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**Engaging Latino/a Students in the Secondary English Classroom: A Step Toward Breaking the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

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Engaging Latino*/*a Students in the Secondary English

Classroom: A Step Toward Breaking

the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Behavior issues in the classroom directly relate to the teaching style and the type of interactions between the teacher and students. In particular, Latino*/*a students need to be engaged in the curricu-lum content if they are to be successful, both academically and emotionally. If this does not occur, then behavioral issues will arise, which will then feed into the school-to-prison pipeline theory.

Key words: critical pedagogy, curriculum, Latino*/*a children and families, literacy, multicultural education, secondary

Although it is estimated that Latinos*/*as will make up one fifth of this country’s population by 2050 (Cart,  [199](#page9)6), they are still often relegated to second-class status in America’s public schools (if not society as a whole). The most recent statistics show that although Latinos*/*as are 17% of the high school population, only 58% graduate on time (compared to 78% for their White counterparts). On average, compared to their White peers, Latinos*/*as are more likely to be placed in special education classes, less likely to graduate from high school, and much less likely to attend college (Alliance for Excellent Education,  [200](#page9)9). Even more concerning in regard to Latino*/*a youth in our nation’s schools is the theory of the school-to-prison pipeline, which asserts that through suspensions and expulsions from school, students of color are much more apt to become a part of the U.S. juvenile justice system (Hewitt & Tuzzolo,  [200](#page9)6; Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine,  [200](#page10)9). Because of zero tolerance policies in public schools, increasing numbers of students of color (i.e., Latinos*/*as) are being suspended, expelled, and even arrested (Giroux,  [200](#page9)3; Hewitt & Tuzzolo,  [200](#page9)6). Data show that minority youth make up more than 60% of the children involved in the juvenile justice system and that they are more than 8 times as likely as their White peers to be placed in juvenile detention facilities (Nicholson-Crotty et al.,  [200](#page10)9). In reality, it appears that the “United States is at war with young people, especially those marginalized by class and color” (Giroux,  [200](#page9)3, p. 60).

It is my contention that in order to help break the school-to-prison pipeline for Latino*/*a students, teachers must do a better job of engaging their students inside the classroom. Research has shown that with increased student engagement, there are less student distractions and negative

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behaviors; this in turn leads to increased academic performance and achievement (Decker, Dona, & Christenson,  [200](#page9)7; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg,  [200](#page10)5; Ota & DuPaul,  [200](#page10)2). Therefore, if Latino*/*a students exhibit fewer behavioral issues in class, then they will be less likely to be disciplined and, ultimately, might avoid the school-to-prison pipeline altogether.

Unfortunately, in English*/*Language Arts (ELA) classes today, Latino*/*a students are not being engaged; they are practically invisible and almost always ignored and*/*or overlooked in the class-room curriculum (Medina,  [200](#page10)4). It has been asserted by education researchers that many high school ELA classes in this country create a climate of privilege for the lived experiences of White people through the presented curriculum and classroom interactions (Carter,  [200](#page9)7) and that “mid-dle class students often *. . .* enter the world of the classroom and the text with dispositions shared by the author and the teacher who is ‘teaching’ the text” (Massa & Pinhasi-Vittorio,  [200](#page10)9, p. 50). The majority (84%) of teachers in this country are White females (Feistritzer, 2011), and because of their backgrounds and educational experiences (Bean & Moni,  [200](#page9)3), texts are often presented through a White, Eurocentric perspective. Ultimately, this inadvertently (or advertently) silences the voices of Latinos*/*as, especially because their home language often differs from that of the teacher. It is the responsibility of the high school ELA teacher to present students with a wide range of multicultural literature that represents various races, religions, and nationalities in order to create a space of openness, equity, and appreciation for all students. In this way, Latino*/*a stu-dents will more likely be engaged in the classroom material, will not exhibit behaviors that are deemed troublesome, and will not get involved in the school-to-prison pipeline in the first place.

In this article, I address the various types of discrimination and oppression that Latino*/*a stu-dents (and their families) face in this country. I also describe what I consider to be a culturally appropriate and effective ELA curriculum that both engages Latino*/*a students and affirms their identities. Lastly, I explain how I support my Latino*/*a students in their development of a critical consciousness toward racism and oppression with a focus on social justice and transformative social change.

FRAMEWORK

For the following discussion, I utilize a critical, multicultural theoretical lens within a social jus-tice framework. According to Montero-Sieburth ( [198](#page10)8), multicultural education “should lead to recognizing cultural values and differences among and between ethnic groups and individuals, and will develop cross-cultural understanding and awareness, which will lead to more positive learning outcomes” (p. 3). Therefore, using a lens of multiculturalism addresses how “different groups’ social and cultural ways of knowing have been disaffirmed, misunderstood, and*/*or devalued in the classroom context while male, upper-class, and Eurocentric ways have been affirmed” (Carter,  [200](#page9)6, p. 353). It has been asserted that in American society today, our notions of race are more deeply embedded and fixed than in previous decades (Ladson-Billings,  [199](#page9)6), and this requires action from our primary and secondary educators in order to address and counteract behaviors that can lead to the school-to-prison pipeline. Ultimately, as Giroux ( [199](#page9)7) has stated,

in order for teachers, students and others to come to terms with “whiteness” existentially and intel-lectually, we need to take up the challenge in our classrooms and across a wide variety of public sites of confronting racism in all its complexity and ideological and material formations. (p. 385)

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Although it is not an easy task, ELA teachers have the ability to help Latino*/*a students make substantial changes in their experiences within the classroom. The movement toward multiculturalism in ELA classrooms, as well as the struggle for social justice, must be one that “fosters an awareness of societal challenges that affect students’ families, communities, and the larger society” (Chapman, Hobbel, & Alvarado,  [201](#page9)1, p. 539) in order to be successful. Ultimately, within a social justice framework, Latino*/*a students learn how to take on an active role in their own learning process, which helps create a critical, democratic, and empowering learning environment (Hackman,  [200](#page9)5).

DISCRIMINATION OF LATINOS*/*AS IN THE UNITED STATES

Latinos*/*as face adversity on many levels, as well as in many different contexts, in this country. Historically speaking, after the U.S. conquest of Mexico in 1848, “the [White] attitude of racial, religious, and cultural superiority *. . .* was reflected in the treatment of the Mexicans who remained” (Spring,  [201](#page10)0, p. 91). This resulted in the segregation of schools and housing, as well as discrimination in employment (Spring,  [201](#page10)0). This is still true today: Latinos*/*as are often dis-criminated against in the workplace and often get paid less than their White counterparts in similar positions (Anyon,  [200](#page9)5). In addition, the news media frequently focus on illegal immigrants and their (supposed) taking of American jobs (Giroux,  [199](#page9)7). Mexicans and Mexican Americans are rarely discussed on television news, and when they are, almost half of the segments deal with ille-gal immigration and how “Latinos [are] a social problem and a burden to the country” (Gonzales, 2005, p. 1). Being Spanish speaking has also been an issue of contention for Latinos*/*as in this country. English-only initiatives have appeared in many states across the country over the past few decades in an attempt to make English the state language (Arizona Language Education Council,  [200](#page9)0), which is discriminatory against Spanish speakers.

In schooling, Latinos*/*as are also continually discriminated against. Data show that Latino*/*a students who need special education services are almost twice as likely as White students to be placed into more restrictive educational settings (as opposed to inclusion programs; Alliance for Excellent Education,  [200](#page9)9). Latinos*/*as are also much more likely than their White peers to attend segregated, high-poverty schools that are overcrowded and underfunded (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). In regard to curriculum content, Latino*/*a students must contend with “conditions that disregard, marginalize, and delegitimize the cultural knowledge they bring about themselves and their communities, while [they are] expected to conform and assimilate *. . .*

to the Eurocentric cultural system” (Darder,  [199](#page9)3, p. 196). They feel culturally and historically alienated from the education system, which adds to their feeling of oppression (Acosta,  [200](#page9)7). This is especially true in the ELA classroom, in which few teachers develop and include Latino*/*a literature in the mainstream curriculum (Medina, 2006; Rojas,  [201](#page10)0). As stated earlier, Latinos and Latinas are practically invisible in the presented classroom content (Medina, 2006).

Recently, in the state of Arizona, Latinos*/*as have been the targets of racial discrimination. Specifically, the Mexican American studies (MAS) program has been recently eliminated in the Tucson Unified School District. The MAS program, although shown to lead to increased grad-uation rates, engagement, and academic success, has been accused of “promot[ing] resentment towards a race or class of people” (Acosta & Mir,  [201](#page9)2, p. 24), which appears to be completely

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unfounded. Be that as it may, this battle is now being waged in court, and MAS teachers must now find other ways to engage their students academically.

ENGAGING AND AFFIRMING LATINO*/*A STUDENT IDENTITIES

In order to engage Latino*/*a students in academic content, ELA teachers must be willing to con-nect with Latinos*/*as and choose literature that reflects the students’ own lives, families, and personal histories (Acosta,  [200](#page9)7). Because the “lives of [Latino*/*a] students outside the school gates are largely marginalized and ignored in their daily school experiences *. . .* [they] are desperate for an education that reflects their lives [as well as inspires them]” (Acosta & Mir,  [201](#page9)2, p. 17). Because the teaching profession continues to be predominantly White, female, middle class, and culturally and linguistically different from students of color (L. F. Rodríguez,  [200](#page10)9), teachers are often disconnected from their Latino*/*a students. It has been asserted by researchers such as Joyce King ( [199](#page9)1) that educational content is not now, nor has it ever been, neutral; it serves various sociopolitical interests, such as socialization, domination, and assimilation. Latinos*/*as have been all too aware of this fact for decades now and often dream of an educational experience that more closely mirrors their own culture (Acosta & Mir,  [201](#page9)2).

ELA teachers continue to support and represent the traditional White, male, Eurocentric literary canon in our schools (Wilhelm,  [200](#page10)8), yet in order to begin the process of engaging Latino*/*a students, the traditional literary canon must be deconstructed (Banks,  [199](#page9)3). For Latino*/*a students in the ELA classroom, curriculum content often comes in the form of literature (e.g., anthologies, novels). Although the body of Latino*/*a literature has grown extensively over the past few decades (R. E. Rodriguez,  [200](#page10)0), recent research on literature anthologies has shown that although the presence of Latino*/*a authors is quite large, the anthologies only focus on the works of a few select, well-known Latino*/*a authors (e.g., Sandra Cisneros, Gary Soto; Rojas,  [201](#page10)0). Therefore, it is essential that the literary canon be expanded to include a more diverse range of Latino*/*a authors in order to recognize and engage our Latino*/*a students.

To the detriment of Latino*/*a students in this country’s schools, “few educators and scholars attempt to develop a curriculum that is respectful of the varied traditions of U.S. Latino literatures” (Rojas,  [201](#page10)0, p. 266). In my own secondary classroom, I attempt to incorporate Latino*/*a literature into the everyday curriculum at all grade levels. For example, in the Advanced Placement 12 ELA class, we read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez; in the freshman ELA class, I introduce *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros; in the junior ELA class, we discuss and analyze the speeches and protests of Cesar Chavez during the civil rights movement. To help discuss book banning and censorship in this country (as part of the *Fahrenheit 451* unit), the junior ELA class spends a great deal of time discussing the recent elimination of the MAS program in Tucson and its racial and sociopolitical implications (Acosta & Mir,  [201](#page9)2). Simply stated, multicultural literature that reaches out to our Latino*/*a students can play a significant role in saving their lives because it validates their existence and, as a result, empowers them (Hinton & Berry, 2004*/*2005). I have taken this message to heart and thus have made the decision to incorporate multicultural literature into all of my ELA classes, with the focus being on social justice issues in this country and around the world.

Educator and activist Antonia Darder ( [199](#page9)3) made several recommendations to further support Latino*/*a students in the schools. She asserted that if Latino*/*a students are to be successful in

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school, they need a safe space to discuss and analyze their “common lived experiences, their personal perceptions of the bicultural process, and their common responses to issues of cultural resistance, alienation, negotiation, affirmation, and domination” (p. 203). Darder also posited that to help ensure Latino*/*a student success, teachers must be warm, open, and firm in their classroom management; hold high expectations for their Latino*/*a students; and allow for parent involvement. According to Darder,

Latino students require teachers in their environments who understand the dynamics of cultural sub-ordination and the impact this has on students, their families, and their cultural communities. Latino students also need critically conscious teachers who come from their own cultural communities, who can speak and instruct them in their native language, who can serve as translators of the bicultural experience, and who can reinforce an identity grounded in the cultural integrity of their own people. Latino students also require classroom relationships that make explicit social injustice and that reinforce their inalienable rights to participate and have a voice within and outside the classroom environment. Further, they require dialogical approaches and curricular materials that will assist them in knowing themselves as historical beings and empowered subjects in the world. (p. 203)

Researchers have also found that students like to share their own personal knowledge in the classroom and are more engaged in learning when they have the opportunities to do so (Mitsoni,  [200](#page10)6). Furthermore, students enjoy schooling when they find the tasks to be enjoyable, feel that they can succeed at said tasks, and are given the reasons why they are learning what they are learning (Harris,  [200](#page9)8). Latino*/*a academic engagement emerges if students’ voices are validated by their teachers and they are also given the opportunity to build a community in the classroom (Berta-Ávila,  [200](#page9)4). Ultimately, research has shown that

racial minority students (e.g., Mexican Americans) who feel that their teachers value and respect multiculturalism and diversity will perform better in the classroom and will be less likely to drop out of school, compared to racial minority students who don’t feel their culture is valued or respected by their teachers. (Tan,  [200](#page10)2, p. 21)

DEVELOPING A CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The idea of a critical consciousness, created by Paulo Freire (1973*/*1998), explains the process of how human beings can begin to see the world critically, with all of its contradictions, and ultimately become their own agents for social change. Helping Latino*/*a students develop a crit-ical consciousness is no easy task, but it is one that is vital for their emergence as empowered citizens. For Latino*/*a students, who are “veterans of surviving in a system that has historically oppressed and marginalized them[,] *. . .* school has rarely worked for them and they feel that it is not built for them to succeed” (Acosta,  [200](#page9)7, p. 37); therefore, teaching social justice issues in the ELA classroom is an important and effective method of helping Latino*/*a students become critical of the difficult issues facing them on a daily basis (e.g., poverty, discrimination) as well as find the power to address those issues. In the ELA classroom, “social justice is a way to increase students’ abilities to articulate their experiences, critique their world, and address those identified issues with subsequent action” (Chapman et al.,  [201](#page9)1, p. 540). In that same vein, as stated by Acosta and Mir ( [201](#page9)2),

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in order for students to believe that the classroom can be a space of empowerment, liberation, free-dom, and autonomy, it is critical that educators cultivate a learning environment rich in student voice. As a literature teacher, it was crucial for me to find engaging, provocative, literature that was relevant to the lives and experiences of my students. (p. 20)

Greenslate ( [200](#page9)7) asserted that of all of the high school core subjects, ELA lends itself most readily to issues of social justice because ascertaining authors’ intent, along with their com-ments on the world around them, is at the center of what studying literature, essays, and poetry is all about. Addressing social justice issues in the classroom can be accomplished through the use of engaging independent*/*group activities, texts, assignments, and assessments that allow the students to incorporate their own stories into the class material (Chapman et al.,  [201](#page9)1). As stated by Greenslate, “Every poem or work of literature can be connected to present day social justice issues” (pp. 31–32), and I could not agree more. As mentioned previously, I attempt to engage students by incorporating into the daily curriculum current events issues that directly relate to and*/*or affect the Latino*/*a community. Whether it is a discussion about illegal immigration along the borders or the racial profiling of Mexican American drivers in Arizona, through class readings and discussions, students are able to begin to identify injustice and develop a critical consciousness. In an effort to help develop this consciousness, ELA “teachers prod and push students to think about multiple points of view, search for the reasons behind actions, understand the characters and their circumstances, look beyond the surface text and, ultimately, learn about themselves and others” (Mantle-Bromley & Foster,  [200](#page10)5, p. 73).

One of the most effective ways to help Latino*/*a students develop a critical consciousness is to analyze the absence and*/*or misrepresentation of Latinos and Latinas in the mainstream media. As a class, we discuss the six main Latino*/*a stereotypes in both movies and television according to Charles Ramírez Berg (2002; the *bandido*, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady), which then leads us directly into the commercial analysis project (Rubin,  [201](#page10)2). The assignment is for the students to watch two hours of television and just focus on the commercials, not the programming. As a group, we assess how often Latinos*/*as are seen onscreen and, if they are onscreen, which type of roles are they portraying. Students chart the products*/*services being advertised, the (perceived) race and gender of the actors, and the actors’ importance in the commercials (e.g., in a speaking or nonspeaking role, in the background). Eventually, the students calculate the number of actors in the commercials they identified, group them by race, and create a graph to illustrate their findings. In addition, they reflect upon their research and respond to prompts such as “What does your research generally tell you about Latinos*/*Latinas on TV commercials?” I ask the students to reflect upon what they have seen and read in class in order to come to a new understanding about racism on television as well as a new perspective about Latinos*/*as and their place in American society. I believe that reflection is an essential component of the analysis process. Godina and McCoy ( [200](#page9)0) asserted, “It is easy to take for granted how our actions, and the actions of [White] people, affect others; yet it is necessary to inspire the type of reflection that develops a critical consciousness in our students” (p. 177). If this reflection process does not occur, “ultimately, lack of self-reflection locks all of us, no matter what our social identities, into places of passivity and powerlessness, while members of our surrounding communities and society lack the necessary resources for a healthy, successful life” (Hackman,  [200](#page9)5, p. 107).

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FACILITATING ENGAGEMENT IN TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

According to Quiroz ( [200](#page10)1), “For voice to be empowering, it must be heard, not simply spoken” (p. 328). Therefore, after Latino*/*a students begin to develop a critical consciousness, the next step is to put those feelings about social justice issues into action. Acosta ( [200](#page9)7) stated that “it is essential for our students to develop consciousness that will allow them to be critical of the constraints in their lives, in order to develop projects that address these issues and offer real change in our community” (p. 41). Even though teachers do not have the power to make their students think or act in any particular way, the hope for many educators is that the work they do in the classroom will inspire Latino*/*a students to take action for social justice (Rios, Trent, & Castañeda,  [200](#page10)3). Even though “the mere possession of information does not necessarily translate into wisdom or deep knowledge” (Hackman,  [200](#page9)5, p. 105), teachers can help support students in their desire for social action.

The next logical step after learning about social justice issues is to act upon that newfound wisdom by going out into the community and making an attempt at positive change. For teachers such as myself, there is a strong belief that “social justice education helps students discover and wield their own power as critical and knowledgeable people” (Chapman et al.,  [201](#page9)1, p. 541). No matter the size or scope of the social justice project (e.g., a letter to the editor, a march on city hall), the important thing is that the Latino*/*a students are engaged and are using their newfound power in an attempt to create positive change in the world.

CONCLUSION

According to Berta-Ávila ( [200](#page9)4),

Teaching is political when the curriculum and environment reflects the realities of students in the classrooms. This *. . .* approach to the classroom opens the door to critical thinking, questioning, and understanding of the students in relation to race, class, and gender. (p. 74)

But in today’s day and age of standardization and high-stakes assessments due to No Child Left Behind, ELA teachers are often forced to narrow their academic curriculum (Nichols & Berliner,  [200](#page10)8; Sleeter,  [200](#page10)5) and simply teach to the test (Jones,  [200](#page9)7; Webb, Briscoe, & Mussman,  [200](#page10)9). ELA teachers must not allow themselves to be bogged down by issues that arise from standard-ization and No Child Left Behind. Teachers must find ways to cover material that interests and engages their Latino*/*a students in order to ensure their academic success.

If societal change is going to occur in this country, particularly in the form of breaking down the school-to-prison pipeline, the Latino*/*a youth will be the ones marching on the front lines (both literally and metaphorically). If Latino*/*a students are taught in ELA classes to look at the world through a lens of multiculturalism and social justice, then as adults they will be equipped to identify societal inequities (e.g., social, political, economic) and have the ability to fight for what they feel is just. The students will have learned what injustices occurred in the past, will be aware about what is happening in the present, and will have the ability to be vocal advocates for what is to come in the future.

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