

The Racialization of Chicana/o Latina/o Youth in California Public High Schools: Looking Back and Moving Forward

Rosario Torres

Department of Chicana/o Latina/o Studies and English Education

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Victor Rodríguez
Department of Chicana/o Latina/o Studies

Abstract

The staggering academic underachievement of Chicana/o Latina/o students is a topic of heated national debate. However, the focus is never really on the root of the problem—the historical, biological, and cultural deficiency theories that have played a major role in shaping a racialized educational system for Chicana/o Latina/o youth. It is important to analyze the way in which the educational system has paradoxically served to perpetuate the inequalities that are so prevalent in our society. Through a close reading of books, journal and newspaper articles and an analysis of statistics, I have found that racialization—the role of race and class in education—has served to legitimize a stratified occupational hierarchy. Through my examination of academic and vocational tracking, it is evident there is a great need to provide opportunities for better access to rigorous curricula to assist in providing Chicana/o Latina/o students equal entry to higher education.

Introduction

Although the educational system in the United States is thought to be the “great equalizer,” the infrastructures and social mechanisms in the system continue to reproduce social and economic inequalities for Chicana/o Latina/o students. Furthermore, it is through school that we begin to learn how race is constructed (in terms of meaning and identity) and how racial inequality (in terms of access to resources) is perpetuated by the “drawing and redrawing of racial lines” (Lewis, 1970, p. 4). By understanding the role of biological and cultural deficiency perspectives

across a historical timeline, we learn to challenge racial stereotypes and assumptions that continue to perpetuate racial structural inequality in schools.

According to Victor Rodríguez (2005), “the process of racialization is responsible for assigning individuals and groups a socially constructed identity and status” (p. 79). Although schools do not explicitly “teach” racial identity, “schools are settings where people acquire some version of the rules of racial classification” (as cited in Lewis, 1970, p. 4). By placing students into positions of dominance or oppression according to race and class, the construction of ideologies in various institutional arrangements (i.e., K-12 education) lead to striking economic and educational differences. This classification is particularly true with working-class and students of color who are given a narrow choice and access to educational opportunities.

It is critical to understand that schools reproduce social and economic order by limiting “economic resources, social connections, cultural knowledge, and symbolic status” (Lewis, 1970, p. 5). In the United States, White students and students of higher income households have traditionally been granted more access to resources for the attainment of higher education. It is pivotal to examine how this “capital” is distributed in educational contexts because it helps explain the mechanisms and processes of racialization that determine the educational outcomes for Chicana/o Latina/o high school youth. For Chicana/o Latina/o and other ethnic minority low-income students, moving up the socioeconomic ladder may only be achieved through the completion of a bachelor degree. Obtaining an undergraduate degree has typically served as a gateway to achieve middle-class status. Since race and class in the United States have historically been intertwined, it is necessary to explore how societal factors and processes of a broken educational system affect the nation’s largest and fastest growing ethnic minority group.

By the year 2025, Chicana/o Latina/os will become the largest ethnic minority in California and will constitute over 40% of the entire U.S. population. Even more striking, the U.S. Census Bureau predicts that one out of every four students will be of Hispanic descent (Gándara, 2010, p. 17). Given that today in most California public schools, Chicana/o

Latina/o students are already the majority; the academic underachievement of Chicana/o Latina/o students leaves politicians, administrators, and teachers divided.

The National Centre for Educational Statistics (2001) reported that the staggering low math and reading scores in grades 4 and 8 both at the national and state levels demonstrate significant gaps of achievement between Chicana/o Latina/o students and their White counterparts. On national average, White students outperform Chicana/o Latina/o students by nearly 20 points in reading and math at both grade levels (*Daily News Reporter*, 2001). If Chicana/o Latina/o students fail to meet grade level expectations, it becomes very difficult to get them to succeed in competitive academic settings. The academic pitfall of Chicana/o Latina/o students particularly in K-8 forces us to question the larger educational implications in denying their access to a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum.

While the population of Chicana/o Latino students in California keeps booming, the academic attrition and achievement scores of Latino students keep plummeting. The low academic trends have become barriers for Latino educational attainment, and in fact, continue to perpetuate a cycle of poverty. By the third grade, “80% of English-proficient Latino students are already underachieving the basic skills of reading, writing, and math” (Kloosterman, 2003, p. 49). The realities and socioeconomic disparities of Latino-serving schools are oftentimes glossed over by the striking low achievement levels of Chicana/o Latina/o youth in K-12.

As stated by the U.S. Census, out of 100 Chicana/o Latina/o elementary school students, 46 graduate from high school, 8 graduate with a bachelor degree, 2 earn a graduate or professional school degree, and only 0.2 graduate with a doctoral degree (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006, p. 1). It is evident that pursuing a post-secondary education for many Chicana/o Latina/o graduating high school students seems out of reach. When we closely compare academic opportunities granted to members of other ethnic groups, we are able to witness the great disparity and discrepancy in our educational system.

Since schools are generally responsible for training and producing workers, racialization in schools plays a major role in determining which

individuals are trained to become skilled workers. Economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis have described this social mechanism (1976):

Schools legitimate inequality through the ostensibly meritocratic manner by which they reward and promote students, and allocate them to distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy. They create and reinforce patterns of social class, racial and sexual identification among students which allow them to relate “properly” to their eventual standing in the hierarchy of authority and status in the production process. (p. 11)

When our founding fathers first envisioned our educational system, they understood that in order for a capitalist economy to function, a great disparity between wealth and poverty had to exist. This newly formed educational system would distinguish from the “laboring and the learned” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 29). In such a manner, social stratification is achieved: “at the top, there is the highly selective aristocratic tradition, the elite university training future leaders and the base is mass education for all, dedicated to uplift and control” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 29). When we look at the stratification within educational across history, we notice that Chicana/o Latina/o, lower income, and immigrant children have not been given the equal choice of pursuing a post-secondary education because they have often been placed into lower academic tracks.

Biological and Cultural Deficiency Perspectives: The “Mexican Problem”

The biological and cultural deficiency perspectives that emerged as a result of the invention of the “intelligence quotient” (IQ) exams at the turn of the 19th century have legitimated the educational inequality among Chicana/o Latina/o youth and their White counterparts for generations. These oppressive and racist ideologies regarding the difference in educational abilities have given other certain groups more privileges and access to economic wealth and social dominance over ethnic minority groups. It is paramount to closely study how these

ideologies have played a significant role in shaping educational policy among Chicana/o Latina/o youth, particularly in California where there has been a long history of vocational tracking and institutionalized racism in schools.

With the influx of Eastern and Southern European immigrants at the turn of the century, progressive reformers of the time sought to stratify secondary education by race, class and ethnicity according to the “the needs of working-class and immigrant children” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 193). It is essential to note that these students were not being prepared to become leaders or upwardly mobile citizens, but rather, trained to become the factory workers that would fit the demands of a booming, industrial economy. Nonetheless, it was the biological deficiency perspectives derived out of this era that carried out the misconceptions about the educational attainment and cognitive skills of working-class and immigrant children. Similarly, these biological deficiency theories were also later applied to Chicana/o Latina/o youth.

Educational theorists of the period claimed that, “non-Anglo Americans, including Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, were biologically different and inherently inferior to Anglos” (as cited in Ochoa, 2007, p. 29). It was believed that Mexican children “were naturally inclined toward sex rather than education and that they did not have the capacity to control their sexual urges (Ochoa, 2007, p. 29). Similarly others believe “authorities on the Mexican mind agree that after the age of 12-14 educational and higher ambitions turn to inclinations of sex impulse. ... The average [Mexican] boy and girl revert to the native instinct” (as cited in Ochoa, 2007, p. 29). Biological deficiency theories served to justify the intelligence and academic performance of Mexican children.

Since Chicana/o Latina/o students were not expected to graduate from high school, they were excluded from academically rigorous courses and as a result, were severely tracked into vocational fields that would train them to become manual workers. According to Gilbert G. Gonzales (1990), “By their sixteenth birthdays, many Mexican children had barely reached junior high, and the dropout problem, which subsequently became notorious, began to manifest itself” (p. 23). Consequently, “[s]ince the schools strongly advocated manual vocations, and since most Mexican families lived in poverty, many expected the

majority of Mexican children to leave their segregated schools before high school in order to enter the labor force” (Gonzalez, 1990, p. 23). The establishment of biological deficiency theories led to the legitimization of “Mexican schools.” However, these state-mandated segregated schools “were typically under budgeted and overcrowded, administered and taught by inferior personnel, and embraced a different set of goals” (Gonzales & Fernandez, 2003, p. 91). The creation of “Mexican schools” was one of the many attempts to institutionalize racism against Chicana/o Latina/os living in the United States.

At the turn of the century, social theorists began to equate the experiences of Mexicans with those of Southern and Eastern Europeans who had already successfully integrated into American culture (Ochoa, 2007, p. 31). The lack of Mexican socioeconomic advancement in the United States led social theorists to blame their culture for their inability to efficiently assimilate and acculturate into American culture. Cultural deficiency perspectives came to replace biological deficiency theories in the 1920s. However, theorists failed to see how exclusionary practices such as the legitimization of Mexican schools affected the integration of Mexican children into American society.

Social theorists of the time asserted that Mexican children were “too clannish,” “present-time oriented,” “[did] not care about education,” or “[had] a language handicap” (as cited in Ochoa, 2007, p. 32). In many cases, Mexican students were punished for speaking Spanish in an attempt to strip them of their culture. These cultural deficiency ideas stigmatized the identities of Mexican children who began to internalize a sense of racial inferiority. The Americanization programs present in Mexican schools (similar to the Indian boarding school experience) emphasized the students’ culture rather than focusing on academic content.

Though the 1946 federal landmark case *Mendez v. Westminster* held that the segregation of Mexican and Mexican American children in Mexican schools was unconstitutional, the longstanding repercussions of Mexican schools continues to shape the educational policy and processes of Chicana/o Latina/o high school youth today. School policies and practices are still modeled on these exclusionary practices and in fact,

still continue to perpetuate and reinforce stereotyped assumptions in attempt to maintain the social economic order.

Racialization in Schools Today

Racism in schools appears to be institutionalized in more subtle ways. According to Orfield (1996), Chicana/o Latina/o children continue to be one of the most segregated groups of children in the United States. Consequently, Latino students who are isolated from middle-class experiences are missing the opportunity to envision a more promising future (Gándara, 2010, p. 32). The significant academic gaps and under resourced schooling conditions inform us that Chicana/o Latina/o students continue to be at a disadvantage in the pursuit of a higher education.

Studies have shown that Chicana/o Latina/o students are more likely to attend schools with higher number of students per classroom, have un-certified teachers in the fields they teach, and more year-round long-term substitute teachers as a result of higher numbers of teacher turnovers (as cited in Gándara, 2010, p. 32). Additionally, Chicana/o Latina/o high school students continue to be academically and vocationally tracked. Chicana/o Latina/o students are significantly underrepresented in academically rigorous programs such as the Gifted and Talented Education Program (GATE) and Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Similarly, Gilda Ochoa contends, “Low-income and minority students are less likely to gain access to college preparatory, honors, and Advanced Placement classes than other students and they are more likely than non-minority students to be placed in the low, non-college bound track, independent of their actual academic achievement” (p. 31). Taking A-G courses is crucial for competitive admission to a University of California (UC) or a California State University (CSU). A recent study of California schools found that only 52% of classes in the lowest income (and highest percent) Latino schools were designed for college preparatory A-G requirements; whereas, 63% of courses in the highest income (and highest percent White) schools were designed for college preparation (Gándara, 2009, p. 98). In order to improve the enrollment of Chicana/o Latina/o students in post-secondary education, we must begin

by increasing high school graduation rates and ensure that they are completing the necessary A-G requirements.

Leaks in the Latino educational pipeline illustrate why the pool of Latino college applicants is so small. The Latino educational pipeline suggests the most critical obstacle to pursuing post-secondary education: the low high school completion rates. In the state of California alone according to a recent study by Harvard University (2005), only 60% of California Chicana/o Latina/o youth have a timely graduation (as cited by Ochoa, 2007, p. 25). These percentages are strikingly low when compared to the 78% of White and 84% of Asian American students. Comparably in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), only 39% of Chicana/o Latina/o students graduate on time (as cited in Ochoa, 2007, p. 25). The Latino educational pipeline suggests that the greatest educational disparity occurs from the transition from high school to college.

In recent times we have seen the negative repercussions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as it determines how different subgroups of students are testing. Under NCLB legislation, all students are expected to reach proficiency in all core subjects; however, this does not take into account the apparent structural inequalities present in our schools. If schools fail to meet the Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP), which is applicable to many schools in low-income and working communities, schools may risk receiving severe penalties, typically ranging anything from decreased funding to privatized tutoring programs to being completely overrun or taken over by the state (as cited in Ochoa, 2007, p. 173). If low-performing schools continue to fail to meet AYP, they may also be at risk of becoming disapproved in the public eye and being overrun by the charter school movement (as cited in Ochoa, 2007, p. 174). Little attention is focused on the structural inequalities of the school conditions and the social factors that shape test results.

NCLB has primarily affected students in non-college preparatory courses and students in working-class areas with high percentages of English learners. Because standardized tests shape the curricula being taught in the classroom, the pressure to perform well on these tests is even greater among working-class and Chicana/o Latina/o students. Under California Standardized Test (CST) testing preparation, teachers

generally have less autonomy and there are very few opportunities for teachers to implement culturally sensitive curricula and engage students in critical thinking assignments (Ochoa, 2007, p. 189). With such top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, “teachers may be pressured to employ exercises that are more conducive to multiple-choice tests such as test practice, memorization, and drills” (Ochoa, 2007, p. 181). District and school-site administrators have turned to scripted literacy programs promising a quick fix solution to mend English learners’ low literacy scores on CST results. Scripted and literacy programs such as *California Gateways* and *Open Court* not only reduce the freedom of teachers in their own classrooms, but also move teachers away from implementing student-centered and culturally-sensitive curricula that could be ultimately transforming for students.

Solutions for Chicana/o Latina/o Education

In order to move forward, it is critical to find ways to diversify our schools and implement rigorous college preparatory curricula that focuses on achieving Chicana/o Latina/o high school student success. Schools must promote cultural sensitivity and employ critical pedagogical practices in everyday curricula. It is essential for teachers, administrators, and students to understand how critical pedagogy allows them to become agents of change. Critical pedagogy allows students to question predisposed assumptions and stereotypes about themselves and their communities. By allowing Chicana/o Latina/o students to view the world through these lenses, students are given the opportunity to see how the struggle for power and money in the United States has always involved the oppression of people of color in order to sustain the status quo. Our schools are a vital part of our communities that mirror the existing social arrangements. For that reason, we must reanalyze the ways in which Chicana/o Latina/o high school students have been shorthanded in their education in order to help them to succeed and move up the socioeconomic ladder.

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