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6. TOWARDS EQUITY AND JUSTICE

Latinx Teacher Auto-Ethnographies from the Classroom

In the first book of this series on *Unhooking from Whiteness: The Key to Dismantling Racism in the United States*, we examined our trajectories as U.S. Latinx[1] to understand our hybrid identities and our participation in our worlds framed within whiteness and Latinx-ness. Our original ethnographic study aimed to ascertain how our hybrid identities exist within historically accumulated lived experiences juxtaposed against normative policies and dominant views of race, ethnicity, gender roles, and hegemonic socioeconomic oppression during our schooling. The close analyses of our own histories and experiences allowed us to identify how we resist assimilation, heal from discrimination, and participate in constructing broader societal models of normalcy. We offered the term Latinx-ness to discuss ourselves through *testimonios* and to explicate our complex identities within whiteness.

Through our *testimonios*, we expanded racial-ethnic, gender, social, cultural, linguistic, and (im)migrant categories to offer insights into our Latinx hybridity. Likewise, in using the term Latinx-ness as a broader concept about ourselves and our worlds, we were able to question our hybrid identities, identify ways we learned to resist normative practices, see how we contest oppressive forces, and enumerate the means we employ to finding our voices as non-dominant individuals and educators.

OUR CONCEPTUAL APPROACH FOR THIS EDITION

In this chapter, we aim to question how our Latinx-ness lives in our teaching, and we are always concerned with how our presence in the classroom reflects the tenets of critical pedagogy and Latinx critical race theory. Like many other critical scholars, we are constantly struggling to understand our roles as educators working toward dismantling oppressive practices, promoting equity, and encouraging our students to find their own voices when working within an educational system that favors middle class White practices and politically fickle educational mandates.

Years ago, it became clear to us that our personal and professional collaboration offered an exceptional opportunity to contribute to the scholarship on the effects of Latinx educators in K–16 settings from a wider lens. In the research literature, we find work that scrutinizes the presence of Latinx educators in schools and higher educational settings (Albers & Frederick, 2013; Flores, Clark, Claeys, & Villareal, 2007; Monzó & Rueda, 2001). These studies report on and about Latinx teachers and

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their experiences in different educational settings. Nonetheless, there is negligible research conducted by Latinx educators analyzing their own practices and presence through a Latinx-ness identity lens. As a practicing teacher and a teacher educator respectively, we sought to conduct a self-study to thoughtfully and rigorously examine our impact on Whitestream systems. Through the collection of qualitative data, we aimed to theorize how as Latinx educators we contribute to, alter, or maintain traditional schooling practices. This personal and academic research journey closes a gap in the literature on how practicing Latinx educators combine theory and practice in mixed settings such as middle school, high school, and college environments, and articulates solutions to racism and discrimination.

After collecting data from our own teaching to explore the notion of teaching to dismantle oppression, we identified two areas of scholarly research to ground what we were seeing in professional journals: work-force diversification and multicultural professional preparation. From our literature review, we ascertain that the presence of a diversified teaching force at the K–12 level is beneficial to non-dominant student populations. According to Villegas and Irvine (2010), non-dominant teachers appear to be more committed to teaching in difficult-to-staff schools and have lower attrition rates, which indicate that students of color benefit from having teachers of color in their classroom, as they become intermediaries linking paths between the educational setting and students' culturally diverse worldviews. It has been documented that teachers of color act as translators, become resources to stabilized families, and understand and model socially sanctioned patterns of behaviors in non-dominant cultures and in dominant educational settings (Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Other scholars examine questions about the additional responsibilities Latinx teachers take on to support students and their families. In our own experiences, adding professional responsibilities to an already taxed teaching day does not affect our professional evaluations or reward us with additional financial compensation. Nonetheless, taking on tasks that deconstruct injustices, improve social and political outcomes for students, and contribute to advancing the economic status of students of color form part of Latinx educators' professional lives (González & Padilla, 2008).

Undeniably, for us in the classroom, teaching has become a game of high stakes testing. Even though the presence of teachers of color cannot account for improved test scores or any other narrow standardized testing measures, there is consensus that Latinx teachers repeatedly challenge discriminatory teaching practices and enhance instruction through lessons that are grounded in culturally responsible understandings (Ochoa, 2007). Consequently, in collaboration with state and federal funding, some higher education institutions are implementing programs to attract, graduate, and retain educators of color (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Sexton, 2010; Sleeter & Milner, 2011). Despite efforts to diversify the teaching profession and retain non-dominant individuals, we continue to fall short in luring more Latinx teachers into classrooms (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). Therefore, with fewer Latinx teaching in high schools and postsecondary institutions, we are depriving students

from fair access to cultural and social knowledge reflecting their lived realities and limiting the enactment of empowering policies.

The second theme in the literature regarding Latinx educators aligns with professional preparation for pre-service and in-service teachers. Addressing both pre-service and in-service teacher preparation is central to our research, as we both work with pre-service teachers, and Rosa, as a classroom teacher, is contractually required to participate in in-service teacher preparation sessions. As a practicing teacher and a postsecondary faculty member, we recognize that educational systems have deeply rooted hegemonic practices and policies. According to Spring (2008), educating culturally diverse teachers is challenging, as our educational system remains grounded in ethnocentric European traditions that promote colonial dominance. As educators of color, we are not surprised that for the past century, education has been presented as the answer to solving problems related to social issues such as poverty, health, economics, and incarceration. U.S. Latinx have lived through a century or more of school reforms that have come and gone in efforts to fix schools for children of poverty from a deficit perspective (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Critical scholars have long contested the cankerous notion that schooling can be improved for students of color with new policies and practices while ignoring the fact that normative White practices are deeply woven in educational reform (Tye, 2000; Hess, 2011). Hence, there is a large body of scholarship examining the question of disparities in academic achievement between non-dominant and dominant students, which puts forward centuries of systematic deculturalization and subtractive education for Latinx (Spring, 2012, Valenzuela, 1999). Nevertheless, schools across the nation continuously participate, with mixed results, in an assortment of school reforms designed to minimize the discrepancies between Whites and non-dominant groups. All these changes come with the expectation that teachers in the trenches remain on course despite school instability because of demands for re-tooling, adapting, and adopting the up-to-the-minute educational policies and strategies seeking to improve their failing schools (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2005; Lee & Ready, 2007; Lonsbury & Apple, 2012).

In fact, Ladson-Billings (2009) points out that critically prepared teachers of different racial backgrounds can successfully teach non-dominant students. However, Gorski (2010) reports that college courses preparing multicultural educators often focus on issues around cultural sensitivity and operationalizing cultural diversity while classroom teaching techniques ignore critical praxis. He specifies that college preparation programs ignore theoretical perspectives addressing issues of power, equity, and oppression. By ignoring critical pedagogy as the theoretical foundation of multicultural education, college courses adversely promote notions about inequality that are hierarchical and oppressive. Students may not explore how oppression operates in its multiple forms and, as such, there is no distinction between linguistic oppression, gender oppression, and racial oppression. Oppression is oppression (Gorski, 2012; Gorski & Goodman, 2011). Teacher education programs, even when offering multicultural courses and instruction directed towards improving *racial*

goodwill (Juárez, 2013), often fail to challenge normative thinking about educating diverse student populations (Ladson-Billings, 2011).

Moving from professional preparation to the work teachers do in their schools, Urrieta (2010) argues that the path-making process between academic settings and non-dominant students requires teachers that are committed to supporting students' journeys in resisting Whitestream education as well as in-depth knowledge of the content areas they teach. According to Urrieta (2010), committed Latinx educators work on sharpening and promoting their critical consciousness and social activism. Similarly, in our work, we assert that critical scholars are not born with a critical consciousness. Instead, we offer our own *testimonios* that critical consciousness transforms through our lived experiences with discrimination in academic institutions (Mazurett-Boyle & Antrop-González, 2013). Therefore, critical consciousness must be incorporated into teacher preparation coursework. Teachers, especially educators of color, need critical and multicultural preparation to recognize and contest racist and discriminatory academic practices (Hayes, 2013). Hence, the need for a critical underpinning in pre-service and in-service preparation is obligatory if we consider the latest census reports, which reveal U.S. citizens are self-identifying as multi-ethnic and residing within multi-racial households (U.S. Census, 2010). New teachers entering the field must be ready to create and deliver instruction that is culturally responsible for the increased population of racially and ethnically diverse school age children.

METHODS

Data for this chapter were gathered during 2010–2014 in the form of journal entries, reflective fieldnotes, course syllabi, and other documents such as publications and essays. Using auto-ethnographic data collection methods, we aimed to collect explicit and detailed data about our practices and experiences as Latinx educators and academics. Self-reflexive data analysis (Urrieta, 2008) was used to categorize and sort data to learn more about the effects of our Latinx-ness in our professional lives.

As critical scholars looking to improve both our practice and our understanding of what is really happening in our schools and postsecondary institutions, we continually examine our own teaching practices to understand who we are and what our teaching looks like as Latinx educators and researchers. In the following section, we offer selections from our data.

CRITICAL MOTHERING AND QUALITY OF LIFE

During the last four years of data collection, it became clear that our experiences as postsecondary students continue to mirror our K–12 students' experiences. That in itself is intriguing as researchers and discouraging as educators. During

the last 15 years, Rosa has been teaching in the fourth-poorest school district in the nation servicing African Americans, Latinx, and other students of color. This year, district officials reported that only 10% of the African American and Latinx students graduated high school in this school district in 2013–2014. For Rosa, a Latina mother of three, these statistics are tragic. We also cannot stop thinking about the extent to which school-related structures of opportunity are heavily dependent on students' socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic identities, linguistic uniqueness, and sociocultural backgrounds. We also know that humans fall in love or find mates through a complex process of selection, evolution, and reproduction influenced by chemicals and biological and cultural preferences. Individuals fall for others with comparable socioeconomic backgrounds, intelligence, looks, and even religious backgrounds (Fisher, Brown, Strong, & Mashek, 2010; Sternberg & Weis, 2006). Moreover, some findings report that adolescent romantic relationships play an important role in identity formation, social competence, independence, personal achievement, and interpersonal relationships (Donaldson, 2014).

The following long quotation comes from Rosa's journal:

> "*Got Sperm*?" My Spanish IV students debated the ethics of testing on animals and that conversation morphed into raising animals with specific genetic compositions for testing. The discussion incorporated issues around DNA, social heredity, and the use of sperm banks. They (2 males & 8 females) had mixed feelings pro and against artificial insemination and use of animals in lab tests. Please don't ask me how the discussions moved from animal testing to DNA and sperm banks. I can only say this is a chatty group with strong critical thinking skills. The students' debated questions around DNA, DNA manipulation, preserving/eliminating family features, severe illness, and medical benefits/drawbacks of testing on animals. I asked the only two male students in the class, "Would you donate sperm to a sperm bank?" These boys are college-bound Latino males. Both students agree that they would not consider donating sperm. LR said, "My cousin is the baby daddy of five kids… his DNA is solid," and PN added that he couldn't do it. I think the idea of having kids without an active role in their lives made them uncomfortable. In earlier discussions, PN also showed reservations about animal testing and stem cell research. Then I shared the abysmal graduation data for Latinos and African American males and they discussed its significance in real life terms. LR: "I'm not going to be that, because I am graduating and going to college." The students quickly agreed that statistically, Latinas and African American females with college degrees will be hard pressed to find non-dominant partners who shared their socioeconomic status, looks, and academic achievements. Then I asked the girls, "Would you use a sperm bank?" DM said, "My aunt is gay and she went to a sperm bank," adding, "It's hard to grow up looking like me and not looking like nobody else in your family." (*January and February, 2014*)

The abysmal graduation rates for males in my district will have long lasting effects in the life of our schools and community. The notion struck a chord with me and my students, so I shared my journal entry with the principal and the counselors. On Wednesdays, the school meets in the auditorium for a school wide assembly. Normally, during this time, students perform; there are guest speakers; and the staff shares information about a wide range of topics. The principal decided to give students graduation data for the district and for our school. The data allowed staff and students to think about and find tangible ways to improve college access opportunities, academic achievement, employment, and seeking out community partnerships.

PROFESSIONAL DUTIES

> Constantly, I find myself assisting pre-service teachers to move beyond what they see in my urban classroom or passing judgment on students without deeper exploration of our own prejudices, preexisting biases, and socialization through social class and race. I like to debrief with students about lessons and what we experience during the day or week. By questioning our classroom practices and experiences, I attempt to help future teachers develop critical teaching praxis and curriculum. Unfortunately, the area universities I work with do not offer seminars to help their student teachers reflect on their experiences from a critical race perspective. How can we expect to have reflective practitioners, White or non-dominant, when their professional preparation avoids or ignores the influences of White privilege on professional and personal decisions? (*2013–2014 school year*)

My professional responsibilities include keeping up with my professional preparation and duties as a classroom teacher in addition to advocating for our students. As a teacher, I participate in service learning opportunities with area colleges to create opportunities for my students to interact with area college students and faculty. I open my classroom to student teachers and pre-service teachers doing observation hours. I write curriculum that incorporates students' funds of knowledge with *cariño*, *respeto*, y *confianza* [care, respect, and trust] (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). In addition, I am always seeking professional opportunities to improve my teaching through affiliations in professional organizations at the local, national, and international levels. In my life as a researcher, I try to keep up with the literature in my area of interest; I collaborate with other researchers; and I develop research opportunities that include my students and other educators. Therefore, creating opportunities for students to develop the skills to address social issues involving the police is an important part of my professional responsibility. Teaching, then, is not just about the job but a conglomeration of jobs that give me the opportunity to work in the classroom, to interact and mediate with families in my community, and

to help prepare White and non-dominant pre-service educators to work within and for social equity.

I DON'T TEACH CRIMINALS

We have a police officer in school today, and I am so mad. After the fourth or fifth fatal shooting, reports of muggings, drug dealings, gang assaults, and other dangerous events near our school the city assigned an armed school officer to our building. Our students have not participated in any of the violent events taking place outside our school. They arrive by public transportation at seven, and for the most part they leave by two fifteen. In our school, our students have the highest graduation rate in the city. Most of our students will graduate with 10 to 20 college credits. This year we have a young lady receiving both her high school and her associate degrees. We have students going to four-year colleges as far away as Alaska and into aeronautical programs across the Eastern border. Down the street we have one of the top IB high schools in the city. It's true that our students have been the victims of mugging and other violent attacks while walking home or waiting for public transportation. A few years ago along the streets bordering our school building, the city police installed a noise detector to pinpoint gunshots, traffic cameras, and other surveillance equipment in this historically African American neighborhood. Some of my students live in this neighborhood; they ride the city busses to and from home to school and to college campuses; they walk home; and they frequent the corner stores, play with siblings in the streets, ride their bikes, and party in nearby houses. Inside the school, they work.

A crime, yes it's a crime that my students—like me at their age—have to live in the fourth-poorest city in the country. Installing an armed police officer in my school criminalizes my students because of their economic status and is a deliberate macroaggression. Sadly, my students live in streets and neighborhoods policed by visual and sound surveillance. Then at school they go through metal detectors, turn in their phones, and their bags are searched. They eat lunch with an armed police officer in their cafeteria, and when they leave they see the police car parked strategically by the front entrance. Since experiencing this police presence, modeling and advocating for students' dignity is an important part of my job.

I invited the police officer into my classroom to discuss his presence in our school and to help my students negotiate the boundaries between being policed and speaking out. According to the school officer, I was the only teacher in his 20 years who invited him into the classroom to question his presence in the school and to allow students to voice their feelings about having a police presence in their cafeteria, halls, and on the school campus. In inviting him to our classroom, I aimed to share my students' experiences as learners under police surveillance and to give them a voice to fight criminalization of their schooling experience on the basis of social economic status as well as our racial makeup.

RENÉ'S PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY

Like Rosa, I am a teacher and a teacher educator. More specifically, I support the preparation of ESL teachers in Georgia. Before deciding to move to the Deep South, I supported the preparation of second language educators in Milwaukee. Milwaukee was an attractive city for a community worker and scholar like me, because of this city's progressive politics and racial/ethnic and linguistic diversity. Moreover, Milwaukee's public schools value developing bilingual education programs and is the home of *Rethinking Schools,* a progressive educator publication that centers its work on social justice learning and teaching. Unhooking from whiteness for me means pushing my students' thinking around race/ethnicity and language and immigration rights. The rural area in which I now work and reside is uniquely positioned in the South, as a majority of its residents are of color with 50% being Latinx.

In spite of this area's racial/ethnic demographics, bilingual programs do not exist and the area's schools are assimilationist in nature and engage in subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999). As a teacher educator who is Latino and bilingual/bicultural at an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), I have Latinx students in my courses who often hesitate to engage me in Spanish. Undoubtedly, this hesitation has been shaped by years of subtractive schooling and the ultra-conservative politics that permit local police to set up roadblocks in their effort to deport people without documentation and/or drivers' licenses. As residents of a "show me your papers" state, many immigrants in the community in which I live fear being separated from their families. Additionally, there exists very little political organization and direct action among Latinx in this area. In fact, the power structure is overwhelmingly White and politically conservative in spite of this area's majority minority status. What I have come to observe and theorize is that this Latinx political disengagement is directly connected to the stripping of Latinx students' primary culture and language.

As a teacher educator of color, it is my moral obligation to uncover learning and teaching practices that are grounded in colonialism. It is my hope that the pre-service educators I work with will take up the call for respecting their students' first language and culture rather than work to reproduce the racist cultures of schools that only wish to "mold real Americans." In the process, unhooking from whiteness and weaving bilingual/bicultural education into school curricula have the potential to support the raising of political consciousness so that we can dismantle the anti-immigrant sentiments and legislation that pervade Georgia. In the meantime, unhooking from whiteness obligates us to start and sustain difficult dialogues with reactionary elected officials and pre-service educators in the spirit of political and community transformation and justice. Until these transformations take place, we cannot rest.

CONCLUSION

As Latinx teacher educators, we use our classrooms as spaces where we can challenge deficit-based ideologies. Because these ideologies are based on White

supremacy, it is our moral obligation to disrupt the potential for psychological trauma and other forms of symbolic violence that these hurtful belief systems wage on students of color. We attempt to disrupt this violence through our curricular work in schools and the communities in which they reside. We strongly feel this curricular contestation is more likely to occur when teacher education programs work to recruit and retain people of color who are passionate about disrupting racist discourses, engaging in curricular truth telling, and building relationships with students. Such teachers hold their students to high expectations and engage in the comparing and contrasting of master and counternarratives in order to offer their learners competing historical narratives and their implications for how they are shaped and viewed in popular culture.

In conclusion, we call upon teacher education programs to support Grow Your Own programs in which there is explicit work conducted to recruit and retain teachers of color and arm them with courses characterized by syllabi that introduce Critical Race Theory, bilingual/bicultural education, multicultural education, and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), among other critical sociopolitical and historical frameworks that inform and facilitate ways that classroom teachers can support the development of critical political consciousness in the lives of young people. Unless there is enough political will to contest and dismantle the education apartheid that currently exists in the teaching profession, marked by the dominance of White monolingual and monocultural teachers who operate from deficit ways of viewing learners of color and their communities, we have no choice but to continue to offer our *testimonios* as Latinx teachers working in the spirit of intentional anti-racist education practices.

NOTE

[1] In this chapter we use the terms Latinx and Latinx-ness. We do not use singular or plural or gendered forms. See https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/12/08/students-adopt-gender-nonspecific-term-latinx-be-more-inclusive

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