Ethnic Studies Pedagogies
2023, Vol. 1, Issue 2
www.EthnicStudiesPedagogies.org ISSN 2993 - 3609

The 4 I's of Liberation: Moving Beyond Oppression and onto the Struggle to be Free

Kiki Ochoa, Ethnic Studies Lead Teacher, San Diego Unified School District
Guillermo Gomez, Ethnic Studies Lead Teacher, San Diego Unified School District

Abstract

The 4 I's of Oppression developed by John Bell is an essential tool to introduce students in our Ethnic Studies classes to begin critically analyzing the different forms of oppression that our communities have had to endure. Once students have a strong grasp of the 4 I's of Oppression, we build on this framework with what we call the 4 I's of Liberation. Our contribution to liberatory education has helped our students not only identify oppression they see in their lives but conceptualize what a better world can be like.

Keywords: oppression, ideological, institutional, interpersonal, internalized, liberation.

With over 52 years of combined experience in the public school system, we have taught at every level: from elementary, middle school, high school, community college to graduate courses at institutions of "higher learning." Currently, we are blessed to be able to continue teaching Ethnic Studies in an urban San Diego high school. Our curriculum has always included John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression framework (Cuauhtin, 2019 pg. 216-219) used to analyze how oppression plays out in our daily lives. In order to continue growing, we clearly understood that Ethnic Studies' ultimate goal is to create systems of liberation for ourselves and our communities. John Bell's model is essential to understanding ideological, systemic, interpersonal and internalized oppression. However, over the years, we realized that John Bell's model lacked an explicit path towards liberation. Therefore, we built on our students' strong grasp of John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression, and developed what we call the 4 I's of Liberation. The 4 I's of Liberation transforms students' hopelessness into power and channels their anger into energy to begin conceptualizing a method towards active liberation. In this teacher practitioner reflection piece, we will share how the 4 I's of Liberation in conjunction with John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression is used to analyze past and present systems, social movements, collectives and individuals that have resisted oppression in all its forms, and worked towards liberatory solutions.

After building a strong community and developing a strong sense of identity through several activities and exercises that focus on two (Self and Stories) of the 5 S's of the principles and guidelines of Ethnic Studies (California Department of Education, 2021), we embark into a unit whose ultimate goal is to analyze, deconstruct and struggle against colonialism. In order to do this, we looked for tools and frameworks that teach our students to identify and deconstruct systems of oppression and their impact on our respective realities. John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression has been

a useful framework to give high school students the language to name, analyze and critique such systems.

Within an Ethnic Studies pedagogy students must be able to uncover the truth and John Bell offers a framework that consists of four conceptual areas that helps our students tackle the issues they face in their lives. John Bell defines oppression as "a concept that describes a relationship of dominance and subordination between categories of people in which one benefits from the systematic abuse, exploitation, and injustice directed toward the other" (Cuauhtin, 2019, pp. 216-219). The framework outlined in Figure 1 defines how oppression takes place in our world.

IDEOLOGICAL	**INSTITUTIONAL**
Any oppressive system has at its core the IDEA that one group is somehow better than another, and in some measure has the right to control the other group.	Is demonstrated in how institutions and systems reinforce and manifest ideology.
INTERPERSONAL	**INTERNALIZED**
The way we play violence out on each other, based on oppression.	Internalized oppression means the oppressor doesn't have to exert any more pressure, because we now do it to ourselves and each other.

Figure 1. 4 I's of Oppression by John Bell (Cuauhtin, 2019 pg. 216-219)

We contextualize each of the 4 levels of oppression and give students scenarios to analyze. A major point highlighted by Bell (Cuauhtin, 2019 pg. 216-219), is that each act of oppression manifests itself in each of the four quadrants. Every act of oppression manifests itself on an interpersonal, internalized, institutional, and ideological level.

To introduce this framework, students analyze John Gast's 1872 painting, *American Progress* (see figure 1). This popular painting is used to depict Westward expansion of the 1800's and is found in most U.S. History textbooks, like the one used in our district, *The Americans: Reconstruction to the 21st century* (Danzer et al., 2008). Through an in-depth collective examination of this painting, students realize that the 4 I's of Oppression are ever so present. Students are able to see how this painting depicts the oppressive system of forced displacement, destruction of nature in the name of god and progress. They are able to tie these atrocities to the manufactured ideology that settlers of European descent have the technology (electricity, railroads, agrarian reform, etc..) to improve the land and have been chosen by god to move west, and they realize that in order to do so, displacement of Indigenous communities was necessary to white settlers. This clearly explains the ideology of superiority that white settlers felt and their self-claimed right to occupy land in the name of "progress." It becomes crystal clear why they needed to institutionalize this concept of

Manifest Destiny in order to displace Indigenous communities and claim the land as their own through laws and policies. Students are able to understand how interpersonal oppression played out as Indigenous communities were forced into reservation camps, robbed of their identity, and murdered through genocide. Students are then able to examine the internalized form of oppression that took place along with the decimation of the Indigenous populations and its descendants, who were forced and later assimilated to the white culture in order to survive. As briefly shown here, Bell's 4 I's of Oppression can be applied to many past and current events to help students understand what takes place in our world, but most importantly why and how these acts of oppression transpired.

Figure 2. John Gast (1872) *American progress* [painting]. Crofutt, G. A. (ca. 1873) [Photograph] at Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

We then follow this introductory exercise and personalize the discussion about oppression by asking students the following prompt:

Think about a time you personally experienced and/or witnessed an injustice/act of oppression. What happened? What did you do? Would you do anything differently?

Students begin to share instances they experience in school, on the way to school, in their neighborhoods and in their families. They share how these situations made them feel and how they dealt with them. Often, students feel powerless in these situations and this eventually can translate to the apathy many of us experience. Students share stories of how they have encountered and experienced oppression in their daily lives: they share frustration because they don't have the language to name the oppression they encounter, but even worse they don't know how to struggle against it. This is where we revisit John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression.

Students re-engage the instances they reflected and shared about using John Bell's framework and are able to better understand why oppression happens, the role they play in perpetuating it, and ultimately where its ideological origins. Being able to provide the tools to name, analyze, critique and challenge oppression is an essential guideline and value of Ethnic Studies praxis. A difficult part within this critical work is coming to grips with the oppression we see, feel and experience every day. Students know they are angry, frustrated, uncomfortable. However, they often do not know why they feel the way they do. Again, John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression provides the opportunity to analyze their lives, their family histories, their communities, and our world to better understand why injustices take place. It's an eye-opening experience for most: The world is unveiled before their very eyes, and they're able to see how the oppression they experience—at times perpetuated—is grounded in ideologies that are centuries old.

Students, once they feel that they grasp the 4 I's of Oppression framework, are tasked to re-analyze the injustice that they've experienced and write about. They delve into and analyze the circumstance, and share how that act of oppression is an example of interpersonal framework.

They are then able to show how people internalize it, how it stems from a form of institutional oppression that is ultimately rooted in an ideology that justifies the oppression itself.

4 I's of Liberation

John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression allows us to diagnose social problems but, like curing any disease, we must provide a solution. This is why we have crafted the 4 I's of Liberation. If the possibility of being fully liberated never takes place, if a path to liberation is denied to our kids in the TK-12 schooling system, Ethnic Studies further oppresses our communities by only triggering trauma, exposing truths, and highlighting injustices. Once students have a solid grasp of the 4 I's of Oppression, we introduce our 4 I's of Liberation to combat hopelessness and dehumanization. We have found that the use of similar terminology and a four-quadrant organizer similar to John Bell's 4 I's of Oppression helps students transfer the knowledge they have already learned and easily apply it to our definition and framework for liberation.

Liberation: The struggle against dominance and oppression where people fight for and/or gain complete freedom from the systematic abuse, exploitation and injustice of the oppressor.

IDEOLOGICAL	INSTITUTIONAL
Any liberating system, movement, collective, and space has at its core the idea that all groups are equally valued regardless of who they are, where they come from and where they are going. No one group has more power or control, everyone has the right to self-determination.	Is demonstrated in how institutions, systems, movements, collectives, and spaces reinforce and manifest this ideology.
INTERPERSONAL	**INTERNALIZED**
The way we struggle together, support each other, practice solidarity and build unity.	Internalized liberation means that oppressors do not have power to exert any more pressure because we know the goal is to be liberated, to be free, and that one's freedom does not have to come at the expense of another person's liberation

Figure 3. 4 I's of Liberation

We use this framework to highlight historical social movements and contemporary struggles, and we encourage students to conceptualize their own freedom. To offer an example of this methodology, we counteract the above *American Progress* (Crofutt, ca. 1873) by exposing students to the painting reflected in Figure 4. The artist, Charles Hillard, was commissioned by the Land

 ISSN 2993 - 3609

Tenure Foundation to counteract the ideology of manifest destiny that has been falsely taught and professed for decades in our schooling institutions.

Below are some excerpts from student critical analysis reflections:

> *"Reviewing this picture, it shows to me clearly that **Ideological liberation** is present. The Indigenous people are reclaiming their land and resisting the takeover of their resources."-9th grade student*
>
> *"I**nternalized liberation** is taking place in this painting because the Native Americans are not afraid to fight back for their land and resources." -9th grade student*
>
> *"In this painting I can't tell if **Interpersonal liberation** is happening. I assume that the Indigenous people belong to the same tribe, but I might be wrong. I know that there have been other examples when **Interpersonal liberation** has taken place when it comes to Native American social movements. In another example, The Standing Rock Protest, Mr. Gomez taught us, there were different groups working together protesting against the building of an oil pipeline in their sacred land and under their water source in their reservation." -9th grade student*
>
> *"In this painting it is not clear if any **Institutional liberation** was put in place. I know there were some federal laws protecting the land that belongs to Native Americans, but I also know that many of those treaties or laws were broken by the U.S. government." -9th grade student*

These reflections illustrate how students engage in a critical analysis to identify a process of liberation. Students once familiar with the principles of the 4 I's of Liberation are able to use this lens to identify not only forms of oppression, but can pinpoint struggles for liberation within contemporary and past social movements.

Figure 4. Charles Hilliard (2014). *Reversing Manifest Destiny* (painting). Indian Land Tenure Foundation.

Also, once students critically reflect upon the Four I's of Liberation, they begin to conceptualize their own liberation as well. They can come to grips with a path to freedom that is interconnected with the liberation of others. They begin to understand that their liberation cannot come in isolation, or they will become oppressors themselves. They realize that a better world is possible. They start to understand that the world as we know it can and must change immediately. This begins on a very small scale for many. They begin to find ways to heal their own traumas and reconnect with their loved ones. This, although a small example, has become a very impactful form of liberation for our students as individuals. Other students have decided to join student organizations on campus to address different acts of oppression and injustices targeting them as students. While student resistance has taken form through campaigns at our high school, we did not have the terminology or the framework to name these struggles for liberation. Now, we can better explain why our students took it upon themselves to engage in various campaigns to end marksmanship trainings within our school district, to disallow U. S. Border Patrol agents onto our campus, and to force the school district to require A-G Graduation

requirements (UC approved courses to ensure college preparatory courses for all students) by providing college preparatory classes to all students regardless of color or socioeconomic status. And more recently, the campaign that forced district leaders to create an Ethnic Studies course and establish an Ethnic Studies graduation requirement that will finally see its first students walk across the graduation stage this June 2024. Our students have fought for liberation in their homes, on the streets, in their communities, and in our schools. Liberation has always been the goal, and John Bell's framework allows us to become better educators and to develop new theories based on the daily practice within the four walls of our classrooms, and beyond the gates of our campuses as teacher-organizers.

Besides being teachers on the ground, we also serve as lead teachers in Ethnic Studies for our district. We have designed and facilitated professional development for colleagues who are beginning to teach Ethnic Studies courses or are modifying their curriculum to meet the values and guidelines of Ethnic Studies. In this work, we have used the 4 I's of Liberation in our district professional development sessions. We have asked our colleagues to do self-reflection themselves. Are they free? Are they liberators or are they unconsciously oppressing the students they love and wish to lead towards liberation? Is their classroom a liberating space that has at its core the idea that all students are equally valued regardless of who they are, where they come from, and where they are going? Should they have more power in their classroom? Are they comfortable releasing power to their students? Do their students support each other? Are their students practicing solidarity with one another? Is a culture of unity and liberation being established in their classroom?

Other examples of teaching units we have used that highlight the 4 I's of Liberation include the Chicano Movement alongside the film *Walkout* (Olmos, 2006), The Filipino Farmworker Movement, the Black Panther Party, the Autobiography of Malcolm X (Haley, 1964), and local social movements like the liberation of public land to build Chicano Park in San Diego, CA.

A common critique of this unit is that students are merely being exposed to analyzing forms of oppression and this can lead to victimization. Although this is a valid concern, we are well aware that being able to identify, name and analyze forms of oppression—past and present—is necessary in order to be able to critique and challenge systems of oppression. Students must understand why oppression takes place: we could not teach the 4 I's of *Liberation* successfully if we didn't make sure that students understood the John Bell's 4 I's of *Oppression* as well.

In conclusion, liberation is often a misplaced or missing concept in the school system. If we truly want students to use their education to improve themselves from the oppressive conditions that they live in, then it's imperative that we offer liberatory examples and frameworks that allow us to move toward liberation. Most of all, we must give our students the language and tools to pursue what it is to be truly free in their own terms.

References

Cuauhtin, R. T. (2019). Teaching John Bell's four I's of oppression. In R. T. Cuauhtin, M. Zavala, C. Sleeter, & W. Au (Eds.), *Rethinking ethnic studies* (pp. 216–219). Rethinking Schools.

California Department of Education. (2021, March 18). *Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/esmc.asp

Crofutt, G. A. (ca. 1873) American Progress, ca. 1873. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/97507547/.

Danzer, G., Woloch, N., & Wilson, L. (2008). *The Americans: Reconstruction to the 21st century*. McDougal Littell Publishing.

Haley, A. (1964). *The autobiography of Malcolm X: As told by Alex Haley*. Random House Publishing.

Hilliard, C. (2014). *Reversing manifest destiny* [Painting]. Indian Land Tenure Foundation: https://iltf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ProjectUpdate_2021.pdf

Olmos, E. J. (Director). (2006). *Walkout* [Film]. HBO Films.