforming schools into spaces for freedom dreaming” (2021, p. 23) and provides an opportunity for juvenile justice youth to see themselves as more than a problem to be fixed, and view education as more than required programming. Through RJP, juvenile justice programs can establish meaningful partnerships and collaborations, and have a chance to influence and change teachers' perceptions of justice-involved youth—contributing to a more humane, culturally informed educational experience and facility climate.

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