Emma Gajda

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Professor H. Hoang

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From Pidgin to Policy: Examining Hawaii's English Standard Schools Using CRT

"...from my mouth, if I let it rip right out the lips, my words will always come out like home."

This poetic statement from Lovey, a Hawaiian native in *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers,* a Hawai'i focused novel by Lois-Ann Yamanaka, embodies the complex emotions of minority students in Hawaii's 1920s English Standard Schools (ESS). While the uncontextualized words may initially appear as a proud declaration, Lovey is earnestly expressing deep shame and disappointment in herself. Despite her clear intelligence and eloquence, she struggles to meet her school's expectations for 'proper' English, leading her to question her worth as a student and a person. For educators and policymakers striving to foster a positive and just learning environment, it is essential to critically examine the stories of real students who have faced the repercussions of unjust educational systems. Precedent acts as a means of guidance, allowing for the reevaluation of certain systems.

Through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which analyzes systemic racism, teachers can work towards dismantling cultural shame and racialized roles in schools. An analysis of Lovey's story and the implementation of ESS in the 1920s reveals how schools often sustain educational practices that reinforce racialized roles and perpetuate feelings of shame and

foster the internalization of racism among students. Investigating the Hawaiian ESS through CRT reveals that these supposed American-character cultivating institutions were not merely focused on language instruction as claimed; rather, they played a crucial role in maintaining racial and economic dominance for whites. This examination illuminates the roots of educational inequity and provides valuable insights for educators committed to creating inclusive and equitable learning environments.

To begin, it is important to understand the history behind the creation of English Standard Schools and their counterpart, the Non-English Standard Schools (NESS). Between 1850 and 1920, Hawaii saw an influx of non-native, non-English-speaking workers from various Asian countries seeking jobs on the sugar plantations (Young). This migration transformed Hawaii's linguistic landscape, leading to the development of a creole known as 'Pidgin.' Initially created by plantation managers to simplify communication, Pidgin soon became a marker of lesser intelligence, primarily due to its association with people of color. This perception resulted in the segregation of Pidgin and non-English-speaking students from those who spoke English through the establishment of ESS, effectively dividing white students from black and brown ones. While white parents wanted non-white students to assimilate, they preferred that assimilation occur away from their children, fearing that the perceived inferiority of minorities might be 'catching.'

With the introduction of ESS, a racialized system was established that maintained cultural and racial dominance while also securing economic benefits from a segregated labor force. Their design kept native Hawaiians and people of color in labor roles on sugar plantations, while white students were taught how to manage those plantations in ESS. This system economically benefited whites, ensuring a steady supply of cheap labor. The concept of an 'overeducation' of black and brown students was viewed as a threat; if laborers acquired skills beyond those needed

for plantation work, they might seek other opportunities, disrupting the economic advantages enjoyed by the ruling class (Young). Thus, maintaining racial hierarchies was directly linked to preserving financial benefits. For many years, this arrangement ensured that whites gained status, respect, and wealth, while minority populations were increasingly associated with poverty and a lack of education. CRT highlights that such racial stratification is deeply rooted in institutional structures, not merely individual biases. It demonstrates how educational policies were part of a broader pattern of systemic racism, reinforcing existing hierarchies that permeate the socio-economic fabric of society.

Lovey, a student of the NESS, exemplifies the implications of racializing education. Her internalization of the ESS leads to an inability to accept that language does not determine worth or intellectual inferiority (Young). The language-based segregation in ESS not only pigeonholed students into expected career paths but did so through a racial divide in educational experiences. This segregation was both physical and symbolic, reinforcing the notion that English, and by extension white culture, was superior. In turn, it perpetuated a form of internalized racism among many in the population, as seen in Lovey, who came to view Pidgin as inferior and herself as less competent. Such a system not only shaped how students perceived and treated themselves but also how the educational system treated them, limiting their future schooling opportunities. Deborah Brandt describes the accumulation of literacy as a "...piling up and extending out," illustrating that the acquisition of literacy in one generation builds upon the next. When a generation is not taught effectively, like Lovey's, they lay no foundation on which to 'pile,' leaving future generations with less to begin with. This concept is exemplified in the case of ESS, where only certain demographics received a genuine education.

Through the scrutiny of ESS and a compassionate focus on Lovey's story, educators can identify the flaws in division, and instead concentrate on community building in their classrooms. The racialized policies of ESS in Hawaii exemplify systemic racism and illustrate that racial stratification is not merely a matter of individual bias but is deeply embedded in institutional structures. This case emphasizes the need to create inclusive, diverse environments where critical thought can flourish. To create such an environment, teachers must first examine what they already have. What books and authors are they teaching? What are their expectations for all students? Do they provide students with historical figures they can relate to? Are they teaching more than just the traditional perspectives of history? By asking themselves these questions, teachers can identify where they are succeeding in providing equitable education and where they may be falling short.

By understanding how systemic biases have restricted access to quality education for marginalized groups, teachers can work to mitigate these effects, building equitable learning environments where everyone can succeed. This requires valuing students' cultural backgrounds and engaging thoughtfully with race. Challenging the notion that 'the white way is the right way' is essential for addressing persistent inequities and fostering a more just society.

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