

## Returning to Normal? The Zero-Sum Phenomenon and Imagining Otherwise

by Omar Davila Jr., McKenzie Mann-Wood, William Martinez & Maria De La Lima - April 30, 2021

*COVID-19 generated a strange paradox. Social suffering reached new heights, and simultaneously, we conceptualized new possibilities. Terms such as “reimagining” and “rethinking” became part of our everyday vocabulary, shaping new possibilities, especially in the field of education. Researchers have long demonstrated the way unequal structures produce unequal outcomes. Yet the very logic driving these inequalities has received much less attention in our imaginative spaces, that is, the zero-sum phenomenon. At its core, the zero-sum phenomenon is the way academic success is based on logics of competition, wherein the academic success of a few requires the nonsuccess of others. Simply consider selective enrollment, award distribution, and standardized testing. In a society in which race, gender, and social class are so intimately connected to notions of merit, it should come as no surprise that the zero-sum phenomenon consistently reproduces power and subordination. We, therefore, call on education scholars, practitioners, and activists to join us in reimagining the future of education, one that departs from exclusion and strives toward transformation.*

For better or worse, COVID-19 served as a catalyst to reimagine new possibilities in education. According to Gloria Ladson-Billings, the pandemic became a “portal” to fix our broken education system—or better yet, consider alternatives (Farrell, 2020). As President Joe Biden and his administration take the helm, his political rhetoric promises a “return to normalcy” (Garofoli, 2021). We must ask, however, Is normalcy desirable? After four years of political turmoil, leading to an attempted coup, it seems quite reasonable at first glance. Ladson-Billings, however, stated the following during an educational conference: “Normal, for the kids I’m most concerned about, was a disaster. . . . Normal was they were being suspended at a disproportionate rate. . . . Normal was they were being expelled” (Farrell, 2020). Perhaps we succeeded at removing a president with authoritarian tendencies, but we should proceed with caution. The pandemic created a space to rethink the future of education and imagine otherwise, all of which may evaporate if we allow normalcy to settle in.

In education, we witnessed drastic changes, sometimes in positive and surprising ways. One of those was the shift away from standardized testing at the university level. Despite years of research studies showing how standardized testing affects students from marginalized backgrounds (Dixon-Roman, 2017; Kidder & Rosner, 2002; Montejano, 2004), it took a pandemic for the University of California to finally phase out the SAT and ACT by 2025 (Jaschik, 2020a); the University of Oregon and Oregon State University will no longer require the SAT and ACT, permanently (Jaschik, 2020b); and Tufts University will conduct a three-year experiment, implementing a test-optional admissions policy (Duck, 2020). In essence, abolishing the SAT and ACT represents a major step forward for students, educators, and scholars committed to transforming education. Unfortunately, the ostensibly meritocratic technologies that reproduce power and subordination extend far beyond standardized testing (Davila Jr., Forthcoming; Baquedano-López, 2004; Bonilla Silva, 2006; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Leonardo, 2013; Meiners, 2010; Rios, 2011; Solomon, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2018).

Herein, we direct attention to an equally disconcerting subject of inquiry, which has received much less attention: the zero-sum structure of education. In another publication, the first author described this phenomenon in the following way:

Consider a fictitious scenario. All students from marginalized backgrounds become high-performing students—strong SAT scores, strong GPAs, and strong letters of recommendation. Even in a scenario where all students are classified as “high-performing,” top universities would reach a saturation point and awards would only go to a select number of students. In essence, the U.S. education system is a zero-sum game, which guarantees a few winners and ensures the reproduction of inequality. (Davila Jr., Forthcoming)

At its core, the zero-sum structure of education is one wherein the academic success of top students, attending top universities, depends on the failure of others or, at the very least, their nonadmission to top universities. The academic success of a few requires the nonsuccess of others. In a society in which race, gender, and social class are so intimately connected to notions of merit and academic success (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hurtado & Sinha, 2016; Noguera, 2008; Rosa, 2019), we must consider the following questions: Is a zero-sum structure of education inherently unequal? Is our approach to raising academic success among marginalized groups limited? And, how might we reimagine a transformative education that transcends the current zero-sum structure?

### EXTENDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Education has long served as the main policy lever to address social inequality (Kantor & Lowe, 2013). Since the Great Society programs of the 1960s, a diverse cadre of policy makers, activists, and researchers have called for an expansion of educational opportunity to address social injustice, especially along the lines of race. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, for example, were developed to combat segregation and racist practices in education, in hopes of providing equitable learning environments for students of color. The 1970s birthed a new approach to educational equity, which aimed to solve social inequality using market-oriented and accountability-based foci. This culminated in the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act under President George W. Bush in 2001 and Race to the Top under President Barack Obama in 2009. Their focus on business logics was subject to intense critical scrutiny, showing how these policies worked against teachers, unions, and communities of color (Apple, 2013; Kantor & Lowe, 2013; Lipman, 2011). The common denominator across all these reforms, nevertheless, is that raising academic success will confer upward mobility for marginalized groups.

Similar logics operate in contemporary policy efforts designed to increase academic success as a form of empowerment. K-12 STEM programs (Morales-Doyle & Gutstein, 2019; Vakil & Ayers, 2019), President Obama's My Brother's Keeper (Davila Jr., 2019; Weiston-Serdan & Daneshzadeh, 2017) and countless diversity and inclusion programs in higher education (Davila Jr., Berumen, Baquedano-López, 2015; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Howard et al., 2016) all assume that increasing academic success under the current system will lead to equity and empowerment. These initiatives, however, insufficiently address the way unequal structures produce unequal outcomes and, more specifically, the zero-sum structure of education. Indeed, Gonzalez and Núñez (2014) argued that one of the main objectives among universities, and top universities in particular, is achieving "world-classness," which operates through exclusion. In other words, a world-class education at top universities is achieved largely because only a limited number of "meritorious" students are conferred access. World-classness and merit, therefore, cannot be universally accessible under a system that operates under zero-sum logics. Unless we are to believe that a zero-sum education system is just, equitable, and transformative, it may be time to consider alternatives.

### IMAGINING OTHERWISE IN EDUCATION

Social change often requires that we go beyond what is deemed practical, affordable, and imaginable. It is particularly important to remember that slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and other oppressive institutions were once deemed the standard, normal way of life. Eventually, they were abolished. Imagining otherwise in education calls on us to consider abolitionist perspectives and to reimagine, rethink, and reconceptualize a *transformative* education (Crawley, 2014; Davis, 2005; Harney & Moten, 2013; Meiners, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2018).

Transformation itself entails a shift, a movement away, a departure from what we otherwise consider "normal" (Tuck & Yang, 2018). Transformation acknowledges that our lived reality is undesirable, unsustainable, and fundamentally inequitable. Abolitionists offer key insights, given that this process is not merely a negative process (Harney & Moten, 2013), but one that entails reimagining and creating a new society rooted in love, sustainability, and a critical uptake of democracy (Davila Jr., Forthcoming). In alignment with Angela Davis (2005), this process begins with the elimination of institutions wherein domination takes place (e.g., prisons, detention centers). Likewise, we argue that imagining otherwise in education necessitates the elimination of all logics, processes, and technologies that sustain inequality. We interrogate the zero-sum phenomenon, for it serves to legitimize unequal social relations in education and society writ large. Furthermore, it can be traced to logics of competition, which derive from ideologies of race, gender, and social class—or what bell hooks (2000) called white supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy. The following question remains, however, where do we go from here?

Following the insights of Paulo Freire (2012), we employ a problem-posing method, thereby challenging what is taken for granted or deemed "normal" in education. We invite researchers, practitioners, and activists to join us, for imagining otherwise will require a communal effort to address a labyrinth of questions, some of which may be controversial. Are zero-sum technologies, such as selective enrollment, inherently unequal? How might we reimagine an education system that departs from zero-sum logics? And, how might we reimagine an education system rooted in love, sustainability, and a critical uptake of democracy? As levels of inequality and social suffering reach new heights, the present historical moment calls on us to employ a more critical and imaginative lens.

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