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DECONSTRUCTING COLONIZATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Many argue that the neocolonial culture that permeates the American public-school system directly leads to the disengagement of Latina/o students. In my research, I aim to unpack each element of this assertion. Though there is still a lot of work to do, many school districts and state public education authorities have introduced various innovative ethnic studies programs into their curriculums in attempts to diversify the content and reengage the Latina/o students in the public education system today. In the last 18 years, the national dropout rate of Latina/o students has dropped by almost half. By way of interviews and critical analysis of the national education system based on primary and secondary sources, I will identify ways the education system disenfranchises Latina/o students and point to ways to further decolonize the education curriculum. I will examine 3 case studies of the positive effect ethnic studies programs had on young Latina/o students. Finally, I will conclude with ways to utilize the methods of educational decolonization to help reengage Latina/o students on a local scale.

Keywords: Colonization, Latinos, Disengagement, Education

There are an infinite number of factors that have led to this particular moment for young Latina/o students. One could begin to confront the issue by first bringing up the marginalization of indigenous people throughout Spanish colonization. Or, if that's too broad for a pinpointed discussion, focus could also be directed towards the systematic social disadvantage Latinas/os have been presented with in this land of opportunity. One could also argue that it was the Mexican-American war, or the Mexican Revolution brought on by western imperialism. There truly are an infinite number of issues fundamentally wrong with our society. But, they have all been argued before. In this proposal, I will explore what kind of behaviors, systems and curriculums directly lead to the disengagement of Latina/o youth and provide proposals of counter-action to fight it.

In the case of at-risk or systematically disadvantaged children, the classroom should be an inclusive and engaging place. A report done by The Community Foundation for the National Capitol Region and Identity Inc. in Montgomery County, Maryland (2014) says that there is a disengagement among Latina/o youth. While this could, again, be blamed on a multitude of different things, a few key issues stand out. Lack of parental involvement, severe lack of computer access and low expectations from teachers are all alarming in their own right. However, the latter proves to be a problematic angle.

A central question in the process of deconstructing colonization in the classroom is this: how early do we need to start? While I would argue that inclusive culture should be all around them from the very beginning, such change doesn't come that easy. The Montgomery County report (2014) also found that children who, while in middle school, find parents to have low expectations of them are more likely to drop out. Low expectations from teachers is also a contributing issue. There is a nationwide diversity problem within the student-teacher ratio. (The

Community Foundation for the National Capitol Region and Identity Inc, 2014) Only 7.8 percent of teachers are Latina/o, whereas 25.8 percent of students are Latina/o. While the rate of Latina/o teachers is growing, so are higher rates of Latinas/os in kindergarten and 1st grade. One must beg the question, what exactly are these kids learning?

Research to the topic insinuates the school curriculum to be the overarching issue of colonization in the classroom. Curriculum in Texas is especially problematic. Within the state Latina/o students outweigh white students by nearly 10%. Texas schools are populated by 45.3% Latina/o students and 36.5% white ones. (Noboa, 2012, pp 49) Julio Noboa, of the University of Texas, conducted a study of KSA's (Knowledge, Skills, and abilities) in Texan curriculum. Looked over in a small subgroup of KSA's designated to "history proper", Noboa analyzed the first 10 KSAs. He found that only 4 of them deal with the development of civilizations and cultures. Out of those 4, 3 were dedicated to European history, while only one is dedicated to cultures and civilizations in Africa, Mesoamerica, Asia and South America. He found that European history gained 3 times the attention than all of the world's other civilizations combined. (Noboa, 2012, pp 51) Noboa (2012) also wrote that "World history offers a rare opportunity to cover some of the achievements and contributions of ancient Mexico, which would help these students 'develop an appreciation of their own heritage'" (pp 50). Unfortunately, these are also squeezed into that same single KSA 6 along with a dozen other non-European civilizations.

Texas has had history with opposing teaching the truth, they're not alone in that. Just a prime example. Curriculum in the state, like many other states, is focused heavily on "foundation curriculum" (math, science, English) rather than "enrichment curriculum." (history, music, social sciences) In doing so, Texas has sacrificed the education of critical thinking. Without critical

thinking, students will not know how to combat Eurocentric classroom material, they may not even know how to identify it.

In 2010, the state of Arizona banned the teaching of ethnic studies. Augustine F. Romero, who started the program, cited in his paper (2010), *At War with The State to Save the Lives of our Children: A Battle to Save Ethnic Studies in Arizona*, “Without humanity and a critical consciousness, they [the students] become the premier prey for cultural and capitalistic predators. (McLaren 1995)” (pp 14). He was dead on. When this ethnic studies program began in Tuscan, Arizona, Latino graduation rates and engagement levels shot up. This was because the students were being taught about Mayan chants and Chicano movements. They were being taught things that were relevant to their own cultural identity, rather than just another dead white guy. Romero (2010) also spoke of the correlation between ethnic studies and critical thinking. When he began, his students had an average GPA of 1.0. Throughout his program, the state saw a turnaround of 12 percent in graduation rates. He said that teaching young and vulnerable students about their ethnic background gave them a sense of humanity. (pp 11)

Taking into account all of these instances of either trying to reengage or reasons behind disengagement of Latina/o students, one should now unpack the idea of Critical Race Theory and how it may impact the above areas of research. Critical Race Theory, or CRT, shows systems of dominance and how they work and permeate in our American Public-School system. “According to CRT, ‘whiteness and racism are predictable, structural, institutional mainstream and common phenomena. Whiteness works through hegemonic systems and occurs at the material, ideological, local and global levels.’” (Nuñez and García, 2017, pp 2) In turn, LatCrit (Latina/o Critical Race Theory) work together to “compliment” theories regarding the process of identity construction. As Nunez and Garcia explain, through LatCrit, an analyst can see the ‘power

moves' moving under and throughout the disengagement of students. America has always had a way of "othering" to obtain dominance and justify collective acts of violence. When one understands the stakes of assimilation culture only being taught in schools, they are being shown systems of dominance by way of both LatCrit and CRT. In 1972, Robert Blauner called the general process of assimilation culture "Internal Colonization." (Hurstfield, 1975, pp 137) Hurstfield (1975) continued with talking about "5 processes which characterize the colonial relationship." (pp 137) They read as follows:

"(i) colonized groups are forced to become part of the dominant society through conquest, enslavement, etc.; (2) the colonized are disproportionately confined to various categories of low status labor; (3) the colonized are subject in all areas of their lives to external White bureaucratic control; (4) their culture is transformed, depreciated or destroyed; and finally (5) they are the victims of an ideology of racism which rationalizes White dominance over them." (Pg 137)

These five processes describe all of systematic American Culture. In relation to the education system, process number three strongly illustrates LatCrit theories. In 1972 the education system was dominated by Anglo, conscious or unconscious, oppressors. They dominated the school board, administrative positions and teaching positions. Latinx constituted for most non-teaching and non-professional positions in the southwest, such as "janitors, handymen and cleaners." (Hurstfield, 1975, page 137). That shows process number two with low status labor. This statistic is still the case today. As of 2016, seven percent of school administrators are Hispanic, meanwhile eighty percent are white. (Hill, Jason, Randolph Otem, John DeRoche, 2016)

Looking back at the Montgomery County Report of Disengagement of Latina/o Youth (2014), we remember that no computer access, low expectations from teachers and low parent

involvement were all cited as reasons behind the initial disengagement. Some of the cited issues contradict well-documented Latina/o culture, such as it being heavily family oriented. It's entirely possible that a lot of Latino parents or grandparents who spent their childhood in a foreign country and migrated here as adults never finished school. So, this family dynamic, no matter how involved in their child's lives, will never look like the white standard being normalized in the Eurocentric curriculum. The lack of teacher involvement is troubling while not surprising. As mentioned above, 7.8 percent of teachers are Latina/o, while 25.8 percent of students are Latina/o. (Hill, Jason, Randolph Otem, John DeRoche, 2016) Systemically, teachers are not keeping up with the increasing student's rates of diversity. This assertion can directly be connected with hegemonic systems of dominance that CRT and LatCrit point to. Latina/o adults are living in the same world of systematic disadvantage. What CRT and LatCrit are doing within our school system is promoting an attitude of critical thinking. When critical thinking is lost in a curriculum, students at a systemic disadvantage may not be able to be aware of the outright unfairness of their place in society, or that there shouldn't be societal "places" at all. As Antonio Gramsci states about how states (or in this case educational systems of dominance in the American public-school system) gain power is that, "Hegemony is accepted and works because it relies on the granting of concession to subordinate groups but only when the overall framework of the domination is not threatened." (Gramsci cited in Tatum, 2017, pp 30). If schools were at least to begin a more rounded education of critical thinking and analysis, the hegemonic oppressive systems wouldn't last much longer.

To achieve a diverse curriculum for young Latinas/os, we all must also be able to think critically. For critical thinking is vital in the pursuit for racial and cultural equality. My

concluding thought: How can an inclusive curriculum be taught to Latina/o students when the students haven't even been taught to think critically?

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