

The Complexities of Social Justice: Providing a Voice for Students of Color

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Dr. Caraballo refers to herself as “a person of color, daughter of immigrants, and an English language learner” (Caraballo, 2014). She was born in Puerto Rico to Cuban immigrant parents who did not speak English and from a very young age, her parents instilled upon her the importance of education. Dr. Caraballo was sheltered by a close community of immigrants and it wasn't until she left for college that she became aware of what it meant to be a person of color in mainstream U.S. (Caraballo, 2014). Dr. Caraballo began her career as an English teacher in a very diverse school in California and that was when she became aware of the gender and color blindness rhetoric that she had internalized (Caraballo, 2014). Through her journey, Dr. Caraballo often grappled with conflicting views between culture and academic aspiration as a woman of color. Through personal negotiations, she recognized that her work in academia should always reflect her position as a woman of color.

Dr. Caraballo, a social justice leader in the field of education, utilizes her platform as an Assistant Professor of English Education at Queens College to engage in complicated conversations about inequities in schools, promote equitable and culturally relevant school curriculum, and also provide opportunities for youth to become agents of change against the inequalities that affect them. She is committed to creating a space for discussing unfair school curriculum, how it affects students of color, and restructuring the lens of deficit thinking that is used to view students of color from low socioeconomic families and their academic struggles. Kelsey, Campuzano, and Lopez (2015) stated that a socially just school leader is not only critical of injustices imposed upon Marginalized students, but they strive to design a school curriculum that is inclusive and just. Dr. Caraballo exemplifies that definition of a social just leader with her

unremitting effort to promote the academic achievement of marginalized students and is particularly captivated by culturally sustaining and socially unbiased literacy curricula and pedagogies.

Creating an inclusive space for youth to voice their concerns by using meaningful and culturally relevant curriculum provides pride and heightens participation in social justice practices (Kelsey, Campuzano, & Lopez, 2015). One way that Dr. Caraballo promotes youth participation in social justice is by facilitating a voluntary after school program at Teacher's College where young people learn how to conduct research and decide on different modes of how to convey their findings. Cyphers for Justice is a program (CFJP) for New York City High School students, incarcerated youth, and educators that utilize youth participatory action research and hip-hop culture to provide opportunities for young people to share their concerns and heighten awareness about important social issues and to be heard (L. Caraballo, personal communication, October 17, 2018).

Dr. Caraballo also engages youth in learning about social issues through a class that she developed and is taught at Queens College. Young people are introduced to qualitative methods of research and engage in discourse about critical perspectives and critical social theory. Students also develop their own research inquiries and decide on different ways to convey their findings. It's an approved college credit pathway and the students present their findings by creating rap songs, short videos, or writing about their experience. "All of these projects want to build young people's voices as creators of knowledge" (L. Caraballo, personal communication, October 17, 2018).

Dr. Caraballo directs a workshop series called *Complicated Conversations Series* at Queens College in which she creates a space to talk about difficult topics that are not discussed

in classrooms because they are controversial, people feel like they will be judged, they don't feel safe, or nobody is ready to talk about them (L. Caraballo, personal communication, October 17, 2018). *Complicated Conversations Series* is a perfect medium to address biases and provide support for teachers to take a stand and make a change.

A *Complicated Conversations Series* created, written, and performed by New York City Public High School students was presented at the Kupferberg Center for the Arts at Queens College. The Epic Theater Ensemble encourages and values youth voice by providing a platform for students to tell their stories about the inequalities and unfair treatment of minority students. *Overdrive* is a depiction of the student's research findings about standardized assessments in public schools and *Nothing About Us* is about educational segregation. Both performances are presented in a humorous way, but the message of inequality is strategically and fervently conveyed. After both performances the students facilitate a complicated conversation about the concerns that they presented to the audience through their drama performance.

Dr. Caraballo shared that her identity is the reason why she advocates for marginalized students of color and expresses her pleasure for working with current and future educators in an urban, public institution, and how she encourages all teachers to prepare students to fight for social justice (L. Caraballo, personal communication, October 17, 2018).

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