

**A Lexicon for Social Justice:
New Ways of Knowing, New Ways of Seeing
Charles A. Barrett, PhD, NCSP**

Before a serendipitous introduction to school psychology, I considered teaching high school English or becoming a speech pathologist. As a child, I participated in 6 years of school-based speech therapy for stuttering. And because of this, writing has always been my preferred method of communication. Unlike the uncomfortable and embarrassing moments when speaking in class, there weren't any unexpected dysfluencies in my writing. Over time, I've wondered if this inconvenient impediment led to being captivated and fascinated by the poetic potential of words. Whether reading Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son* or listening to the rhythmic eloquence of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., who persuasively spoke truth to power, their intentional use of language not only inspired me, but it continues to challenge my professional practice as a school psychologist.

Language and Systems

While the field recognizes and is increasingly embracing social justice, it's critical that we never lose sight of what it is, and what it isn't. Social justice is not a fad, a trend, a buzzword, or the next hot topic in education or popular psychology. What it is, however, is a way of thinking and practicing that's embedded in every aspect of the profession and our roles as school psychologists. Most importantly, social justice requires a systems orientation to understanding student functioning. Therefore, how we use words to convey the realities of institutional injustice and structural oppression is essential. The few forthcoming examples highlight slight, but nonetheless meaningful differences in how words shape our perceptions of children, families, schools, and communities that have been, and continue to be, marginalized by systemic factors.

Opportunity gaps, not achievement gaps. Researchers, schools, policymakers, and professional associations have taken strides to reframe the achievement gap as the opportunity gap. What's the difference? Whereas the achievement gap focuses on the performance (e.g., underachievement) of students or student groups (e.g., Black students compared to White students), opportunity gaps center how systems and structures limit access to educational environments and experiences (e.g., qualified teachers, adequate materials and technology, safe and supportive school cultures) that result in differential outcomes. Said another way, the achievement gap prematurely assumes a deficit orientation—that difficulties lie within the child—but the opportunity gap places the onus where it rightfully belongs: on the system. For a succinct explanation, read *Why We Say "Opportunity Gap" Instead of "Achievement Gap"* by Theresa Mooney.

Minoritized, not minorities. Systems centered language refers to non-White individuals as minoritized rather than minorities. More than a semantic nuance, minoritized focuses on how federal legislation and policies such as slavery, Jim Crow, and redlining have worked against people of color (i.e., Asian/Pacific Islanders, Black/African Americans, Indigenous

Americans, Latinx); minority suggests that some individuals are inherently less than their White counterparts. Perhaps you're reading this and wondering if minoritized is a new word. Maybe it is. But new words are necessary to express new ways of knowing. Because old words are incapable of depicting the growth that school psychology is experiencing, we need new vocabulary to show new ways of seeing and new ways of understanding. Despite its familiarity and frequent use in our field, *diverse* or *diversity* can be highly problematic terms. Simply meaning different or difference, diversity centers White, and Whiteness, as the norm (the standard, the expectation) while everything else is relegated to *different* or *diverse*. Having wrestled with this realization in my own practice and scholarship, I have tried to consistently use systems-oriented language, such as *racially and ethnically minoritized*, that is better aligned with social justice, rather than *culturally and linguistically diverse* to describe the students, families, schools, and communities I serve.

The parameters of this piece don't allow me to discuss additional phrases that illustrate the importance of systems centered terminology. For example, students and families living in situations of low-income and economic marginalization (LIEM; American Psychological Association, 2019) are not vulnerable; they have been marginalized by systemic injustice. The goal of our clinical and educational services should not be cultural competence, but cultural responsiveness, which is a byproduct of cultural humility. And while I understand the sentiment, we shouldn't say that we seek to "speak for the voiceless" or "those who don't have a voice." Why? Because there are no voiceless people. There are, however, people "whose voices have been muted" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2017) and therefore require amplification.

Language and Me

Social justice involves a willingness to challenge our personal limitations and shortcomings in order to become more effective educators. Personally, this has led to interrogating my own use of language. Am I trying to appease (majority White) audiences who may be offended by certain terms (e.g., *White privilege* vs. *privilege*)? Or am I truly making language choices based on what is going to help people learn, grow, and move forward in the best interest of children?

Intersecting with my life and work as a school psychologist is faith. Growing up, I heard (and read) the same New Testament story from multiple perspectives. Notably, the words of the writer accentuated what was salient to them about each event. And so it is for the equitable practice of school psychology: The words we use are a window into how we think. The words we use reveal what we believe and what we value. The words we use tell others what is and what isn't important to us as individuals and educators. The words we use not only show what we see, but how we see. Whether acknowledging systemic responsibility for the plight of children, or prematurely focusing on the individual (ignoring derelict policies that reinforce inequities), both are communicated by our words.

We often tell children to use their words, but how are we using our words? Used to tell stories, what stories are we telling with our words?

Stay tuned for a resource that is being developed by the Social Justice and Publications Committees that will not only provide important definitions to promote shared understanding throughout the profession but are also aligned with the tenets of social justice.

References

American Psychological Association. (2019). *Guidelines for psychological practice for people with low-income and economic marginalization*.

http://apacustomout.apa.org/commentPracGuidelines/Practice/LIEM_Guidelines.pdf

Mooney, T. (2018). *Why we say “opportunity gap” instead of “achievement gap.”* Teach for America. <https://www.teachforamerica.org/stories/why-we-say-opportunity-gap-instead-of-achievement-gap>

National Association of School Psychologists. (2017). *Strategic plan: 2017–2022*. Author.