

While working as a teaching assistant at Fenway High School in Boston, I noticed something that doesn't always make headlines. Students of different racial backgrounds—Black, White, Latino, Mexican—teamed up easily, joked around, and got through assignments together without much tension. There was no sense of forced harmony; it just felt normal. Honest. Uncomplicated. Of course, I'm not ignoring the realities of racism or inequality. I know how deeply those issues run. And I'd never claim that these problems have disappeared or that we should stop confronting them. Still, what I observed in those classrooms often didn't match the picture painted by the justice-based education theories we'd been studying. The terms we discussed—"achievement gap," "White fragility," "segregation"—felt distant from what I was seeing on the ground.

That difference raised a hard but necessary question: Are the frameworks we use to understand educational justice still in sync with how students are actually living and learning today?

This essay is my attempt to explore that disconnect. I'll draw from what I saw during my time at Fenway, alongside the theories we discussed in class. My hope is to find a way of thinking about justice in education that fits more closely with what's happening now, not just what's been true historically.

Take, for example, Gloria Ladson-Billings and her concept of "educational debt." She argues that focusing too much on the "achievement gap" keeps us stuck in a mindset where students—especially students of color—are seen as lacking something. Instead, she suggests we look at the long history of underinvestment in communities of color. She writes, "the achievement gap discourse keeps us locked in the deficit paradigm," and I think she has a point.

She pushes us to ask bigger questions: Why have these communities been underfunded for so long? What are the long-term effects of that? And how do we even begin to make things right?

I agree with her overall. But still, at Fenway, what I witnessed felt more complicated. Many students of color weren't weighed down by that deficit framing. In fact, they showed a lot of pride, leadership, and creativity. It made me wonder—could sticking too closely to the idea of “debt” risk missing the ways students are already shaping something new?

John Dewey's philosophy helped me think about this differently. Dewey believed that education should grow out of the real conditions people live in, not just follow abstract rules or fixed theories. His idea of pragmatism—focusing on what works, here and now—felt especially useful. Maybe we still need the concept of educational debt to understand history, but at the same time, we should also be paying attention to how students are already moving forward, sometimes in ways that theory doesn't fully predict.

Robin DiAngelo's theory of “White Fragility” was another part of our readings that stood out. She describes how white people often shut down or become defensive when race is brought up—how even mild discomfort can lead to denial, guilt, or silence. That idea has clear relevance, especially in workplaces or institutions where power is unequally distributed.

But again, what I saw at Fenway told a slightly different story. The white students I encountered didn't seem especially fragile. They participated in conversations about race. They asked honest questions, joked without being dismissive, and listened when others shared experiences. It wasn't perfect—but it also didn't feel paralyzed by discomfort or fear of saying the wrong thing. In short, the kind of fragility DiAngelo describes didn't seem to define their behavior.

So I started to think: maybe this concept works better for adults than for students. Or maybe younger generations are simply developing a different way of relating to race—something that's less about denial or guilt and more about dialogue and everyday interaction.

This reminded me of Paulo Freire's idea of *critical consciousness*. Freire believed that people, especially those who are marginalized, need to become aware of the social forces shaping their lives in order to change them. But at Fenway, it seemed like many students already had this awareness—at least in a lived, intuitive way. They didn't need to be told that race exists or that inequality is real. They seemed to know that already and were figuring out how to move through it, together.

Jeanne Powers' work added another layer to my thinking. In her research on Mexican-American students in Arizona, she shows how segregation didn't always rely on explicit laws—it often happened quietly, through school zoning, cultural assumptions, and subtle exclusions. “Although state law never formally mandated the segregation of Mexican American students,” she writes, “school districts often established separate ‘Mexican Schools.’”

What she shows is that injustice doesn't always shout. Sometimes it hides in structure, tradition, or what's considered “normal.” Even if a school looks integrated on the outside, deeper inequalities can still be built into the curriculum, into which voices are heard, or into how discipline is enforced.

So even at a school like Fenway, where students genuinely seem to connect across race, Powers reminds us not to assume everything's been fixed. Just because there isn't obvious tension doesn't mean there aren't deeper issues still in play.

And in the meantime, my experience at Fenway gave me cause for hope. There was something different about the way students related to one another. Race wasn't ignored—but neither was it something that consistently seemed to pull them apart. They worked together, competed with each other, spoke of their backgrounds openly. And most of the time, no big deal.

This was not to suggest that inequality had vanished. There were undoubtedly still differences in students' school lives, and some types of prejudice perhaps still seethed just beneath the surface. But in the everyday interaction—through group work, class discussion, even casual hallway conversation—what I saw was real connection, not tolerance but rather a kind of comfort with difference.

To me, what this suggests is that while theories like educational debt and White Fragility are still useful, perhaps they need updating—or at least more subtlety—when applied to places like Fenway. The theories we use must leave space for change, for development, and for real complexity of student existence.

I'm not saying we should abandon the theories. Not at all. They help us understand where we've come from and where problems still exist. But if we rely on them too rigidly, we might miss the very real signs of growth unfolding in front of us.

Fenway isn't perfect, and I know it doesn't represent every school. But what I saw there felt important. It showed me that justice in education isn't just about big reforms or sweeping statements. Sometimes it shows up in smaller moments—in shared laughter, in respectful disagreement, in the simple fact of students being themselves, together.

Looking ahead, I think the work of justice-based education will require two things at once: staying rooted in truth and history, while also being open to the ways students are already

creating something better. The past matters, and so do the theories that help us understand it. But the present matters, too. And if we look closely, we might find that some students are already living out the kind of equity and connection we've only begun to imagine.