



PURSUING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH EDUCATION POLICY AND SCHOOLS
Christyna Serrano-Crenshaw October 27, 2017
Speech at New Leader Scholarship Reception

Exactly ten years ago, when I first became a New Leader Scholar, I gave a speech at one of these receptions. When Ruth asked me to speak tonight for the second time, a true honor and privilege, I decided to revisit my old speech.

In that speech, I talked about my humble beginnings on the small island of Puerto Rico where my life chances were deeply imprinted with the cruel forces of social inequality—acutely demonstrated by the federal response, or lack thereof, to the devastation and ongoing humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico brought on by hurricane Maria. I also discussed how although I come from an impoverished background, where I did not have access to a high quality education, I was blessed with athletic talent, which allowed me to receive a full scholarship in track and field to UC Berkeley. However, and unfortunately, I was more focused on being an athlete than a good student and lacked the necessary cultural capital to fully understand and take advantage of my educational opportunity.

As a result, and at the risk of revealing my age, after participating as an extra in the movie “The Matrix,” which was filming in the Bay Area at the time, I decided to pursue an acting career in Los Angeles, in the middle of the semester, without formally withdrawing from Cal. Consequently, my grades that semester were all F’s and I was subsequently dismissed by the university. It wasn’t until six years later, after the birth of my first son, Caelan, that I realized how important it was that I finish my degree. Therefore, I accomplished everything necessary to be readmitted into Cal. And upon my return, I maximized my second chance at educational opportunity. As a re-entry, non-traditional, student parent and double major in sociology and social welfare, I developed a critical lens about the nature of social structural inequality and the role of schools in its reproduction and perpetuation. However, being at Cal the second time made me realize how important education is for individuals and communities’ life chances and how it can serve as a powerful vehicle for social justice. Therefore, once I completed my undergraduate degree, I moved straight into a PhD program in Education Policy at UC Berkeley.

During my time as a PhD student, my background significantly influenced not only my reasons for choosing a PhD program in education, but also the topic of my dissertation. The question of how change agents can effectively pursue educational equity and social justice has always been the North star of my activist and scholarly agenda. It is the question I will seek answers to until I move on from this earth. And my dissertation brought me one step closer to the answers I seek.

My dissertations guiding research question was: How are education policies and schools both reproducing structural inequality and also promoting educational equity and social justice? I

explored this question through an exemplary case: The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010. The HHFKA is the most recent reauthorization of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and endeavors to reduce childhood hunger and improve the nutritional quality of school meals to promote health and address childhood obesity. Childhood hunger and obesity are strongly associated with race and class, with rates of prevalence being substantially higher than the national average among Black and Hispanic households, single-parent families, and households with low educational attainment and incomes near, or below the federal poverty line. Childhood hunger and obesity are a consequence of inequitable access to healthy food and symptoms of an unjust food system and significantly impact children's health, cognitive development, and ability to come to school ready to learn. Therefore, their amelioration through the school lunch program reflects how education policies and schools can be used to promote educational equity and social justice.

My dissertation examined the implementation of the HHFKA at the local level, specifically, the Oakland Unified School District, and analyzed the mediating factors that shaped the process of implementation in OUSD and the outcomes. What I found was that implementation actors at the local level, through innovative programming and collaborations with community partners, were able to take a program called California Thursdays to scale across the state. The program has increased students access to fresh, local fresh fruits and vegetables, grains, and proteins and is significantly and positively changing how schools are thinking and going about the process of serving kids food in schools. This demonstrates the power of education policy and schools to pursue equity.

My time as a doctoral student has been a sometimes challenging but amazing stepping stone in my lifelong journey of pursuing equity. While I was in my program, I have gotten married, had a second child whose name is Maddox, opened a small business with my husband in Hawai'i (and now live there), and on May 19, 2017, I finished my doctorate and officially became Dr. Serrano-Crenshaw. Presently, I work as an institutional and educational researcher at Kapi'olani Community College and am working on securing a tenure track position at UH Manoa's College of Education. On the side, I am a highly-educated ice cream scooper and artisan ice cream cookie sandwich maker at our store, CC Cookies & Cream.

In closing, I'd like to share a quote from Paolo Freire that inspires me daily: "Say yes to life, yea to it all, and participate with joy, humility, indignation and gratitude in the adventurous struggle to remake the world each and every day." The New Leader Scholarship and network has been an integral part of my adventurous struggle for the pursuit of social change. Therefore, with all of my heart, I want to thank Ruth and Bill, all of the scholars, and all of you for your support.

Thank you