Building Teacher Skill

BY LEARNING ABOUT RACIALIZED EXPERIENCES DESCRIBED BY LATIN@ MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH*

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RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta evidencia en torno a una tendencia en la educación de los Estados Unidos, donde la diferencia cultural entre los profesores y sus alumnos no permite que haya una comprensión completa de las experiencias de los estudiantes cultural y lingüísticamente diversos en las escuelas y en sus comunidades, específicamente la de los hispanos y latinos. Los resultados parciales de un estudio de análisis documental cualitativo basado en la teoría crítica racial ("critical race theory") completado en 2011 demuestra la existencia de racismo individual y social que afecta a los estudiantes hispanos y latinos en escuela intermedia y superior (en algunos lugares, escuela secundaria y preparatoria), así como en sus comunidades. Los maestros pueden aprender más sobre lo que significa ser un profesor en un contexto global si logran comprender las experiencias racializadas verbales y no verbales de los 105 estudiantes hispanos y latinos descritas en este estudio.

Palabras clave: diferencia cultural, educación del maestro, estudiantes hispanos, teoría crítica racial

ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates a trend in U.S. education where the cultural gap between teachers and their students does not allow for a full understanding of culturally and linguistically diverse students' experiences in schools and their communities, specifically that of Hispanics and Latino/as. Partial

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study results of a qualitative document analysis based in critical race theory completed in 2011 demonstrate individual and societal racism impacting middle and high school Hispanic and Latino/a students in their schools and communities. Teachers can learn more about what it means to be a teacher in a global context by understanding the verbal and nonverbal racialized experiences of the 105 Hispanic and Latino/a students described in this study.

Keywords: critical race theory, cultural gap, Hispanic students, teacher education

T his paper addresses two purposes. The first one is to show a trend in U.S. education of a cultural mismatch between teachers and students, which does not allow for a full understanding of culturally and linguistically diverse students' experiences in schools, specifically that of Hispanics and Latino/as (referred throughout the paper as Latin@s in accordance with Latino/a Critical Theory - LatCrit). Secondly, it seeks to share part of the results of a research study completed in 2011, demonstrating the individual and societal racism affecting middle and high school Latin@ students in their schools and communities in the mountain region of the United States as a step to build cross-cultural and global understanding, a critical 21st century skill.

Researcher's Context and Motivation

The study manifested from my personal and professional experiences as a Latina educator in public education in the mountain region of the United States. My concerns were and continue to be related to the *racialized experiences* of the Latin@ students with whom I have worked. Duany (2011) defines the term as discrimination from people outside of the racial group based on a perception of membership in a racial group, "…inputting a hereditary origin to certain intellectual, emotional, or behavioral characteristics of an individual based on group membership" (p. 1). These assumptions of intellectual, emotional, or behavioral characteristics are

most often negative and serve to further marginalize already dis-enfranchised youth in schools.

Through my years as an educator, students have shared a variety of stories of a "subtractive process" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 3), in which their culture and language are frequently not valued or honored in their schools, yet many teachers are not aware of these negative experiences. Often when I tried to tell my colleagues about these anecdotes, the stories were dismissed in a variety of ways. I assert that there are two (and possibly more) reasons why the counterstories are dismissed. First, it is well documented that although the demographics of students are shifting in class-rooms, teachers in U.S. schools remain largely white (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004; Palaich et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This creates a cultural mismatch that can lead to a clash between teachers and their students. It also suggests "the classroom culture or the teacher's culture is at odds with the culture of ethnic minority students" (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010, p. 63). Yet, the teacher's culture is often the base for the way a classroom setting is created and maintained.

The cultural mismatch has been shown to lead to discipline and achievement disparities between students of color and their white peers (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Justice & U. S. Department of Education, 2014). This phenomenon, also known as "culture clash" (Viadero, 1996, p. 39), exists when schools are not in alignment with the cultures of students in attendance.

Secondly, acknowledging that race impacts some of our students unfairly can be a difficult pill to swallow. Whatever the reason, the need still exists and a profound opportunity presents itself for teachers to build their cross-cultural understanding of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

This paper demonstrates a beginning two-step process to create inroads for cross-cultural and global understanding of students' racialized experiences. The first step requires sharing the students' experiences of discrimination and racial microaggressions. The second one aims to deconstruct the findings to support teachers' understanding of how the Latin@ students' experiences

impact their learning, and make evident the need for more teachers to be open to the described experiences of Latin@ students in schools.

Research framework

Because of the focus on race and ethnicity, and the specific impacts of Hispanic/Latino heritage relayed in this paper, the research framework included the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). While many scholars have comprehensively explained the roots of CRT (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Milner, 2008), it entered the discussion in education as critical theorists questioned race as a factor in educational inequities. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT as "an analytic tool for understanding school inequity" (p. 48). CRT tenets are connected to education through: (1) intercentricity of race and racism; (2) challenge to dominant ideology; (3) commitment to social justice; (4) centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) interdisciplinary perspective (Yosso, 2006). LatCrit theory scholarship in particular brought a Chicana/o, Latina/o consciousness to CRT in examining racialized layers of subordination based on immigration status, sexuality, culture, language, phenotype, accent, and surname. Scholars have used this in addition to CRT to strengthen another perspective in addressing educational inequities (Alemán, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Villalpando, 2004). LatCrit complements the work of CRT in that it encompasses the underpinnings of CRT but "focuses more specifically on the experiences of and realities of Latinos" (Villalpando, 2004, p. 42). "LatCrit Theory calls attention to the way in which conventional, and even critical, approaches to race and civil rights ignore the problems and special situations of Latino people—including bilingualism, immigration reform, the binary black/white structure of existing race remedies law, and much more" (Stefancic, 1997, p. 1510).

Methods

Grounded in CRT and LatCrit, this research reveals Latin@ students' voices regarding their racialized experiences through their

responses to an open-ended questionnaire. Qualitative document analysis (QDA) (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, & Schneider, 2008; Flick, von Kardorff & Steinke, 2004) focused on giving voice to adolescent students (Weber, Miracle, & Skehan, 1994). Documents analyzed included transcripts of the questionnaire.

First, 105 racialized experiences were identified, recorded and analyzed. Second, inductive coding and critical thematic analysis (CTA) were applied to develop themes. CTA is a blended inductive process that includes aspects of thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996). Due to page limitations, the full study, which included focus groups and poetic analysis, is not described in this paper (refer to Gabriel, 2011, for an in-depth look). The partial findings are shared as a first step in building cross-cultural understanding through the analysis of students' racialized experiences.

Data Sources

Setting. Data was collected in a public PK-12 mountain region school district from 2006 to 2009. In 2011 (time of completion of the full study), the district served approximately 15,000 students in a tri-city area. Social and economic changes impacted the demographics and needs of students. For example, the percentage of free and reduced eligible students increased significantly, from 21% in 2002 to 32% in 2010; the school district's portion of Hispanic student population doubled between 1998 and 2010, from 8% to 16%. One district response included a culturally responsive leadership program (CRLP). As the Latina Program Director of the CRLP, I collected handwritten data as part of the application process.

Participants. The 105 applicants to the CRLP filled out the open-ended questionnaire responses on the application. They were Hispanic and Latin@, male and female, students in eighth through twelfth grades, and were all between the ages of 13-19 at the time of the study.

Open-Ended Questionnaire. Analysis for this study focused on 105 responses to the open-ended item on the above-mentioned CRLP application, "Describe a time when you or someone you

know confronted an issue because of their race or ethnicity." Attributes such as age, gender, and grade level were included.

Results

The coding analysis of the archival data revealed there were 100 references to racialized experiences provided by 94 of the 105 students. Ninety percent of the students reflected back on an experience in which they or someone they knew were racialized, defined as having endured discrimination based on their race (Cavanagh, 2009; Duany, 2011). Markers included a range of experiences along a continuum of negative treatment and are described as two main types of experiences: those done (an action) to respondents or someone they knew, and those said (a verbal interaction) to the respondents or someone they knew. Table 1 demonstrates the types of verbal racialized situations that students experienced and described. Thirty of 105 respondents describe their racialized experience with the term "racial comment" or "slurs," or use of specific derogatory terms or slurs, and 32 other verbal interactions were described on the bases or perceptions of national origin, language spoken, skin color, and income level. Comments were made by teachers, students, and community members. Some of the types of verbal experiences are deconstructed further below.

National origin. The described experiences in Table 1 reflect the anti-immigrant sentiment rampant across the United States. Anti-immigrant legislation throughout the 2000s has continued to fuel the sentiment that plays out in school communities (Markon, 2011). An article reported answers to the question posed to understand what was fueling this opinion in the United States (Dizikes, 2010), suggesting that "a fair amount of the anti-immigration sentiment is driven by deep-seated cultural factors that are difficult to change with policy tools" (p. 1). Sadly this sentiment is not limited within certain sectors of communities, it is being heard and felt by students in this study as illustrated in the descriptions of racialized experiences. Perceived national origin and what was found to be an endemic anti-immigrant sentiment in the community included a further step of biased language as described in the following category.

Table 1

Verbal Racialized Experiences with Frequency and Examples

What was said	Frequency	Example
Racial comments	30	"...that guy turned and yelled 'beaners' with anger, like hating Hispanics."
National origin	13	"A problem I had confronted was when a student at my school thought it was funny to make fun of immigrants."
"Go back to..."	8	"A white student made the comment of all Mexicans, illegal or not, should go back to Mexico."
Language	6	"My teachers said I couldn't do the work because I talked Spanish."
Skin color	4	"...we were picked on and called black because of our skin color. They would tease us for being darker skinned then them."
Income	1	"...my teacher answered the student saying, 'Most Hispanics don't have money to spend on little things like glasses'."

Source: Gabriel, 2011.

"Go back to…". Eight examples were provided where students reflected on this phrase being stated against them in a variety of locations in their community. These comments are threatening, scary, and reflect the anti-immigrant sentiment rampant across the United States as described in the previous category.

Language spoken. The example is representative of the deficit model implying limited future access and opportunity based on beliefs and perceptions. A deficit perspective is described as one in which people are "defining students by their weaknesses rather than their strengths" (Gorski, 2008, p. 34) and becomes the way of understanding them. Additionally, the teacher's inability to support their students' ability to learn more than one language is an example of subtractive schooling. If the child's culture and language are not valued or honored in their school, this essentially subtracts their "social and cultural resources" (Valenzuela,

1999, p. 3), leaving the students at great risk for non-persistence of high school.

Skin color. Another manifestation of cultural identity includes phenotype, a specific observable characteristic as seen in skin color. This is one such aspect that is noticed and sometimes becomes a source of racialized experiences (Omi & Winant, 1998). Four of the responses included experiences described with the words "skin color." These types of experiences are racial micro-aggressions, understood to produce "feelings of degradation, and erosion of self-confidence and self-image" (Pierce, 1969, p. 31). Another important note is that the middle and high school age students who responded to us were often reflecting back on experiences that have haunted and troubled them to the date of response to these questions. This was true for the example in Table 1 related to skin color.

Income level. This specific example displays a teacher's use of deficit theorizing. Instead of examining the structure or func-tions of schools, comments made by school staff often point the proverbial finger at students or their families' perceived internal deficiencies for educational failure (Valencia, 1997). This perspec-tive and line of thinking limits students' opportunities and places them in boxes they may never escape. It becomes a systematized way of limiting access and opportunity.

Each of the findings in Table 1 support a body of research describing like incidents as racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1969, 1988, 1995; Sue et al., 2007; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

> Probably the most grievous of offensive mechanisms spewed at victims of racism and sexism are microag-gressions. These are subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal and/or kinetic. In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbid-ity, and flattened confidence. (Pierce, 1995, p. 281)

Herein lies the importance of listening to the voices of students who are racialized in schools. We cannot shy away from the stark reality that exists for our students of color. Educators often buy

into a myth that encourages the dismissal of a conversation of race (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Gabriel, Martinez, & Obiakor, 2015), but this does not change the outcomes for our racialized students. Denial of their experiential reality further marginalizes them from learning environments. In this study, an additional way that students were marginalized is encompassed in behavioral responses to their race and ethnicity.

Sixty-two of 105 students in this study described examples of being recipients of racialized experiences that were described as a negative action or behavior such as being discriminated against, excluded, judged, or labeled in ways that impeded their access and opportunity in their schools communities. Table 2 shares the frequency and examples of racialized experiences that are considered actions or behaviors received by respondents. Some examples of these actions are deconstructed further below.

Table 2

Behavioral Racialized Experiences with Frequency and Examples

Action/Behavior	Frequency	Examples
Discriminated against	34	"We noticed the staff only confronted colored kids about the dress code, never the Caucasian kids."
Excluded	12	"The guy would not sell me a ticket because I was Latino."
Judged	9	"One of my friends was being judged because he was Mexican."
Labeled	7	"My friends get called names all the time and it makes me sad that we are always getting stereotyped."

Source: Gabriel, 2011.

Discriminated against. "Discrimination is the denial of justice and fair treatment by both individuals and institutions in many arenas, including employment, education, housing, banking and political rights. Discrimination is an action that can follow prejudicial thinking" (Anti-Defamation League, 2005, p. 11). Thirty-four students described examples in which an action was followed by prejudicial thinking by someone in the student's community.

The example presented in Table 2 supports the research related to disproportionality in school discipline (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Justice & U. S. Department of Education, 2014).

Excluded. While unjust and unfair treatment is defined as discrimination, a further consideration included when someone was directly removed from an opportunity or excluded from one altogether. This demonstrates the variety of ways students report being excluded from membership in their community. Exclusion is a violation of human dignity, and when one person has more rights to access and opportunity, it impacts others' sense of community, whether classroom, school, neighborhood, or recreational or entertainment events.

Judged. Due to the nature of the data, follow-up questions were not available and hence the continuation of the full study not reported here (consult Gabriel, 2011). The example in Table 2 is a students' description and realization that it happens to people they know. The results in this study demonstrate that judgment placed on students' status in schools is alive and well, and it impacts a sense of self-worth (Pierce, 1969, 1988, 1995).

Labeled. Similarly to the theme of being judged, students state their understanding and realization that they are being labeled and stereotyped in school settings. They have a sense of their surroundings and the level of acceptance they have (or have not) achieved. This influences their level of participation in activities and if they see themselves as belonging to a school community. These results resonate with research that has shown the ethnic identity of adolescents has been problematized by dominant culture and in systems, it often goes unexamined, but proves useful when young people have a strong ethnic identity (Martinez & Dukes, 1997). It's an oxymoron to expect students to have a strong ethnic identity when they continually receive overt negative messages based on their ethnicity and race.

These findings illustrate the depth and breadth of racialized experiences and racial microaggressions experienced by middle and high school students, illuminating the unique aspects of what it means to be Latin@ in schools in the U.S. today. Students described the specific ways that skin color, language spoken or

perceived to be spoken, perceived Mexican origin, and perceived immigration status limited their access and opportunity to be full participants in school settings. They described experiences in which teachers and other community members used aspects of their racial and ethnic identity as means to label, judge, exclude, or discriminate them and people they know. Racialized perceptions and beliefs about the students in this research consistently impacted their self-esteem and self-worth, and at times lent to exclusion from learning opportunities and disproportionate consequences and discipline.

▉ Significance

To examine the significance of the study described in this paper, it is important to situate the context. "Using a Critical Race framework allows us to specifically place race and racism at the center of the analysis and focus on those educational inequalities that impact Latina/o and African American students inside and outside the schools" (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004, p. 11). CRT is a recommended tool to address inequities in education (Gabriel, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Key findings shared in this paper illustrated three core tenets of CRT and the importance of LatCrit as a lens to understand the racialized experiences of middle school and high school Latin@ youth. First, the sheer numbers and descriptions of the students' negative experiences demonstrated the depth and breadth of racialized experiences by Latin@ students in middle and high schools in a part of the country that is not often discussed in the academy. The volume and spectrum of such experiences create a clear example of intercentricity of race and racism (Yosso, 2006) and the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992). Further, the permanence of racism is demonstrated through the racial microaggressions endured by the students. Undergraduate college students' experiences with racial microaggressions have been researched (Yosso et al., 2009), but reporting of 8th-12th grade middle and high school students' experiences is newer to research. This is significant given the concern about the short and long-term effects of being racialized and the specific racial microaggressions on people of color (Duany, 2011; Pierce, 1969, 1988, 1995; Sue et al., 2007).

Second, the results demonstrate a 'centrality of experiential knowledge' (Yosso, 2006) that "Black, Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their White counterparts matters that the Whites are unlikely to know" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9) through these students' brief descriptions of racialized experiences. Listening to their voices presents a critical element of building cross-cultural understanding when the majority of U.S. teachers continue to be White and female (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004; Palaich et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Importantly we find that when given safe spaces, adolescents have a voice to share (Furman, Langer, Davis, Gallardo & Kulkarni, 2007; Garza, Ryser & Lee, 2010; Knaus, 2009; Weber et al., 1994) and Latin@ students should be viewed as "holders and creators of knowledge" (Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 106) as they are in this paper.

Third, the findings encourage an "interdisciplinary perspective' (Yosso, 2006) to understand the intersectionalities found among the perceptions held by others of students' ethnicity, race, and perceived national origin, home language, skin color, and family income. Together these findings demonstrate a continued 'subtractive schooling process' (Valenzuela, 1999) based in the cultural and linguistic diversity of the students studied. Using a LatCrit lens that uncovers and reveals students' voice "focuses more specifically on the experiences of and realities of Latinos" (Villalpando, 2004, p. 42).

> LatCrit Theory calls attention to the way in which conventional, and even critical, approaches to race and civil rights ignore the problems and special situations of Latino people—including bilingualism, immigration reform, the binary black/white structure of existing race remedies law, and much more. (Stefancic, 1997, p. 1510)

Transforming the school environment is our challenge as:

> Educational leaders collectively view themselves and the schooling enterprise to be inherently non-racist. In fact their tightly held beliefs and understanding regarding the significance of race makes it difficult for teachers to comprehend, examine, and rectify the very ways in

which race dramatically impacts achievement. (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. xv)

When teachers are open to hearing the racialized experiences of Latin@ students, they can understand how race impacts students' access and opportunity in schools, and this can impact their skills in teaching. Listening and affirming the reality of diverse experiences of Latin@ students in schools is a first step in building cross-cultural understanding to better serve each and every student.

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