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## TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

### *ENSEÑAR Y APRENDER EN UNA ÉPOCA DE PANDEMIA*

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the implications of Antonia Darder's article "Reflections on Cultural Democracy and Schooling" (this issue) on the author's pedagogy as a teacher educator preparing teacher candidates to work in urban public schools during the pandemic. The author illustrates the ways in which he integrates Darder's culturally democratic pedagogy into his teaching. Particular attention is placed on how the author helps teacher candidates analyze the role of ideology in concealing and legitimizing structures of power, guiding candidates to center students' lived experiences in the curriculum and develop student voice, and cultivating their capacity to understand teaching as a moral and political act.

**KEYWORDS:** teacher education, pre-service social justice, urban schools, critical pedagogy.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo explora las implicaciones del trabajo de Antonia Darder “Reflexiones sobre la democracia cultural y la escolarización” (en este número) con respecto a la pedagogía del autor del trabajo en tanto que educador del profesorado que prepara candidatos para trabajar en escuelas públicas urbanas durante la pandemia. El autor ilustra cómo integra la pedagogía culturalmente democrática de Darder en su enseñanza. El trabajo pone especial énfasis en cómo su autor ayuda a los postulantes a profesores a analizar el papel de la ideología en ocultar y legitimar estructuras de poder, guiando a los candidatos a plasmar sus experiencias vividas en el currículum y a desarrollar su voz, así como a cultivar su capacidad de entender la enseñanza como un acto moral y político.

**Palabras clave:** *formación del profesorado, justicia social en la formación docente, escuelas urbanas, pedagogía crítica.*

As a teacher educator at a large public university in Los Angeles, I find Antonia Darder’s article “Reflections on Cultural Democracy and Schooling” timely and important. Significant in her opening is a discussion of the uneven impact of the pandemic in the United States and the globe. Preparing teachers to meet the social, academic, and emotional needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of color (BIPOC) students within this context has not been easy. The pandemic acted like kerosene being dumped into the middle of a wildfire and causing major disruptions, pain, trauma, and anxiety in poor, immigrant, and working-class communities. Intertwined with the pandemic, a number of social, cultural, and economic issues collided with

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each other and exasperated the efforts of critical educators to create nurturing and humanizing spaces for their students.

The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor inspired national protests at the end of May 2020 to end racially motivated state-sponsored violence against Black people. Amongst their demands for social, cultural, and economic reform, the Black Lives Matter movement called for abolishing police departments, ending the school-to-prison pipeline, and changing curriculum to include anti-racist frameworks. Within LAUSD (Los Angeles Unified School District), these efforts culminated in the gains of two major demands. The first was that the school board agreed to cut \$25 million from the Los Angeles School Police Department by replacing 133 school police positions with school climate coaches tasked with creating positive school culture and climate. The second demand gained was the inclusion of the Black Lives Matter at School curriculum and the expansion of the curriculum to include Black authors and social justice connections (Shuttleworth, 2021).

The victory was short-lived when school districts suddenly closed their doors and moved to online education in the Spring of 2020. Given less than a week to transition their curriculums to online platforms, teachers suddenly faced blank screens and felt unprepared to provide academic and socio-emotional support. While school closures were done to protect the health and safety of students, the closures also exacerbated the social and economic inequality that already existed. In 2019, only 46% of LAUSD graduates meet the minimum requirements for college entrance (Swaak, 2019).

Moving instruction online created immediate challenges for students and their families. Students lacked the internet, technology, and skills needed to fully participate, especially elementary students (Burke, 2020). A survey conducted by Educators for Excellence and USC (University of Southern California) researchers

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found that teachers reported only 23% of all students regularly attended online classes and 48% completed assignments. The academic and social-emotional needs were not met for its most vulnerable populations including homeless, LGBTQ+, low-income, emerging bilingual, and students with disabilities (Estrada-Miller *et al.*, 2020). A similar study conducted by the independent analysis unit of LAUSD found that students with the lowest levels of weekly participation tended to be working-class Black and Latinx, Emerging Bilingual Learners, students with disabilities, and students in homeless programs (Besecker and Thomas, 2020).

In addition to the academic challenges students faced during the first year of the pandemic, they also experienced food and housing insecurity. Prior to the pandemic, 80% of LAUSD students lived in poverty. Students whose families were in entry level work and / or service sector jobs were severely impacted when unemployment peaked at 20.3% in Los Angeles County (Wagner, 2020). In response, the school district opened food banks across their campuses and delivered over 40 million meals over a 15 week time period (Los Angeles School District, 2020). As displaced and underemployed workers scrambled to figure out how to make ends meet, the stock market hit new highs, and hyper-accelerated economic inequality. Between March 2020 and September 2020, the net worth of the 14 richest Americans increased by \$401.4 billion (Business Insider, 2020).

At the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, educators breathed a sigh of relief and hoped the summer would be an opportunity to recover and plan for the next year with a renewed sense of purpose as schools transitioned to in-person teaching. LAUSD implemented a vigorous safety plan that included such measures as weekly testing, isolation and quarantine protocols, and vaccinations. The initial joy of seeing students in person quickly faded away as educators were thrust into the center of a number of crises at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year. At

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first, it began with teachers managing their own anxieties about returning to campuses where they could be exposed to Covid and infect others in their households. They constantly sanitized classrooms and made sure students were following safety protocols. Students who spent the last two years away from schools and dealing with traumas by themselves also needed help managing their own anxieties and emotions. Trying to address these issues quickly became untenable as teachers ran to put out one fire after another. Teachers faced daily fights, disruption of school days due to gun and bomb threats, figuring out how to provide instructions for students who missed classes because they tested positive, and covering classes for teachers who also became sick (Mekler, 2022). Then came the spread of the Covid-19 variant, Omicron. On the first day of coming back from the winter break, more than 62,000 LAUSD students and staff tested positive (Esquivel *et al.*, 2022). In some schools, less than a third of students were present for the first week of school. Administrators scrambled to find enough substitutes to cover classes where teachers were out sick.

The teacher shortage problem is not a new phenomenon. Researchers have been trying to sound the alarm to the growing crisis. For example, the Learning Policy Institute published a report in 2016 concluding that between 2009 and 2014, national teacher education enrollments dropped from 691,000 to 451,000, a 35% reduction. Through a combination of supply and demand issues, the report concluded that by 2018 there would be an annual shortage of 112,000 teachers and remain close to that level thereafter. Teachers in poor and working-class BIPOC communities, as well as BIPOC teachers, tended to have higher rates of attrition. California experienced the most severe shortage and was unable to fill positions in special education, math, science, and bilingual education (Sutcher *et al.*, 2016). Carver-Thomas *et al.* (2022) found that the pandemic magnified the problem of finding

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qualified candidates to fill positions. For instance, six California school districts surveyed between August and September 2021 did not fill 10% or more of their total vacancies by the start of the school year. A factor identified for the shortages was an increase in retirements and resignations due to the challenges of the pandemic. In an attempt to close the shortages, districts have turned towards hiring underprepared teachers as interns or with permits and waivers.

How do educators respond to conditions that appear to look like scenes from dystopian virus sci-fi movies? How can teachers persevere and remain hopeful despite these conditions? What tools can help them reflect on their roles as critical educators and engage in a collective political movement to challenge social, political, and economic inequality? What type of knowledge and skills can teachers use to help BIPOC students critically reflect on their schooling experiences?

Reading through Antonia's article at this moment brings me a moment of much needed reflection, affirmation, and healing. She reminds me that the fallout from the pandemic emerged not only from the last two years but rather, the culmination of the colonial and neoliberal legacies in the United States and the globe. In the midst of all this pain and suffering, teachers have been left to deal with the impact and consequences of "rampant marketization of the curriculum, an ethos of individualism and competition, accountability schemes of high stakes practices, and privatization of education have disfigured the labor of teachers" (Darder, 2022). Although these conditions might seem overwhelming and too powerful to challenge individually, Antonia argues that critical educators, in participation with their students and caregivers, can not only challenge these legacies but also transform them. Foundational in this political project is understanding how culture and power shape the consciousness of teachers and students.



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Within my own pedagogy working with novice teachers, I also believe in the importance of examining the role of ideology and hegemony in maintaining and reproducing inequality. I have noticed it is easier for novice teachers to identify blatant forms of oppression from individual school personnel and miss subtle forms in which power operates. In the Fall quarter, novice teachers are required to make observations in their field placements before starting student teaching in the Winter quarter. In debriefing their experiences, they will often share frustrations of racist school staff and miss the more subtle social processes that reproduce white supremacy. While these individuals are problematic, I also encourage novices to reflect on how school policies and practices are normalized, and we don't often question the ways in which white supremacy is embedded in them. For example, in many schools it is common to see posters that promote the importance of having "grit" or have illustrations of a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. Educators lecture their students about having resiliency in the face of the challenges they experience. Rather than having a fixed mindset that leads them to give up, students should develop a growth mindset that sees failure as an opportunity for growth. Riley Drake and Alicia Oglesby (2020) explore the pervasiveness of white supremacy in K-12 education through traditional social-emotional programs. They argue that educators find them alluring because it transfers the responsibility of learning from educators to students and fails to address students' material conditions that influence academic achievement. Despite the various systemic inequalities facing BIPOC students, individual character development is promoted. The message sent is, "Sure, racism is tough, but if you work hard and don't give up, you can learn to deal with it. Just don't give up!" (Drake and Oglesby, 2020, p. 6). Grit and mindset programs are harder to identify as oppressive because they are normalized as helping students.





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to read, reflect and support each other through the writing and research process. While I am always impressed with all of my students' work, Esther Kim's inquiry project stands out for her exemplary integration of Darder's culturally democratic pedagogy. At the beginning of the academic year, Esther was frustrated with students in her math class and was looking to find new strategies to increase homework completion and test scores. Used to teaching math as an abstract and disconnected subject, Esther began to think of ways of connecting students' lived experiences to the math curriculum and creating a space where students engaged in dialogue. In the process of creating a unit on interest, Esther came across an advertisement for a department chain store in a Spanish newspaper. The ad featured a furniture set with a monthly payment of \$26.99. Esther thought the ad was an excellent example to illustrate how interest increases the total cost of an item. Excited about the potential analysis and discussion of the ad, she brought it to class the next day and placed it on a document camera. Projecting the ad on the board, Esther turned to the class and asked what they saw. After a brief moment of uncomfortable silence, a student asked, "\$26.99 for what?"

Thinking this was an excellent question, Esther zoomed into the ad so the class could see more details. Reading it more closely, another student asked, "How many weeks?". When they discovered it was for a total of 78 weeks, the class wondered how much the total cost would be if they calculated the interest. Excited the ad was prompting the type of inquiry she was looking to generate, Esther invited the class to make the calculations. Upon completion, the class discovered the total cost for the furniture set was \$2105,22. Looking at the total cost, a student wondered about the original cost of the furniture set. Reading through the fine print they discovered it was \$900. Realizing the people who agreed to make monthly payments would pay more because of the interest added, students became outraged. Thinking



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those limit-situations (Freire, 1970) through which emancipatory interventions can be developed” (Darder, 2022). The history of the United States is filled with examples of teachers engaging in political action. Some of the earliest strikes occurred in Pennsylvania in late 1929 and 1930 when teachers went uncompensated for over three months (Toloudis, 2019). In 1968 the first state-wide teacher strike occurred in Florida (Noll, 2017). More recently, in 2019 more than 30,000 LAUSD teachers went on a six day strike to increase salaries, reduce class size, hire more school nurses and increasing school funding (Stokes, 2019). In addition to fighting for pay and funding increases, teachers have also been involved in the broader struggle for civil rights. Baker (2011) documents how African American teachers at Burke Industrial School, a segregated school in South Carolina, contributed to the development of the civil rights movement. Challenging the industrial and practical training of the school curriculum, African American teachers between 1940 and 1963, sought to foster critical consciousness and infuse the democratic ideals of John Dewey. Students actively applied the lessons they learned at school to the protests, sit-ins and boycotts of the civil rights movement. Similarly, De La Trinidad (2015) traces the role Mexican American educators in Tuscan fostered the development of bilingual education between 1958 and 1969. Challenging Americanization programs that sought to strip students’ identities and language, these educators instead created culturally sustaining classrooms that integrated their students’ language, history, and cultural backgrounds. Over time, these efforts lead to the passage of the Bilingual Educational Act of 1969.

These stories of teachers making change both inside and outside the classroom are important at this moment in time. The collective toll of the pandemic has caused many of us to focus on simply surviving. Antonia challenges us to maintain hope because we can not only draw inspiration from the past but also draw

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lessons from previous social movements. More than ever, educators need to develop political clarity as a way to fight back the exhaustion and begin to work collectively to create humanizing educational spaces. This process requires us to have a deep commitment and love for the students and communities we work with. No matter how overwhelming and systemic the challenges might appear, collectively we can challenge and transform them.

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