

9-22-2017

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Recommended Citation

Lucko, Jennifer, "Teaching the American Dream: The Unintended Consequences for Latinx Students Conducting Participatory Action Research" (2017). *Education | Faculty Conference Presentations*. 6.
<https://scholar.dominican.edu/education-faculty-conference-presentations/6>

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*Teaching the American Dream:
The Unintended Consequences for Latinx Students Conducting Participatory Action Research*

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In this paper, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork with Latinx English language learners in Northern California to consider how schools inadvertently contribute to internalized racism by teaching the ideal of an American meritocracy while obscuring issues of social justice affecting students and their families. In what follows I will briefly cover four main points. First, I explain the conceptual framework guiding my analysis of the relationship between school policies and practices and internalized racism. Second, I outline my fieldwork site and the research methods used during my study. Third, I describe how educational policies and practices at the Latinx students' school taught the ideal of an American meritocracy but obscured issues of social justice affecting students and their families. Finally, I provide ethnographic evidence demonstrating how students' understanding of an American meritocracy framed their analysis of data collected during a Participatory Action Research Project and led to deficit perspectives about the Latinx immigrant community they were studying.

I. Conceptual Framework

Over the last 100 years, scholars have considered internalized racism primarily as a psychological construct to investigate the consequences of racism on the individual psyche (Kohli et al. 2006; Pyke 2010). In the psychological paradigm of internalized racism, an

individual internalizes racist ideologies and stereotypes perpetuated by the dominant society, which leads to self-doubt, dislike or even disgust for oneself or one's racial group. One consequence of internalized racism is that oppressed individuals may participate in the practice of "defensive othering" by attempting to position themselves as different from other members of the subordinate group (Pyke 2010).

Pyke (2010) argues that internalized racism has become taboo among many anti-racist scholars because the tendency to focus on an individual's behaviors or beliefs—rather than foregrounding the role of racism, inequality and institutionalized oppression in an analysis of internalized racism—can easily lead to blaming victims for their own oppression. Yet given that all systems of hegemonic inequity are partially maintained through the internalized racism of the oppressed, Pyke contends that a critical approach to studying internalized racism is necessary to understand the reproduction of social inequality.

In the field of education, researchers have also highlighted the psychological burden that non-white students face within school contexts of normative Whiteness (Akom 2008; Castagno 2008). Others have considered how educational policies and practices systematically erode the positive cultural and ethnic identities of students of color, a process Angela Valenzuela described as subtractive schooling (Malsbary 2014, Quiroz 2001; Valenzuela 1999). Most recently, scholars have used ethnographic research to explicitly trace how educational policies and practices contribute to internalized racism. In the analysis below, I explain how school wide practices, a multicultural curriculum and direct classroom instruction taught the ideal of an American meritocracy to one group of Latinx English language learners, which not only legitimized the American status quo but also contributed to internalized racism among the

students. I found that students conducting Participatory Action Research often reflected the ideology of the American meritocracy in their analysis of community problems as they critiqued the perceived civic apathy of their Latinx neighbors and participated in defensive othering (Pyke 2010). Based on a conceptualization of community involvement as solely a personal choice, the students tried to differentiate themselves from other Latino/as by positioning themselves as conscientious members of their community who were willing to work hard to better their community.

II. Fieldwork Site and Research Methods

I conducted nine months of fieldwork at a K-8 school in Northern California during the 2014-2015 academic year. The total enrollment at the school was 735 students, which included 597 Latino/a students (81 percent) and 572 students (78 percent) who received a free or reduced price lunch (California Department of Education). I first met with the principal of the school in August 2014 to discuss the idea of a Participatory Action Research project focused on civic engagement. The principal suggested I partner with the Literacy Coach at the school, a highly qualified, innovative teacher who had been assigned a sixth grade English Language Arts class comprised of nine English Learners, all native Spanish speakers, who were reading several grades below grade level (kindergarten through third grade level at the beginning of the academic year).

For a little more than two hours each day, the teacher worked with the same group of students for two consecutive instructional periods and an advisory session. She agreed that I could join the group during that time twice a week and, during one of the academic periods each day, work with a small group of four or five students on the Participatory Action Research

project (i.e., each student met with me in a small group once a week). In addition to facilitating PAR, I conducted participant-observation, worked with individual students, had regular conversations with the teacher about the classroom students and the school, periodically attended PTA or after-school events and compiled daily field notes.

From the beginning of the school year until the winter break in December 2014, I focused the small group work developing the Participatory Action Research Project: learning about student-led civic research projects, discussing photography skills, identifying strengths and problems in students' neighborhoods with photography, analyzing the photographs through writing, developing interview questions for community members and summarizing interview results. My findings are drawn from detailed field notes compiled at the end of each day of my ethnographic fieldwork, student work samples, and a series of recorded and transcribed focus groups sessions that I conducted with seven students who became most involved with the project.

III. Teaching the American Meritocracy: Reach for Your Dreams

The students I worked with learned the ideology of an American meritocracy through school-wide practices, a multicultural language arts curriculum and classroom pedagogy. Upon walking into the school a large banner announces that students are not just entering an ordinary school, but an "I CAN" University. Each month during the 2014-2015 school year, the "I CAN" philosophy was advanced with a school-wide focus on one monthly character trait, including curiosity, grit, gratitude, self-control, courage, optimism, integrity and zest. These traits are based on the work of Carol Dweck (2008) and intended to create a mindset in which children understand the potential for improving their abilities through personal effort and perseverance.

In the classroom, the sixth grade language arts teacher had selected literature that dovetailed with the “I CAN” philosophy by highlighting the efforts of immigrants in the United States to achieve the American Dream. That fall, the sixth grade students read Esperanza Rising, The Circuit and All for the Better. Each novel focused on hard working and resilient immigrants from Latin America who found happiness in the United States despite having to overcome great hardship. The teacher regularly made connections between the characters in the literature and the monthly character traits emphasized throughout the school, once again highlighting the power of effort and perseverance.

At the end of each day the students lined up at the door to be dismissed. Every day, without exception, the teacher waited until all students were quiet to recite a motivational poem with them. This poem was written on chart paper next to the door so that students could read along, but the teacher preferred to read each line and have the students repeat after her. The poem began as follows:

Teacher: What you want to do. Students: What you want to do.

Teacher: And what you can do. Students: And what you can do.

Teacher: Is limited only. Students: Is limited only.

Teacher: By what you dream. Students: By what you dream.

At the end of the poem the students were told that, “And when you reach the top, keep climbing.” The poem provided a daily reminder to students that they too could achieve their dreams if they were willing to work hard enough.

By upholding high academic and behavioral expectations for every student at the school, the teachers and school administrators undoubtedly inspired students to develop the necessary

personal characteristics they would need to complete high school and continue on to college. At the same time, however, the teachers remained overwhelmingly silent about present day inequalities and injustices that students faced in their day to day lives. Indeed, during the time I was conducting fieldwork in the classroom, the teacher did not dwell on social justice issues when these points arose in the literature or make connections to students' own experiences with inequality and injustice. For example, at one point in Esperanza Rising, Mexican and Mexican American workers, including US citizens, are deported to Mexico because they are striking against the inhuman working conditions in the fields during the Great Depression. The class was reading this section of the book together and the teacher briefly paused to ask, "Is that fair?" Most of the students either orally responded "yes" or nodded their heads "yes." When one student suggested, "They were causing problems" the teacher explained, "But they were born here, they were citizens." She provided wait time for the students to contemplate this answer, but then moved on in the reading without further exploring the topics of the working conditions for laborers in the fields, organized strikes, citizenship or deportations. When I asked her later about her decision to continue with the reading at that moment--even though most of the students did not appear to understand the injustice of deporting striking workers to Mexico--she explained that it was a practical decision. The class needed to continue reading to stay on pace with the other sixth grade English classes.

In the next section, however, I consider how this emphasis on individual behavior--coupled with the lack of attention given to students' personal experiences with inequality and injustice--led to unintended consequences.

IV. PAR and Defensive Othering: "I Can Solve Problems in My Community"

By the beginning of December 2014, students had selected their best photographs of community strengths and problems, summarized the photographs in writing and conducted interviews with adults to investigate the causes and solutions to community problems. I decided to work with the students to create a “Prezi” showcasing the progress of the PAR project over the fall months and the students enthusiastically agreed to invite the principal and vice-principal of the school to listen to the presentation of their work. In hindsight, I realized that the “Prezi” clearly reflected the narrative of the American meritocracy emphasized throughout the school by focusing on the role of individual choice and behavior in civic engagement--both when analyzing the causes of civic problems as well as when conceptualizing solutions to these problems.

On the one hand, most of the students in the class selected pictures for the “Prezi” that depicted problems created by the negligence or civic apathy of their neighbors. For example, two of the students took pictures illustrating how neighbors in their apartment building failed to dispose of trash properly. In their pictures the two students captured images of the dumpster area and backyard patio area of their apartment buildings strewn with broken glass, discarded furniture, boxes, random trash and a dead, rotting mouse. Another student took pictures of a prominently displayed “No Dogs” sign at the entrance to his neighborhood playground, a picture of a man with two dogs standing in the middle of the children’s play structure, and multiple images of dog waste found throughout the playground. Several other students took pictures of trash littering the same park or the streets of their neighborhood.

Moreover, when writing about the images they selected for the presentation, most students focused on the failure of community members to take responsibility for their actions. For instance, one student displayed water steadily dripping out of the outdoor water tap because

someone in her apartment building had failed to close the tap tightly in the midst of the California drought. When analyzing her picture she wrote:

This picture shows that people don't care because they don't turn off the water... This is a problem because we are in a drought right now. This picture make me feel frustrated because people do not care that we are in a drought and that they are only wasting water.

After selecting a photograph that depicted one problem in their community, students shared their pictures with neighborhood adults and conducted interviews about the pictures using a list of questions that the class had collectively written. In the process of conducting the interviews, the impression that their neighbors were apathetic or even selfish was reinforced. For example, students asked the questions, "Why are they doing this?" and "Why do they not care?" One student recorded the following response in his interview notes: "People do not care because they are selfish."

On the other hand, even as students highlighted the civic shortcomings of individuals in the neighborhood, they also received the message during their interviews that it was these very residents who needed to take responsibility and fix the problems in the community. For one interview question, students decided to ask adults in their community, "Who has the courage to fix the problem?" In her interview notes one student wrote, "The person who has the courage is my dad." When they inquired, "How do we solve this problem?" one student was told, "We will solve this problem by talking to the people who did this and telling them to stop."

This strong emphasis on individual responsibility led students to conclude that people in their community should simply work harder to better their neighborhoods. Furthermore, students

were eager to position themselves as different from “selfish” residents who “don’t care.” The week before the December winter break I asked the students to write me a personal letter describing their experience with the project. I provided several questions to prompt their writing, such as, “What did you learn about yourself and your community while working on this project?” The following quotes taken from the students’ letters reflect the students’ defensive othering of their Latino/a neighbors:

“My community is dirty because they throw trash everywhere. I learned a lot about my community and now I care more about it. I learned I am a good helper. I learned they are dirty.”

“The thing I learn from myself is that I can solve problems in my community and make my community a better place to live. Something that I learn about my community is that there were problems and neighbors don’t care or don’t pay attention to the problems.”

“I did learn something from my community. I learned that there was a lot of trash. The only problem is there is trash that people see that they dropped it but they are to [*sic*] lazy to pick it up.”

Given the emphasis placed on the role of individual behavior in achieving success it is unsurprising that the Latino/a students first turned to tropes of personal responsibility and perseverance when asked to analyze the civic apathy of neighborhood residents documented during Participatory Action Research and attempt to distance themselves from other Latino/as in their community. In itself, teaching students character traits such as grit and self-control can be an effective pedagogy to develop important skills certainly necessary for academic success. Yet

when this singular focus was coupled with a lack of discussion about social inequalities, students were only provided one lens through which they could interpret a group's successes or failures. The unintended consequence was that discourses of an American meritocracy contributed to internalized racism among the students.