Antiracist Pedagogy and Empowerment in a Bilingual Classroom in the U.S., circa 2006

How can teachers and administrators improve the educational environment for Latino/as and other racially stigmatized youth? What does antiracist pedagogy for Latino/a immigrant youth look like? This article describes the thought, action, and reflection employed by a bilingual 9th grade teacher in the Southwest. Antiracist pedagogical strategies include creating an empowering classroom physical space, articulating an antiracist discourse, and encouraging students to resist oppression through civic participation and activism. The author argues that antiracist pedagogy that is anchored in empowering Latino/a immigrant youth is a key part of creating welcoming school spaces that nurture the resilience of Latino/a youth and their families.

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Antiracism can be understood in its broadest sense as any theory and/or practice (whether political or personal) that seeks to challenge, reduce, or eliminate manifestations of racism in society. (O’Brien, 2007, p. 427)

Schools do not merely inherit or manage racial and ethnic identities; they create and enforce racial meanings. Schools as contested spaces, structure the conditions for the embodiment, performance, and/or interruption of sustained and inequitable racial formations. (Fine, 2004, p. 246)

Ms. Rivera, a veteran ninth-grade bilingual teacher in at Southwest High School (SWHS) did not mince words when talking to her immigrant Latino/a students about the importance of empowerment and activism for the future of Latino communities:

If it is a problem for Latinos, it is my problem. If there is a cause that is about social justice, then it is your cause.... It's happening all over the United States. Boycotts, no buying. It is a day without immigrants.
Referring to the National Day of Action for immigrant rights, Ms. Rivera explicitly positioned herself as person who is deeply committed to issues of social justice and human rights for all immigrants, regardless of their documentation status. This discourse went beyond an abstract commitment to multiculturalism and diversity, and instead engaged students in antiracist pedagogy—thought, action, and reflection—for the empowerment of Latinos/as and other racially stigmatized groups.

How can teachers and administrators improve the educational environment for Latino/as and other racially stigmatized youth? What does antiracist classroom pedagogy for Latino/a immigrant youth look like? The purpose of this article is to describe the antiracist pedagogy employed by a bilingual teacher in a ninth-grade classroom. The data come from a larger qualitative study of the achievement gap, in which I conducted 5 months of participant observation in five ninth-grade classes in a public high school in the Southwest. For this article, I focus on my field notes from Ms. Rivera’s bilingual math class. I argue that antiracist pedagogy that is anchored in empowering immigrant youth is a key part of creating school spaces that nurture the resilience of Latino/a youth and their families.

On Race, Ethnicity, and Anti-racist Pedagogy

Before engaging in a discussion about antiracism it is important to create a common language about the meaning of race, ethnicity, and antiracism (Dei, 2005, p. 14). Most social scientists agree that race and ethnicity are social constructions, not biological facts (American Anthropological Association, 1998; American Sociological Association, 2002). Ethnicity refers to the cultural differences that distinguish a given national origin, language, or ancestry group. For example, my native language is Spanish and my ethnicity is Dominican. Race refers to the socially constructed meanings attributed to the diversity of human physical appearance. For example, in the United States, I am racialized as Black.

How can we understand the social construction of race in school spaces? A key sociological tool for unpacking the social construction is the concept of a racial project (Omi & Winant, 1994). Racial projects are definitions, interpretations, and representations of racial dynamics, and simultaneous attempts to reallocate resources along racial lines. Macro-level racial projects can be seen in social movements, national discourses, the mass media, and other social institutions, such as schools. The 2007 U.S. Supreme Court decision banning the use of race in school assignments is an example of the latest chapter in the hegemonic colorblind racial project that may contribute to de facto school segregation (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Micro-level racial projects can be seen at the individual level of lived experience. For example, at many public schools, Latinos who speak Spanish may be subjected to formal and informal reprimands (Lopez, 2003; Reid, 2005).

Another important concept for understanding how racial and ethnic inequalities operate in the school setting is institutional discrimination—disparities that are often created and maintained inadvertently though systemic political and economic policies, practices, rules, and bureaucracies that contain barriers to opportunities. Zero tolerance disciplinary policies at many school districts that stipulate that any student who is involved in a school fight will be arrested, handcuffed, and processed in juvenile detention centers are an example of institutional discrimination (American Civil Liberties Union, 2007).

Antiracist pedagogy refers to teaching philosophies, practices, thought, action, and reflection that aim to dismantle institutional racism (Gillborn, 1995; Kailin, 2002). Critical educators are
key players in antiracist pedagogy. Olivos and Quintana de Valladolid (2005) defined critical educators as those who (a) have developed a critical lens, (b) create a support system of critical educators who work toward social justice, (c) are actively engaged in community work, and (d) integrate the experiences students bring from home into the classroom (pp. 291–292) (see also O’Brien, 2007).

Political and Economic Context: Growing Anti-Latino/a Sentiment

There is a growing anti-Latino sentiment percolating across the nation. Although Latinos represent over 14% of the U.S. population, dominant discourses frame us as a threat to the social and moral fabric of the United States, as well as a drain to social services. Lou Dobbs (2006), a news anchor at the CNN 24-hour national news cable network, has consistently articulated an antiimmigrant discourse that equates the migration of undocumented immigrants from Mexico with lawless illegal alien invaders and potential terrorists.

These national discourses, definitions, interpretations, and representations of Latino immigrants are important because they represent racist racial projects that shape the allocation of resources. In 2005, two governors in U.S.–Mexico border states declared a state of emergency to keep out illegal aliens. In 2005, President Bush signed into law funding for fencing a third of the 2,100-mile border between the United States and Mexico. Minutemen, an armed volunteer civilian force, use night-vision equipment to secure the border. It is important to note the absence of the U.S.–Canadian border as a problem. Instead, racially stigmatized Latinos, and specifically Mexicans, represent the ideal scapegoats for the economic restructuring fueled by globalization.

This study takes place in the city of Santiago, home to half a million people in a predominantly rural state that sits on the United States-Mexican border. Latinos comprise close to half of the residents in this sprawling urban center. The majority of Latinos in Santiago trace their ancestry to Spanish colonists during the 16th and 17th centuries, and they do not necessarily feel any solidarity with immigrant Mexicans or other Latinos.

The labor market in Santiago reflects the deep racial and class divisions in the country. Low-wage service sector work in tourism, retail, manufacturing, and construction rely heavily on minimum wage immigrant Latino laborers. Higher paid professional work in the military, science and technology, health, education, and the arts industries employ mostly Whites. High property taxes and on-going gentrification of low-income historic neighborhoods have displaced many Latino families to the outskirts of the city.

The antiimmigrant, anti-Latino political discourse is palpable on the school grounds of the city. Although the Santiago school district prohibits inquiry about the legal status of students, school safety officers at a local high school summoned Immigration and Naturalization Service officers to the school because they suspected that two Latino male students were illegal aliens. This is yet another example of the chilling message to Latino/a immigrant youth, many of whom live in blended families where some may be documented, although others are not. As of Fall 2007, all school security officers will carry guns during school hours.

SWHS sits at the crossroads of two predominantly low-income Latino neighborhoods with substantial rental properties and dilapidated housing, as well as an upper-middle class, predominantly White neighborhood with mostly owner-occupied homes. Sixty percent of the students identify as Hispanic and a third identify as white. About one-third of Hispanic students are immigrant or the children of immigrants; a third of students qualify for free school lunch. The majority of teachers identify as Anglo; only one-third are Hispanic. Two-thirds of the educational assistants are Hispanic. The four-year graduation at SWHS was lower than the district wide average (44% vs. 50%). Over three-quarters of white students were proficient in reading, compared to less than a third of Hispanics. The gap in mathematics was even wider (71% vs. 15%). English Language Learners (ELLs) had among
the lowest proficiencies in math and reading, 7% and 15% respectively.

Multiple additions to the main building mark the expansions of the 40-year-old closed school campus. Half a dozen trailer classrooms located at one end of the parking lot housed ELLs, as well as students with chronic discipline problems. The only bilingual Latino assistant principal was housed in the main security office, next to the police officer. Students joked that the building was modeled after a prison; by the end of the day it certainly felt like one. The maze-like hallways felt quite sterile. Ubiquitous gray cinderblocks did not convey any sense of place. The only time that students had a fleeting respite from the wall-to-wall windowless classrooms was during their lunch break when they escaped to the internal courtyard.

SWHS officially embraces multiculturalism and diversity, as proclaimed in the handbook. SWHS offers a dual language track for students who are interested in earning a bilingual seal (Spanish–English) on their high school diploma. SWHS has a Ballet Folklorico, celebrates a Mexican-themed Mother’s day, a Multicultural Talent Show, and offering a Spanish-Speaking Translator for parent-teacher conferences. Blatant racist language is clearly not tolerated at SWHS. A teacher who used a racial epithet in casual conversation with a student was promptly dismissed; however, institutional racism in the form of de facto intraschool racial segregation vis-à-vis curriculum tracking and extracurricular activities went unquestioned. Students racialized as White were overrepresented in advanced placement, gifted, and honors classes; Latino/a and Black students were overrepresented in the special education classes for emotionally disturbed students and disciplinary sanctions.

Creating an Empowering Classroom
Physical Space

Inventorying Classroom Artifacts

Ms. Rivera did her best to create an inviting physical space in her ninth-grade math class. A large sign taped to the door welcomed visitors: “Bienvenidos/Welcome.” The class, which was conducted in Spanish, was part of a collection of courses offered to those students interested in earning a bilingual certificate. A total of 15 bilingual Latino/a students were enrolled; a third were boys.

At the front of the room, a scented candle perched on an electric candle warmer fused the air with lavender, peach, and strawberry essence. A full-length mirror on the wall created the illusion of space in the windowless classroom. A U.S. flag hung proudly in the upper right corner of the white marker board, and a collection of small Latin American flags was featured on Ms. Rivera’s desk at the front of the room. A world map was prominently featured on the wall. Ms. Rivera kept a large poster-like grade sheet featuring students’ in-class assignment grades. Failing grades were noted in red ink. Ms. Rivera also kept an oversized calendar that recorded each student’s birthday. Every student had a place in this classroom.

My favorite classroom artifacts were the plentiful handwritten proverbs that Ms. Rivera carefully featured on colored posters. A quote from Brazilian critical theorist and educator Paolo Freire summarized Ms. Rivera’s teaching philosophy: “All of us know something. All of us ignore something. All always learn something.” A few more maxims asserted: “The secret of success is constancy of purpose.” “Take advantage of your time.” “Think big picture.” “What is popular is not always right. What is right is not always popular.” “Upon birth everyone has a right to be educated and in return, everyone should contribute to the education of the rest of society.” Multiple mathematical charts and colorful posters of Civil Rights leaders—such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, and Dolores Huerta—adorned the wall. These meaningful material artifacts created a physical environment where Latino/a students felt their culture and language were an integral part of the classroom. This setting set the backdrop for the antiracist discourse that Ms. Rivera eloquently wove into her challenging math lessons.
Ideological Clarity and Antiracist Discourse

On the morning of April 10, 2006, a National Day of Action for immigrant rights, youth activists and their families participated in A Day Without Immigrants. At most major cities across the nation, students organized walkouts and joined larger rallies protesting the proposed anti-immigrant federal legislation that criminalized undocumented immigrants, as well as anyone who provided social services to them. To symbolize solidarity with human rights, participants wore white shirts. It is estimated that over a million people participated.

On this historic morning, Ms. Rivera articulated her antiracist stance toward the proposed anti-immigrant legislation. Donning a white, silver-sequenced T-shirt and matching skirt and sandals, Ms. Rivera began class:

Today is a very special day. Yesterday at 4 pm, my family and I attended the prerally congregation of immigrant rights supporters, as well as those who are campaigning to stop the deaths in the border crossings. I was happy to see several of you there in solidarity with immigrant rights. It is important that those of us who do have papers defend the rights of those who do not. We are not talking about invading the United States. We know that we have rights in this country.

Recognizing that many of her students are in blended families, where some members are documented and others are not, Ms. Rivera articulated a discourse of empowerment and solidarity with immigrant communities (Pulido, 2007). Most important, Ms. Rivera spoke of antiracist action that she and her family participated in, even though they have papers.

Although half of the class was present, many students said that they planned to walk out later that morning to join the citywide rally. Marisol, a U.S.-born daughter of Mexican immigrants, distributed flyers with information about when and where students would walk out. Ms. Rivera, along with a small group of teachers, had persuaded school administrators to excuse students who had parental notes; however, not all teachers were as sympathetic. Felipe, also a U.S.-born son of Mexican immigrants, said that he wanted to participate in the walk out but decided not to because some of his teachers threatened him with suspension.

Later that morning, about 200 students, wearing white T-shirts and carrying banners, walked out of class and met on the baseball field. As they marched toward the larger demonstration taking place in the downtown area, students chanted: "Yes we can! Yes we can! Yes we can!" while police escorts on motorcycles cleared the traffic.

The next morning, Ms. Rivera expressed pride in the students who participated in the walkout:

How did it go yesterday at the rally? Unfortunately, I don’t have the time to comment on what went on yesterday in the United States. Yesterday was a very important day for Hispanics. We are over 40 million and we are a large part of the United States economy. We want a migration accord for those who are living on the border. We had a great impact yesterday, even if they don’t want to admit it. That is how Martin Luther King won Civil Rights for us. Boycotts. We are no longer afraid. We are not invaders. We want to be a part of this country. Our soldiers have died in war.

Departing from dominant discourses that represent Latino/a immigrants as illegal aliens unfit for citizenship, Ms. Rivera articulated an empowering discourse for her students. She critiqued the mass media for dismissing the magnitude and significance of the demonstration. She also alluded to the inherent hypocrisy in U.S. policy that allows legal immigrants to enlist in the U.S. armed forces but does not automatically confer U.S. citizenship to immigrant soldiers, unless they die while in service. Most important, Ms. Rivera referred to Martin Luther King’s nonviolent protest as a model for present day campaigns for social justice and human rights.

Antiracist Pedagogy in the Classroom

On a sunny April morning, I made my way to Ms. Rivera’s morning class and noticed a
group of uniformed military personnel in the hallway. As usual, students greeted Ms. Rivera by saying “Buenos Dias,” and stopped to hug and kiss her as they would a family member. Ms. Rivera inquired about Raul’s family and, upon hearing that they were doing well, she beamed, “I am very pleased, young one.” It was clear that Ms. Rivera had established personal relationships with many of her students that were based on mutual respect.

Ms. Rivera began class by inquiring about last night’s homework, “How were the lineal equations?” Students took out their work and pinpointed where they had difficulties. Just after the bell rang, Eduardo walked in and took his seat, stared at the board with a blank space look on his face. Ms. Rivera demanded, “Where is your notebook and pen?” Eduardo replied, “In my house.” Ms. Rivera smiled, “How are you going to learn mathematics, my love?” While handing Eduardo a notebook and pen from her personal supplies, Ms. Rivera joked, “In the battle to earn your high school diploma, here is your ammunition. Here is my gift.” Embarrassed, Eduardo quickly got to work.

For the rest of the class, Ms. Rivera covered the entire board with algebraic equations and students diligently copied them. She reminded students that they could look on the charts and work in pairs if they were confused about adding fractions; however, for full credit students must include all the steps in their solutions. A sign on the wall warned students: “Calculators do not allow you to develop calculation skills.” Noticing that Nelly and Cristina were gossiping about the latest magazine instead of concentrating on their work, Ms. Rivera reinforced the importance of cooperative learning:

Good friends help each other with their schoolwork. Looking pretty is not everything. Adolescence is your spring. What do you have to do now so that in the summer there will be roses? Life is as succession of opportunities. Do you want to work in McDonalds your whole life? It is not a dishonor to work in McDonalds, but it is not the same as a professional. You need to know that life will not be this. You need your high school diploma and then college. You can be a young graduate and have a professional life. I’m old and I have been teaching for close to thirty years, but I always study. It gives me knowledge of different things. Focus. I have a family and a second job. When I spend a week without reading I will be like an old potato. [Students giggled.]

While students completed their in-class assignments, Ms. Rivera checked homework and then called five students to the front of the class to solve the equations. After they all sat down, she went over the problems with the entire class, and graded each student’s work. When the bell rang students waved goodbye, sometimes stopping to give her a hug. Ms. Rivera reciprocated, “Goodbye, my little loves.”

Her stern, yet motherly discipline can be described as othermothering—the responsibility that women from racially stigmatized groups have traditionally felt for raising and educating all the children in their communities as if they were their own (Collins, 2000). Ms. Rivera’s antiracist pedagogy was also emblematic of what Valenzuela (1999) described as authentic caring that is based on reciprocal relationships, high academic standards, and a deep commitment to the success of each and every student (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006; Ferguson, 2005).

Conclusions and Policy Implications

How can teachers and administrators improve the educational environment for Latino/as and other racially stigmatized youth? What does antiracist pedagogy for Latino/a immigrant youth look like? This article described the antiracist pedagogy employed by Ms. Rivera, a bilingual math teacher in the Southwest. First, she created a Latino-themed safe physical space in which students felt a sense of belonging and ownership (Earick, 2006). Second, Ms. Rivera professed an explicit and unapologetic antiracist discourse that declared her solidarity with her immigrant students and their families, regardless of their legal status. And finally, she employed an antiracist pedagogy that was premised on high
academic standards, collaborative learning, and mutual respect (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999).

Against the backdrop of growing anti-Latino sentiment rippling throughout the country, it is imperative that schools, policymakers, and teachers embrace antiracism as a guiding principle. Educational practitioners need to be ideologically clear about how their own policies, practices, and curriculum challenge or reproduce dominant discourses that frame Latino/a students and their families as problems. Content knowledge in a particular subject area can be enhanced by the inclusion of critical consciousness, media literacy, social justice, human rights, civic participation, and empowerment as learning outcomes (Wiedeman, 2002). Every class, regardless of subject matter, can embrace antiracism as a pedagogical strategy and learning outcome. Regardless of intent, schools and teachers who proclaim a neutral position or practice benign indifference position on race and immigration issues are, indeed, taking political stances that may inadvertently promote the status quo (Gillborn, 1995). Activism and empowerment for social justice rooted in antiracist pedagogy are what is necessary for improving the education of Latino/a and other racially stigmatized youth (Bartolome, 2003; Gillborn, 1995; Kailin, 2002; Wiedeman, 2002).

Notes

1. The names of the city, public school district, individual schools, programs, and participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

2. The Santiago school district enrolls close to 90,000 students. Half of the students are Hispanic; a third are White; and the rest are Native American, Black, Asian, or Other. Fifty-six percent of students in the school district live in poverty, as indicated by free and reduced lunch eligibility. Nearly three-quarters of teachers identify as White.

References


