

A Guide to Coded Language in Education

Subversive.Thread

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Academia has an aversion to language that precisely names oppression. Maybe it's because it is largely controlled by wealthy, conservative white men (84 percent of full-time college professors are white and 60 percent of those are men). The stats for elementary and high school teachers aren't better — 80 percent white.

Where white people don't dominate totally, academia is still full of liberals who too often trade accurately naming oppression for institutional clout. In this Eurocentric, male, and capitalist education system, radical BI&POC are left in a constant cycle of learning “new” language to describe problems we've lived through and named for generations.

But we think it is important to push back against the palatable renaming of our oppression. So today, we wanted to cut through the bullshit. In the traditions of Black, Brown, and Indigenous radical thought, we will say aloud the names of our oppression when we see it or experience it: We will say this is white supremacy; this is anti-Blackness; this is cishetero patriarchy; this is ableism; this is empire.

We start with Vol. I of our “Guide to Coded Language in Education.” This series is meant to sift through some of the jargon we hear in education spaces. It is a work in progress. If any of these slides feel unclear, if you would like to see more writing on a topic, please reach out and tell us. There is only so much we can convey in a single slide on Instagram and we welcome the need to bring more nuance to this discussion.

Grit. Is a coded term for saying a child survived the conditions of white supremacy, anti-Blackness and capitalism without having to name those systems of oppression directly — or their correlative effects on young people of color.

“Black, Brown [& Indigenous] [students] don't need to learn grit, they need schools to stop being racist.” — Andre Perry

Under-Represented Minority. BI&POC are not minorities — we are the world's global majority. We are only “minorities” within the borders of Europe's colonial projects. And we are only under-represented to the extent that those projects must continue legacies of genocide, slavery, theft, & Empire to maintain control of their borders. White settlers must ask themselves who would they be without their borders?

Academic Rigor. Rigor itself isn't necessarily a bad thing — but when combined with grading it becomes a tool to create classroom meritocracy. In this way rigor is wielded as an extension

of the carceral state, to punish struggling students by creating failure where growth might otherwise exist. This cycle of stratifying students into successes and failures is necessary to maintain classist and racist institutions like the school to prison pipeline.

College Ready. The bar for “college readiness” centers white students’ educational experiences because it requires access to institutional support that most majority BI&POC districts have been systematically cut off from (racist zoning laws, redistricting, & education policy that ties school funding to property taxes). Here “college readiness” becomes a means to trap predominantly poor BI&POC students into remediation and exhaust their financial aid before they can graduate.

Achievement Gap. There is no “achievement gap.” There is a predictable disparity in learning outcomes between well and poorly resourced communities. Calling it an achievement gap obfuscates the generational wealth and access afforded to white students. Creating an equitable education system means decentering racist outcomes like test scores & grades and shifting resources to meet historically exploited communities’ material and socio-emotional needs.

Under Resourced. Is a way of describing the historical exploitation of BI&POC communities as happenstance rather than as coordinated campaigns of disenfranchisement, marginalization, and terror. It also positions the current distribution of resources and access as something that can be fixed with a simple realignment of policy in an otherwise well-intentioned system. It does not name the intentions of white supremacy, capitalism, or empire.

Growth Mindset. If educators teaching “growth mindset” do not take young people’s environment into account, particularly, youth experiencing white supremacy, anti-Blackness poverty, patriarchy, and ableism, then they are engaged in glorified victim blaming. Educators should remember that BI&POC experience systemic oppression and are more likely to develop a “fixed mindset” because they are far more likely to be punished for their mistakes.

Perfect Attendance. Is the normalized pressure for students to operate as machines rather than human beings who get sick, who navigate trauma, who experience fear, loss, and precarity, or who require support navigating access needs like nutrition and transportation. Perfect attendance is how schools begin to coerce students into internalized ableism and model capitalist work ethic.

Adversity Score. The “adversity score” was College Board’s attempt to account for inequity in students’ educational experiences’ without having to seriously question the efficacy of its test, the SAT — or how the SAT itself perpetuates racial inequity. But attempts to quantify BI&POC students experiences with systemic oppression into a single, numerical value is utilitarian, positivist, and the Institutionalization of oppression olympics.

Cultural Competency. Is a term used to dance around the need for schools to provide explicitly anti-racist training.

“In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be antiracist.” — Angela Davis

Standardized Test. Standardization is always created relative to a benchmark or a mean. So educators must always ask “Standardized for who?” In the case of an education system created by and for white people, standardization simply means the institutionalization of white students’ learning outcomes — outcomes which have been scaffolded by hundreds of years of generational wealth denied to BI&POC communities.

Inner-City. “Inner-city schools,” sometimes referred to as “urban schools,” is a coded way of naming Schools whose populations are predominantly Black & Brown. The term skates around the history of school segregation in America, around the process of white flight that followed

Brown V. Board of Education which left what became BI&POC school districts without funding, and around racist zoning practices — old and new.

Under-Achieving Youth. Is coded victim blaming. It disappears the generational support middle class and affluent white students have received to scaffold their academic achievement while at the same time invisibilizing the added emotional and physical labor BI&POC students do everyday while navigating and surviving histories of genocide, white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and institutionalized poverty.

At-Risk Youth. Is a term of misdirection. It positions BI&POC — and our communities — as centers of risk, But the risks in BI&POC students' lives emanate more from criminalization, policing, and disenfranchisement from economic freedom than our communities. This misdirection is a form of victim blaming because it holds BI&POC responsible for overcoming conditions created by oppression rather than dismantling that oppression.

Underserved Community. Is a phrase which positions white saviorism, charity, and the nonprofit industrial complex as viable solutions to the destruction settler colonialism, capitalism, and Anti-Blackness have enacted. Their purpose is to assuage white guilt not to name systemic oppression or to bring about justice. See also: “Low Income” and “Disadvantaged Background”

Classroom Management. We recognize there are forms of classroom management that are nonhierarchical and nonpunitive. Here we mean to interrogate the ways in which classroom management becomes a synonym for disciplinary punishment, e.g., public shaming, callouts, extra work, and the threats of detention, suspension, and expulsion. Each of these disciplinary actions are early tools in white settler colonialism's criminalization of BI&POC.

Special Education. Is code for identifying neurodivergence and disability in students without having to explicitly challenge the ableism of standardized school systems. A failure to challenge standardization is ableist because it prevents the possibility of building decentralized systems that encompass all students' access needs rather than just a normalized neurotype.

Economic Diversity. This is a fancy way of saying a school is gentrifying. This terminology is also used when administrators want to skate around naming poverty as a prominent and defining force in the school district. Educators should ask why is that new language is constantly invented to name poverty?

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