



# The Color of Schooling: the Race-Making Project of Compulsory Schooling and its Educational Tracks of Violence

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## Abstract

*Popular, progressive histories of compulsory primary and secondary schooling in the U.S. champion it as a democratic success that protected youth from child labor practices at the turn of the twentieth century. This history supports contemporary defenses of schooling as a social equalizer and engine of economic and social mobility. However, critical scholars of education argue that compulsory schooling was designed to discipline new generations into the established class structure, training children into the bodily habits and literacies of industrial and information-economy laborers. I build upon and depart from this critical tradition by arguing that compulsory schooling has been a fundamental institution in the U.S. for racial structuring, the contemporary evidence for which are deep and persistent racial disparities in outcomes for students. Racialized disparities in outcomes are not simply the effects of institutional failure or racialized resource inequalities upon the otherwise neutral institution of compulsory schooling; rather, compulsory schooling must itself be understood as a race-making endeavor that produces necessary and expected racial disparities in outcomes. I argue that evidence of compulsory schooling's negative effects on students of color is best understood by developing an historical lineage between generalized compulsory schooling and so-called Indian boarding schools, which removed Native youths from their families and tribal communities as part of the genocidal project of U.S. settler colonialism. Archival academic records from the Tucson Indian Boarding School reveals how these educational institutions and their pedagogical practices did not intend to develop self-sufficiency among the Native youth population, but rather, to develop and (re)produce an oppressed consciousness of the population. I turn to Paulo Freire's work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to excavate Freire's theorization of the pedagogy of the oppressor, as a way to better comprehend the effects of U.S. racialization on compulsory schooling and the continual persistence of disparities in educational outcomes.*

**Keywords:** *Compulsory schooling, race, (re)production of oppressed consciousness, disparities in educational outcomes*

## 1. Introduction

Popular, progressive histories of compulsory primary and secondary schooling in the U.S. champion it as a democratic success that protected youth from child labor practices at the turn of the twentieth century. This history supports contemporary defenses of schooling as a social equalizer and engine of economic and social mobility. However, critical scholars of education argue that compulsory schooling was designed to discipline new generations into the established class structure, training children into the bodily habits and literacies of industrial and information-economy laborers. I argue that compulsory schooling is fundamentally a race-making institution evidenced by the deep and persistent racial disparities in outcomes for students. To dislodge progressive narratives of education the following section will provide a brief overview of the leading frameworks within the field that address disparities in education outcomes - a Marxist approach and a Critical Race Theory (CRT) approach to education. From there, I turn to the Tucson Indian Training School and its archive as a case study to analyze Indian Boarding Schools (IBS), as part of the larger Settler Colonialism project, its legacy and effects on compulsory schooling in the U.S.

## 2. Literature Review

Marxist centered critics on schooling posits that schooling in the US developed to maintain class distinctions among the population.[1] They argue that much of the support to institutionalize schooling at the turn of the twentieth century, came from business elites who needed a workforce socialized to accept their position in life as subservient and disposable workforce. Marxist articulations of schooling argue that only a limited amount of knowledge was taught and always in the context of religious and class ideologies to normalize capitalistic hegemony.[2] In this framework, persistence of disparities in educational outcomes are attributed to capitalism, where resources (access to education, quality teachers, infrastructure, curriculum etc.), are unequally distributed among classes. The solution



posed by educational Marxists is to redistribute educational resources equally so school foster critical thinking among youth to restore control over their labor and lives. Although this Marxist critique of compulsory schooling highlights resource inequality, socialization of capitalism and class, it does little to address racial disparities. Marxist centered critiques of schooling often mark race as secondary to class and propose that class focused solutions will inherently solve racial disparities.

Critical Race Theory in education counters this understanding. Within CRT, race is discussed as both a social construct and as an embodied experience.[3] Education scholars have used CRT to document how race impacts the schooling system and the affects it has on children, particularly Black and Brown youth. The literature has expose the pervasiveness of racial ideologies within the school system. For example, rates of discipline (suspension, expulsion, push/drop-out, school-to-prison pipeline etc.) are disproportionately higher among Black and Brown male youth compared to white males, despite race-nurtural policies and practices.[4] CRT in education also incorporates discussions of socio-economic distinctions among schools and their communities to highlight how the affects of race are exasperated when linked to low social-economic standing. I note, that this articulation of class is not the same as a Marxist framework of class, where class is a structural position and not a social economic standing that fluctuate.[5] CRT in education has provided language to explain racial disparities within the U.S. schooling system, yet, solutions proposed are monetary, meaning that an equal redistribution of resources (access to education, quality teachers, infrastructure, curriculum etc.) would over time diminish disparities. The proposals would likely alleviate some disparities but not all.

Both Marxist and CRT literature on education have shown how disparities in educational outcomes are embedded in the schooling system in the U.S. Nonetheless, both argue that schools need to be restored to better align with democratic aspirations and promises of an equitable education. My research builds upon and departs from this critical tradition by arguing that compulsory schooling has been a fundamental institution in the U.S. for racial structuring, the contemporary evidence for which are deep and persistent racial disparities in outcomes for students. Racialized disparities in outcomes are not simply the effects of institutional failure or racialized resource inequalities upon the otherwise neutral institution of compulsory schooling. Rather, compulsory schooling must itself be understood as a race-making endeavor that produces necessary and expected racial disparities in outcomes.

The Tucson Indian Training School archives underscores the intent and desired affects of compulsory schooling. The historical origins of compulsory schooling illustrate how the institution of school was designed as a disciplinary technology with the objective of (re)producing and conditioning an oppressed consciousness throughout the generations. This has been its task since it began and has been wildly succeeding ever since. To better comprehend the historical legacy of the Tucson Indian Training School, on compulsory school I now turn to Paulo Freire's work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that traces the (re)production of an oppressed conscioues/population, as a way to better comprehend the persistence of disparities in educational outcomes. Freire argues that an oppressed copiousness is learned and points to schools as one site where it is taught.[6] Pedagogy of the oppressor is a learned consciousness that works to create a split consciousness within students. Students not only learn the behaviors and values of this consciousness but takes it on as their own while simultaneously learning to fear/despise/distrust anything that doesn't align with the oppressors values.[7] For Native (Black and Brown) youth, this means they are taught to distrust themselves. Freire's articulation of the oppressor's pedagogy and the archives of the Tucson Indian Training School illuminate how the oppressed consciousness is continuously reproduced, normalized within compulsory schooling in the U.S.

### **3. Case Study of the Tucson Indian Boarding School**

In 1934 the Tucson Indian Training School reported that it had "reached 1400" Indigenous youth since its inception in 1888, yet only 73 students had graduated during this time, a rate of 5.2%.[8] The collection of the Tucson Indian Training School housed at the Arizona Historical Society, has over 50 record-keeping booklets spanning from 1909 to 1951.[9] Subjects taught included Arithmetic, English, Social Sciences, Art, Biology, Science, Spanish, History, and Music.[10] A school report from the academic year of 1933-34 documents 6th grade to 1st grade student promotions at the school, as well as who was held back and those who were promoted with conditions.[11] In the 6th grade, there was fourteen students who were promoted, eight where promoted with conditions, and two where held back. This means that over 41% of the 6th grade class was struggling or outright failed. For the 5th grade class, fifteen were promoted, thirteen were promoted with conditions, and five were held back.[12] Over 54% of the class had struggled or failed. Given the small class sizes and



that students lived at school, it is stranger that students did not receive assistance to increase their marks in their classes. Proponents of IBS claimed that Indigenous children needed to be removed from their community and placed under the supervision of school staff and teachers to ensure their assimilation into American society. With such a high percentage of students academically struggling within the Tucson Indian Trading School, it is no wonder why their graduation rate was so low.

The Tucson Indian Training School's scholastic record does not improve much over time. In 1950 a teacher by the name of W. Donalson, taught 8th grade Math and 9th grade Science.[13] In his 8th grade class had a total of twenty-six students. Only one student received an A, three received a B, two had B-, three had C+, nine had C, one had a C-, two had D's and three had F's.[14] The letter grade C is assigned to students who are barely meeting classroom and academic expectations. The number of students with C's or lower in Mr. Donalson's class was fifteen. This means that fifteen out of twenty-six students were struggling to comprehend the instruction/material or failing the class altogether. That's over 57% of his students struggling to grasp the material. In his 9th grade Science class, nineteen out of twenty-nine of his students had a C or lower, that means 65% of his students struggled in the classroom.

What these documents help to illustrate is that "passing" students was a fundamental component of the school's pedagogy. Instead of assisting students' comprehension of materials (which again would be inline with IBS objectives), students were passed along to the subsequent grade and arguably more ill prepared to succeed in the following grades. This cycle of "passing" students increases their risk of failing courses in the future, being held back or leaving school altogether. "Passing" students became a way to extend student exposure to the pedagogy of the oppressor - extends their stay within school, bringing them back each year, heightening their exposure to this pedagogy. The expanded implementation of compulsory schooling has only intensified the practice of "passing" students.

Contemporary educational scholars have argued that this is a systemic issue within schools today that disproportionately affect youth of color, making them ill equipped to succeed in subsequent grades, much less move successfully within society.[15] The practice of "passing" students, well intended or not, arose out of IBS. In order to succeed in school, students have to master or mimic the pedagogy of the oppressor embedded in academic subjects. "Passing" marks students as failures: being slow or simple, lacking motivation. In this way "passing" students is a pedagogical form of violence that works to racialize bodies within schools - it maintains the expectation that Black, Brown and Indigenous youth are more likely to have a harder time in school and potentially fail. Compulsory schooling radicalizes youth as either approximating the pedagogy of the oppressor or not. This framework helps to clarify that race does not simply impact one's schooling experiences but rather that *schooling is a race-making institution in and of its self that normalizes the slow death of these populations*. This is why disparities in educational outcomes continue to persist. It's by design, not by institutional failure.

## Bibliographical references

[1] Nasaw. *Schooled to Order*, 100.

[2] *Ibid*, 76.

[3] Darling-Hammond "New Standards and Old Inequalities", 268.

[4] *Ibid*, 270.

[5] *Ibid*, 275

[6] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 45

[7] *Ibid*, 48.

[8] Pamphlet for "The Tucson Indian Training School", 1934, Folder 2, Box1, MS 0809 Tucson Indian Training School Records 1888-1953, Arizona Historical Society Archives, Tucson, Arizona.

[9] Unpublished School Records, Boxes 4-9, 12, 13, MS 0809 Tucson Indian Training School Records 1888-1953, Arizona Historical Society Archives, Tucson, Arizona.

[10] *Ibid*.



[11]. Unpublished School Records , “Student Promotions 1903-34”, Folder 2, Box 12, MS 0809 Tucson Indian Training School Records 1888-1953, Arizona Historical Society Archives, Tucson, Arizona.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Unpublished School Records - W. Donalson, Folder 8, Box 13, MS 0809 Tucson Indian Training School Records 1888-1953, Arizona Historical Society Archives, Tucson, Arizona.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Inoue, Antiracist Writing Assessments Ecologies, 28.

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