

# Voice of the voiceless? Multiethnic student voices in critical approaches to race, pedagogy, literacy and agency

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## Abstract

In this article, the author utilizes critical and sociocultural approaches to race, language and culture to examine the intersectional experiences of a multiethnic and ‘mixed race’ cohort of students in an inner-city, working-class neighborhood between their elementary and high school years. This article examines the students’ experiences in a nine-year educational process focused on critical pedagogy, sociocultural learning, and community engagement in and out of classrooms. More specifically, the article looks at interview, participant observation, and narrative data with a Latina/o and Asian American male student, and an Asian American female student, and how they made sense of.

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## 1. Introduction

It is March 2012, the final semester of the high school career for seniors Veronica Lam and Daniel Liang, and they individually send me Facebook messages about their college acceptance letters. Daniel has been given a provisional acceptance to a California State University, and Veronica has been given a full scholarship to Yale University. Having known and worked with these youth for over nine years, I am ecstatic over their university admissions. On the surface, it may appear that the academic success of both Daniel and Veronica serve to reinforce the Model Minority stereotype of Asian Americans, as studious, hard-working, and high achieving (Omatsu, 1989). Both Daniel and Veronica are students of Asian American and working-poor immigrant backgrounds, who were able to transgress the inequities of the large inner-city public school district they attended in Southern California. However, a far more robust analysis than the Model Minority Myth is required here to accurately understand the pedagogies and other experiences that helped enable the academic successes of both youth. A more robust understanding of the experiences of Asian American students is particularly salient as Asian Americans were the fastest growing racial category in the 2000 Census, and as the tremendous ethnic and linguistic diversity of Asian Americans present challenges for popular approaches to educational equity that are based on more static notions of race, culture, and learning with only one or two racialized groups in schools (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007).

In this article, I focus on the discourse of Veronica and Daniel concerning their formal and informal educational experiences with the critical and sociocultural approaches to classroom teaching (Nasir & Hand, 2006) and community organizing (Ginwright & James, 2002) that I helped facilitate between their fourth and twelfth grade years. I focus on Veronica and Daniel here (their names are pseudonyms), as they are both often marked as Asian American youth from underprivileged immigrant backgrounds who have ‘made it,’ yet their process of educational empowerment challenges many static concep-

tualizations of how we perceive youth from similar backgrounds and their schooling. Based on a holistic body of data that examines the students' voices over a period of nine years, this article discusses the counter-stories of Veronica and Daniel which challenge racial projects such as the Model Minority Myth, and fixed notions of how students of color perceive and act upon ideologies of white supremacy, standard English, and academic achievement, toward their own agency in and out of school.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Critical race theory

Over the last fifteen years, critical race theory (CRT) scholarship has made significant contributions to the educational literature concerning transformative approaches to education for marginalized students and educators (Haddix, 2012; Lynn & Adams, 2002). These contributions have included re-centering challenges to racism and white supremacy within research on pedagogy and methodology (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006), examining the intersectionality of oppression across lines of gender, race and class (Stovall, 2005), and honoring and accessing the experiences and ways of knowing of historically dehumanized people of color (Duncan, 2006). Through these scholarly contributions, CRT literature disrupts hegemonic conceptions of race, ethnicity, and power to afford a more equitable understanding of the challenges, strengths and voices of urban youth of color such as Veronica Lam and Daniel Liang.

For this article, a particularly useful tool found within the CRT literature is counter-storytelling. Counter-stories within the CRT tradition are narratives told by historically marginalized peoples, whose experiences, cultural practices, and ways of knowing have been delegitimized, erased or co-opted into dominant discourses like those of meritocracy, capitalism, heteronormativity, whiteness, and empirical research (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Counter-storytelling emerged as a counterhegemonic device used within some of the earlier theoretical iterations of CRT within legal studies, but they have also emerged as powerful data that highlight the everyday lived practices and literacies of those who struggle against institutions and structures of dehumanization, including the courts, police, and the schools (Knight, Norton, & Bentley, 2004). Within the lives of working-class students like Veronica (who is of Chinese heritage) and Daniel (who is of Mexican and Chinese heritage), these counter-narratives are a significant heuristic to understanding how they make sense of their educational experiences and put their world views into practice.

### 2.2. Ethnic studies

CRT literature that indexes the material legacy of colonization and imperialism by Europe and the U.S. (Kumasi, 2011; Matsuda, 2001) helps provide a layered understanding of the disparate educational and socioeconomic outcomes of racialized groups such as Asian Americans (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009). Yet typically CRT scholarship focuses on Black, Latina/o, and/or white students and teachers (Howard, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1999), and there is a relatively scant amount of articles on contexts that include Asian, 'mixed race' or multiethnic populations (Newton, 2003; Teranishi, 2010). To address this lack of research, critical approaches to race and ethnicity, found in disciplines such as ethnic studies, provide us with valuable theoretical lenses to historicize and understand the experiences of Asian American and multiethnic student communities (Kumashiro, 2006; Okihiro, 2001). This literature helps us identify and challenge the common practice of lumping together the immense number of ethnic and linguistic groups from what is racialized as 'Asia' into a monolithic Model Minority (S.J. Lee, 1994). Lumping Asian ethnic communities into one monolithic group serves to mask the very diverse histories of colonization, labor, class, privilege, and immigration to the Americas that comprise the Asian American racial category (Chang & Au, 2008). Even within one 'ethnic' group such as Cambodian Americans, there are major subgroups with diverse histories including second and third wave refugees, fourth wave immigrants, Khmer peoples, and ethnic Chinese. When these many groups are lumped into the Asian American monolith, the 'success' of Asian Americans who were ushered into the U.S. after the 1965 Immigration Act with significant amounts of higher education, wealth, or cultural capital, becomes normalized in the dominant discourse (Yu, 2006). Ultimately, Asian Americans become appropriated into a neocolonial 'divide and conquer' paradigm that pits them against other communities of color toward the benefit of a capitalist and transnational white supremacy (Prashad, 2006). This betrays the origins of ethnic studies and the term 'Asian American,' which was historically an identity grounded in a multiracial view of civil rights and social justice (Fujino, 2008).

### 2.3. Sociocultural theory

Rounding out the framework of this article is sociocultural theory, and strands of its literature emphasizing critical approaches to learning and literacies development (Campano, 2007; Smagorinsky, 2011). While CRT and ethnic studies combine to provide a broad understanding of dehumanizing systems in education, and general ideas of how to make classrooms more inclusive and democratic, sociocultural theory provides a framework to more dynamically understand culture and learning. It addresses these issues within learning ecologies such as students' homes, classrooms, and communities and is centered around the premise that human activity takes place in cultural contexts, is mediated by language (and other systems of symbols), and when studied, should include the context of the activity's historical development and the perspectives of the specific community's participants. Key here is the conceptualization of culture and how it is situated, can

change over time, and should be considered more as practices rather than a static list of traits that are often branded as a ‘learning style’ (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Understanding culture as situated and socially-mediated practices is congruent with CRT in that it helps counter static constructions of marginalized peoples where culture is a proxy for race, and fixed and positivistic notions of a racial group’s ‘Culture’ are used to grossly explain their achievement in schools (Arzubiaga, Artiles, King, & Harris-Murri, 2008). Such notions of ‘Culture’ signify a fixed and positivistic approach that looks at culture as a pronoun, something that is typically named, uniquely in and of itself, and free standing, like ‘the continent of Africa’ or ‘the Sikh people.’ In concordance with this dominant discourse around indigenous, African American or Latina/o student achievement, the static and positivistic approach tends to frame ‘the Cultures’ and languages of these groups as deficient or deprived of so-called academic, middle-class, or standard ‘Culture’ and language. In terms of the ‘Asian American Culture,’ the static and positivistic approach frames it as having elements of academic, middle class, or standard ‘Culture’ and thus the ‘Asian American Culture,’ and therefore the ‘Asian American race,’ are viewed as a Model Minority (Li, 2003). Through a sociocultural lens, we are able to unpack these confluences of race, ethnicity, and culture that often occur within dominant discourses, and build analyses that more dynamically account for perceived group differences and disparities.

The sociocultural concept of culture as situated and mediated practices over time opens up doors to understand how people develop and change, and these provide potentially powerful foundations for educators to build on this concept with their students and their families (C.D. Lee, 2001). In this sense, sociocultural theory affords a pedagogy of possibility, where cultural, linguistic, and literacy practices are not something that students and teachers are born or stuck with (Lemke, 2001). These practices perpetually change at the intersections, borders and tension points where history, experience, structure and individual meet (McCarty, Collins, & Hopson, 2011). These practices can thus inform the pedagogy of where students are coming from, but they only provide a partial map of where the student can go and what they can do in the company of their peers, family, teacher, and community (Chaiklin, 2003). In my own teaching and simultaneous research with students, sociocultural theory has helped our communities to more actively and dynamically assess and adjust our educational process over the past twelve years whether in schools, organizations, homes, or the streets. In conjunction with the lenses of critical race theory and ethnic studies, we attempted to develop a liberatory pedagogy, and subsequent research methodology, that was caring, collaborative and community-based.

### 3. Research context and participants

#### 3.1. Chinatown and the school

This study took place in a working-class, inner-city neighborhood in Southern California. The majority of the population in this neighborhood was comprised of immigrants and refugees, and self-identified their home countries as those in East and Southeast Asia (e.g. China, Vietnam, Cambodia). About a third of the population self-identified as being of Mexican or Central American descent (e.g. Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras), and about five percent self-identified as African American or Black, with roots in the Southern states of the U.S., as well as countries around the Caribbean (e.g. Puerto Rico, Belize). Self-reported primary home languages and dialects spoken by families included Southern Chinese dialects<sup>1</sup> (Guangdong, Chaozhou, Taishan), Spanish, Vietnamese, Khmer, and Black English. Other languages and dialects spoken by a few of the families included Japanese, Korean, Thai, and other Chinese dialects (Kejia, Mandarin, Shanghai). 98% of students received free or reduced lunch as most of the parents were employed in low-wage jobs in restaurants, housekeeping, sewing, and other areas of service (e.g. nail salons, security). Similar to conditions of other poor and working-class urban communities around the U.S., prevalent issues within the neighborhood were gentrification, gang activity (both Asian and Latina/o), drug abuse (e.g. crystal methamphetamine), and massive budget cuts in schools and social services.

#### 3.2. The Sensational Students community

The participants in this study were originally fourth grade elementary students of mine when I was a teacher in a K-5 public school in a large metropolitan school district from 2000 to 2004. I was repeatedly bounced around grade levels as the newest teacher at the school with the least seniority, and repeatedly assigned to this cohort that was viewed as the ‘bad class’ at the school and placed on the low academic track together for most of their years. Each school year, jokes flowed around faculty meetings about how courageous but unlucky I was to have this group of children. Borrowing from educator Tony Osumi’s idea on building classroom identity and community (Osumi, 2003), the students in my first grade classroom popularly voted on a class name: The Sensational Students. We stuck with this name over time as I had the same cohort of students in third and fourth grade. Out of the thirty-two students who were a part of the “Sensational Students” classroom community over these years, I was able to collect data with twenty-six of them in their high school years. Daniel and Veronica were two of these students.

With the Sensational Students, I utilized a pedagogy that was based on critical, sociocultural and community organizing approaches to education that sought to access the rich, diverse and hybrid funds of knowledge of my students and their

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I use the Pinyin transliteration system for Chinese names, but without the tonal accent marks. Thus my use of the terms Guangdong (often called Canton), Chaozhou (Chiu Chow), Taishan (Toisan) and Kejia (Hakka).

families, and develop multiple literacies that would help them read and write the world in transformative ways for both the official academic curriculum, and a decolonizing curriculum (González, 2005). During our time in the classroom, formal and informal learning was sought on campus and in the local community (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Kinloch, 2009), which included building upon students' varying cultural and linguistic practices (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). Significant in any humanizing educational setting, this building upon cultural and linguistic practices within the neighborhood and broader communities was imperative for our classroom of over fourteen different home countries and eleven languages or dialects. Thus our classroom regularly engaged with university programs, community organizations, and arts and cultural groups that were part of my larger network of urban social justice-oriented entities. In the elementary school years of the Sensational Students cohort, these programs and organizations included a co-ed soccer program (2001–2004), a social justice arts and education collective called Chinatown Voice (2003–2006), and a martial arts troupe called the Chinatown Kung Fu & Lion Dance Troupe (2001–2006). These were all formal and informal learning spaces based on critical and sociocultural approaches to teaching and organizing. Over the years they afforded our 'hyper-diverse' community a more dynamic and sustainable pedagogy toward a variety of outcomes that the Sensational Students community felt was significant and agentive.

As has been demonstrated in other studies of critical and sociocultural approaches to education in secondary schools (Bartlett, 2007), higher education (Vasquez, 2003), special programs (Gutiérrez, Hunter, & Arzubíaga, 2009), adult education (Hull, 1993), and teacher preparation contexts (Fecho & Allen, 2005), by the fourth grade there were multiple outcomes that appeared to be transformative for the Sensational Students and their families. There were high levels of engagement by the students and they demonstrated an eclectic group of competencies in areas such as sports, spoken word, martial arts, and community service. These experiences illustrated the running themes of our classroom, which were to build a culture of community and "serve the people," a mantra taken from anti-imperialist third world liberation movements during the 1960s and 1970s (Maeda, 2009). Parent engagement was also high (Cooper & Christie, 2006), with parents regularly volunteering their time, in the beginning, with more traditional activities like field trips, birthday parties, and classroom assistance. Keeping in mind that the parents were poor or working-class people of color working one to three jobs, this was a significant level of involvement. After conducting home visits with all families and engaging with them through after-school and weekend activities like sports in the local park, the parents also took on a more activist role. They went beyond existing race and language boundaries and came together to successfully petition the school principal for more qualified teachers, and the Superintendent for better food, health and safety practices at the school.

In terms of outcomes traditionally prioritized by the schooling institution, by mid-year of the cohort's fourth grade, the Sensational Students were the highest-achieving students in their grade level based on standardized testing in mathematics and language arts. These outcomes continued for the remainder of the year as we continued to supplement and counter the officially prescribed curricula of Harcourt Math and Open Court Reading that are often found within large urban school districts (Martínez, 2005). At year's end, the students earned personal bests in the annual California high-stakes exam, and all matriculated to the next grade, including Veronica and Daniel, who are the focus of this paper.

### 3.3. To middle school and beyond

Due to a school district program to remedy segregation and overcrowding in local schools, about 30% of the Sensational Students participated in a lottery-based busing program which sent them to suburban schools in middle-class neighborhoods of the outlying valley. From grades six to twelve, students like Veronica Lam and Daniel Liang had to wake up around 5:30 am each day to take the bus to school, which was an hour to 90 min away. At times buses were not provided for afterschool programs, so this made it difficult for inner-city youth like the Sensational Students to participate in extracurricular activities that would help their personal development and college access. During weekends, summers, and winter breaks, there were no buses provided so students would have to take public transportation for two hours to attend summer school or extracurriculars, or not attend at all. As the Sensational Students entered middle school, I entered my doctoral program at UCLA, but we continued the Sensational Students community in new and existing spaces. The Chinatown Voice collective (2003–2006) and Chinatown Kung Fu & Lion Dance Troupe (2006–present) continued past their elementary school years. In addition, together we also helped found or coordinate the Chinatown Ballerz (CTB) co-ed basketball program (2005–2008), the Organization of Southeast Asian Families (OSEAF) youth organizing program (2007–present), and the Mentee & Mentor Project (M+M) college access mentoring program (2006–present). Two stories of Sensational Students who participated in several of these spaces over the years, are the focus of this particular paper.

### 3.4. Veronica and Daniel

Veronica Lam is the youngest of three children born to her parents who immigrated together from Zhongshan, China in the early 1990s. Veronica's father has been a cook, and her mother a garment worker, throughout her life. With two older brothers, Veronica and her family won a housing lottery while she was in the early primary grades and they were able to move into a new subsidized housing development owned by the Sino Service Corporation (SSC). SSC is one of the largest social service agencies in the county targeting Asian Americans. Veronica's family has benefited from a stable, rent-controlled home since that time, despite the rampant local gentrification. Veronica was one of the quietest of the Sensational Students, but was well-liked by the elementary school faculty as she appeared to fit the stereotype of a Chinese girl: quiet, obedient,

non-questioning, and high achieving on tests. As an elementary student, Veronica rarely spoke unless called upon and she followed another Cantonese girl in our class around the school. Although she could speak Cantonese, Veronica would never do so within the school because she said it felt weird: a spurning of home language akin to the historical marginalization of language practices of people of color (Alim, 2005). In addition, while her English reading, writing, and math skills were marked as “Advanced” by California standardized tests, Veronica had issues articulating herself when speaking, especially in front of groups. While Veronica’s parents were supportive of what the Sensational Students were doing in and out of the classroom, they did not directly participate in our activities other than signing Veronica’s homework each night, driving Veronica to and from activities when possible, and speaking with me during annual home visits and parent conferences.

Daniel Orozco Liang was the last of four children born to his Chinese father (Hong Kong) and Mexican mother (Colima). Daniel’s parents met in Mexico when his dad and uncle were working at a Chinese restaurant. After beginning to raise three children in Mexico, the family moved to California where Daniel’s father found work in the restaurant and casino economy, and his mother found work in a soup kitchen of the Catholic Church. Daniel was born at that time, about thirteen years after his sister. In his elementary years, Daniel was one of the loudest and most enthusiastic of the Sensational Students. He maintained a B+ average, in part due to the support of his siblings and his father’s belief that he would be the ‘chosen one’ of his family. This meant he would go on to be trilingual in Cantonese, Spanish and English, attend a university, and have a professional career unlike his siblings. Daniel’s Spanish was always more fluid than his Cantonese from the time I first met him at six years old. This was largely because he only occasionally spoke Cantonese to his father and in Chinese school, but spoke Spanish daily with his mother, siblings, relatives, and neighborhood adults. Daniel’s English reading, writing and math skills were assessed as “Proficient” by the state, although he commonly stumbled when speaking English as he often used lexical patterns from the “Mexico City” Spanish that his family spoke along with Spanglish (Zentella, 2007). In the Sensational Students community, Daniel’s family was very visible as one of his parents would usually attend most group activities that Daniel was involved in. This was in addition to signing Daniel’s work every night and participating in home visits and parent conferences several times a year.

As mentioned in the Section 3.3, both Daniel and Veronica were a part of the lottery busing program that sent them to middle-class suburban schools in the valley for both middle and high school. During these years, Veronica became involved in several of the free community-based programs I helped found or coordinate in the local neighborhood and Daniel was involved in most of these community programs. Over the years, I became quite close to both students and saw them about once a week in high school and also visited their homes from time to time. The background stories of Veronica and Daniel are similar to those of the other Chinatown students I worked with for some eleven years, as well as urban working-class youth from immigrant families of color around the US (Noguera, 2006). Yet the experiences of these two youth are also different as students coming from backgrounds marked as Asian American and ‘mixed race.’ In the subsequent section, I discuss the manner in which we came to study how the two made sense of some of these perceived differences during their collective educational experiences and how they applied it to their everyday lives.

#### 4. Research methods

There were two primary research questions for this study.

1. How did the Sensational Students make sense of their experiences with sociocultural and critical approaches to their education?
2. How did the Sensational Students apply ‘transformative’ aspects of these approaches in their own lives over time?

To examine the long-term impact of critical and sociocultural approaches to these pedagogies with the students, this study used a methodology grounded in literature that applies a critical lens to race, ethnicity, culture, learning, pedagogy, and literacy (Willis et al., 2008). Using a long-term critical action research approach (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2007), this study’s participants were twenty-six of the cohort’s members in high school. I chose to work with as many of the Sensational Students as possible, given that I had still had access to most of them at that time. Also, given that it was an action research study, I wanted to access the voices of as many participants as possible to ultimately learn how to improve the practices of the educational spaces that most of the participants were still engaged in at the time, such as the M+M Project. Yet in choosing such a large group to work with, I was aware that I would not be able to adequately engage in certain types of data collection, such as following around each student to do participant observation. I resolved that I would first do a broader study of most of the Sensational Students, and that I could do a follow-up study in later years, perhaps case studies with just a few of the students.

As I designed this study, I was wary of the effects on data collection that my presence as a former teacher, mentor, coach and organizer could have on the way the students’ made sense of their experiences. My aim was not a ‘bias-free’ study, which my framework would not hold as possible anyway, but rather structuring diverse opportunities for the students to engage and articulate themselves. I ended up collecting data through a triangulated approach of self-administered surveys, semistructured interviews, and small focus groups (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2008). First, the students hand-wrote responses to the surveys’ questions and Likert scales, without my presence. Second, the interviews were done with just me and the individual student. Third, the focus groups were a heterogeneous assemblage of a few students, and included watching and talking about a year-in-review video that they had all seen as fourth graders, as well as a Theater of the Oppressed session

(Boal, 1992) where the students engaged in imaginative play sessions around conflict scenarios grounded in their everyday lives. During the interviews and focus groups, ethnographic data, formal and informal assessments, and other artifacts from the students' educational process with me from 2000 to 2009 (e.g. progress reports, essays, art work, videos of performances) were shared to stimulate dialog, and at times, to challenge statements made by one student or the small group. Primary data collection occurred over six months in the homes of the students and the researcher, as well as a local community center, and the interviews and focus groups were captured in video and audio recordings. Member-checking occurred after the interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, follow-up conversations were had with the participants in their tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade years (2010–2012). These took place over the telephone, email and Facebook, in order to obtain updates on their classes, their extra-curricular activities, their grades, and their plans for after high school. Additional conversations about the participants took place with their close friends, parents, and family members.

Data analysis was based on the constant comparative approach of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and focused on sense-making in the students' everyday lives, and where experiences and practices of agency and transformation emerged from their educational process. As the surveys were being collected, I began open coding and maintained a journal in which I would write the larger questions, reflections, and themes that emerged each week throughout data collection. After I had collected all of the surveys, I developed the semi-structured interview protocols to explore some of the substantive codes that were emerging from the surveys about race, pedagogy, agency, and in and out-of-classroom experiences. During interviews and focus groups, I took field notes with observer comments and then wrote event summaries and memos after I had taken the participants home (Strauss, 1987). I used the observer comments, event summaries, and memos from the interviews to not only continue the open coding process, but further guide the questions and scenarios that were engaged in during the focus groups. While subsequently reviewing the interview and focus group video recordings, I kept an activity log. Substantive codes at this time continued around pedagogies, agency, and experiences in and out of classrooms, but they also included world views, identities, and sustainability of pedagogies and practices. After all data were collected, the activity log was used to direct a partial transcription process of the interviews and focus groups.

Peer debriefing occurred at multiple stages in data collection and analysis with two adults involved in research in this community. One was a queer-identified Southeast Asian American female who had experience doing organizing and youth action research in the community. The other was a straight-identified mixed race male who had experience teaching K-12 students and conducting ethnographic research in local and neighboring communities. The three of us held monthly meetings where we discussed our research projects in the community that the Sensational Students were a part of. We included the types of protocols we were using, how we were collecting participant responses, and emergent themes within data analysis. This was helpful for my research, as it helped me look at the data, including a tentative code on community engagement, through fresh angles that I might not have come up with on my own at that time.

In looking at how the students articulated their experiences and applications of their long-term engagement with critical and sociocultural pedagogies, theoretical codes arose concerning the negotiation of difference and critical and humanizing approaches to relationships and community building (Chang & Lee, 2012; DePalma, Matusov, & Smith, 2009; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000): thus a tentative code became community engagement. After sorting through the data, I observed the students consistently contextualizing their educational process within activities like getting to know those racialized as “the other,” collaboration in the classroom, teamwork through sports or the arts, parent and family engagement, and making connections with students' diverse out-of-school lives and the outside world. The theoretical code of building community was initially unanticipated as my original focus revolved more around each student's individual development of literacies and agency. But in retrospect, doing an action research study of educational spaces rooted in sociocultural learning, humanizing pedagogy, and grassroots organizing, it is not unusual that these paths of care and community emerged for the students. In the following section, I discuss the three themes that students like Veronica and Daniel spoke of in terms of these long-term shared experiences, and the impact it had on their lives.

## 5. Findings

Of the twenty-six Sensational Students that participated in this study, their mean grade point average (GPA) as high school students was 3.0, without being weighted for Honors and Advanced Placement courses (which would make the GPA higher). Three of the students, all males, were retained in middle or high school. For at least two of their high school years, 77% of the youth were in activist or leadership organizations, 54% were in organized sports, and 50% were in organized arts programs. As of fall 2012, twenty-two of the twenty-six students were set to attend higher education in the 2012–2013 school year, with fourteen at four-year institutions of higher education, and eight at junior colleges. Of the four not going on to higher education, all had academic standing as eleventh graders.

### 5.1. Three themes for the Sensational Students

When asked about what they took home from their educational process in the Sensational Students community, the participants broadly recalled the sense of care and fun they experienced over the years. In addition, three particular themes also emerged. Despite their relative success as secondary students, none of the themes revolved around test scores or GPA. Instead, in looking back on their elementary to high school experiences as Sensational Students, the three themes revolved around:

1. Teamwork and collaboration
2. Seeing the world through the eyes of others
3. Critically engaging in real-world issues

The first theme was teamwork and collaboration. The student participants said a practice they developed from our longterm educational process together was being collaborative and pro-active with others to complete tasks. Students noted how this went against their other schooling experiences which tended to be very individualized and viewed collaboration and group work as not ‘real’ learning. Ultimately many felt that their long-term educational experiences helped them speak up in group settings, assert their ideas and needs, and access the strengths of their peers to achieve common goals.

The second theme was the students being able to see the world through the eyes of others. The student participants mentioned how our negotiation of racialized differences and tensions was accomplished in our community, where having so many different groups all in our one classroom provided a unique opportunity. An example mentioned was how our class was able to talk about our differences and bring them out to the forefront. This meant taking the highly racialized contexts in our surrounding environment and accessing them in formal and informal lesson plans to negotiate our shared sense of difference. Over time, students reported how these experiences were invaluable to them as they navigated their multiracial and multilingual worlds at school, in peer groups, and at home. They discussed how being able to see things through others’ eyes helped them address racism when they saw it in books, with their friends, or on-line.

The third theme was about how the Sensational Students critically engaged in broader social issues, which some referred to as ‘real-world problems,’ and how they could and should do something about them. They mentioned that this heightened awareness of their broader world was one of the most important, memorable, and applicable lessons they would learn throughout their experiences in our community. The students discussed this theme in making connections between people’s living and working conditions and their subsequent achievements. Applications of these issues to their everyday lives included adjusting their diets, changing where they shopped and what they bought, and becoming more critical consumers of mass media like popular music, corporate news, history books, and school curriculum.

## 5.2. Daniel Orozco Liang

Daniel’s life changed dramatically in middle school when his father cut his hand at his restaurant job and lost feeling in his arm. Daniel’s father was unable to cook anymore, and was then fired from his job with no benefits. Subsequently, the family was unable to keep up with the fees and paperwork necessary to maintaining the Liang family’s documented status in the US. All of the family, except for Daniel who was born in the States, became undocumented. When Daniel reached ninth grade, his father and eldest brother moved back to Mexico for work, but were largely unable to send remittances to the family. In his sophomore year, Daniel’s mother was cut from her job so the family became dependent on Daniel’s sister Leah. This meant that all three of them, plus Leah’s two primary school-aged sons, were dependent on Leah’s one income. Around this same time, Daniel’s apartment building owner tried to illegally force out Daniel’s family as they were longtime residents paying below market rate due to rent control, despite the neighborhood becoming increasingly white and gentrified. M+M fortunately had Mentors with connections to housing rights groups, and were thus able to momentarily stave off landlord harassment for the Liang family and several others. Yet for Daniel, the family in-fighting, the legal and financial worries, and his own issues around his weight and self-image took a heavy toll on him. Once one of the most popular Sensational Students amongst youth and adults, Daniel became antagonistic, withdrawn, and disrespectful during his ninth and tenth grade years.

By his junior year, Daniel’s demeanor and outlook changed as he pulled his grades up to a 3.2 average and lost a significant amount of weight through exercise. As his family finances, housing, and legal troubles continued, he attributed his turnaround to the Sensational Students community not giving up on him and continuing to help him develop through staying active in multiple spaces. Going back to his middle school years, Daniel was involved in most of the educational spaces I helped facilitate in the Chinatown area. These included the Chinatown Voice for Community Action, CTB basketball, the M+M Project, and the Chinatown Kung Fu & Lion Dance Troupe. Aside from these groups, in middle school Daniel was also involved in the OSEAF youth organizing program. In high school, he was involved in the SSC’s youth leadership council (2009, 2010), the Southside Youth Collective critical education group (2010–present), and a visual and performing arts production space (2010–present). Finally, Daniel was enrolled in the AVID elective class for all of his high school years, which was geared toward building a college-going culture with underrepresented students. As an eleventh grader looking back at his experiences within the Sensational Students community, Daniel specifically talked about how he was able to participate and fit in with many different organizations and programs. He specifically referenced his ‘biracial’ heritage and how his experiences as a Sensational Student validated this:

“One thing that Chang told me was when in first grade I was talking in Spanish and Justine translated and I was talking about a bird’s nest by the lunch tables. It was a long time ago, but I remembered how Chang showed me that story when he wrote it down in that teaching book. We were walking back in and I pointed it out to our class. Chang said he knew one day I would be good in both languages, I always remembered that. Since I was the last one, and the only one born in the U.S., my dad wanted me to be good in all of our languages too.” (conference presentation, 2/26/2011)  
Here Daniel talks about an anecdote I wrote about him and the Sensational Students in a book on teacher education (Oakes & Lipton, 2002). Perhaps the favorite “O.G.” story he likes to tell about our collective experiences, Daniel often brings

this up when he tries to explain the sense of encouragement, support, and purpose he developed as a Sensational Student. As someone who often had his identities and cultural and linguistic practices bifurcated and marginalized in mainstream discourse on race and ethnicity (Razfar, 2005), Daniel felt his Sensational Students experiences countered this discourse and provided him with a learning environment where difference and hybridity were constantly negotiated and valued (Pacheco & Nao, 2009). Returning to the Sensational Students' themes of teamwork and learning to empathize with others (Themes One and Two), Daniel's quote here is an example of the collaborative atmosphere that was fostered in and out of the classroom, which helped students like him feel like they could both teach and be taught, even with the hybrid language and literacy practices that he was told to look down upon and get rid of (Street, 2003). As we look at another counter-narrative of Daniel's, and later those of Veronica, we continue to see them refer to the diverse toolkit of linguistic and cultural practices they developed toward navigating and accessing the educational pipeline, and ultimately, their everyday lives.

Daniel's sister Leah often shared how she had a traumatic childhood as she was welcomed in neither Chinese nor Mexican cultural spaces when she moved to Chinatown. On the other hand, Daniel felt that from our elementary classroom, to CTB basketball, to the Chinatown Troupe, people of different races and neighborhoods were welcome. As a four-time peer-elected Captain of the Troupe and CTB teams, Daniel relished his role in coordinating with youth and their parents on a regular basis, and code-switching between Spanish, English and Cantonese (Orellana & Reynolds, 2008). He stated:

“Over all these years I've had the chance to be in eight different youth and parent groups and each one had different racial majorities in them. I'm Mexican and Chinese so I didn't really fit in any one of them, but I kinda fit into all of them. Asian people don't think I'm Chinese, and Hispanics aren't sure what I am, so it's something I use to get us talking and getting to know everybody. In M+M and other places we learned how to approach and get along with all types of people. We learned not to pre-judge others when we see people from different races, ethnicities, languages, and genders. This helped me better understand myself, understand different groups and treat everyone with respect.” (conference presentation, 2/26/2011)

In this part of his story, Daniel touches upon numerous issues of identity, dialog and learning. As a result of his foundation in the Sensational Students community, he believes he is able to navigate liminal spaces where other peers do not know how to label and approach him. But he was not able to do this until he felt like he could shake up dominant narratives of who he was supposed to be, such as with race and language (Kress, 1988), and how he could actually conduct himself as, “a Chin-exican that goes to school in the hills but still is down for the ‘hood’” (interview, 4/3/2011). Daniel now mediates uncomfortable social spaces by pro-actively making the initial moves to collectively negotiate his and their identities in cooperative and organizational settings (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu, 1999). After this initial embrace of discomfort and tension around identity and how to ‘locate’ one another, Daniel talks about how he accesses practices he learned from his family including, “a sense of humor and a chill, easy way of talking to people,” to work with others on shared tasks and activities (interview, 4/3/2011). Although he was not able to maintain his Cantonese since middle school when his father moved and Chinese school was no longer affordable, Daniel embraces the tentativeness of his Chin-exican Spanglish when he communicates and begins dialog with his diverse peers and community members. His teamwork skills, ability to see things through others' eyes, and understanding of real world issues (Sensational Students Themes One to Three) are all evident here as he develops a critical literacy and leadership role in bringing people together around community issues (Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001). This then opens up spaces to more deeply tackle local problems and broader social issues (Theme Three).

As of his senior year, Daniel has earned admission into a college and involved himself in leadership across different racial and ethnic community-based spaces, whether with predominantly Black youth in the Southside Youth Collective, Asian American families in the Chinatown Troupe, or in the SSC's “Bridging the Gap” Latino-Asian teen leadership program. In order to understand how Daniel developed into a resilient university-bound student leader, it is important to keep in mind Daniel's practices and overall counter-story in hybrid pedagogical spaces like the Sensational Students community over time. In countering static notions of race, Asian Americans, cultural styles and deficits, and the Model Minority, understanding these practices and narratives are crucial.

### 5.3. Veronica Lam

Veronica's family and home situation stayed largely the same during her middle and high school years. Her parents had steady employment in their longtime sectors of restaurant and garment work, and they continued to live in the rentcontrolled housing development of the SSC. Veronica's two older brothers (each of the siblings were separated by one year), looked out for Veronica as they all attended the same valley schools and were also involved in many of the same spaces during and after school (although they were not directly involved in the Sensational Students community). During her middle school years, Veronica was involved in her school's drill team, and also volunteered for an afterschool program at our old elementary school. During high school, she was continually involved in several on-campus clubs (e.g. Debate Team), as well as youth leadership groups at the local library and SSC. She also attended youth fellowship events at the local Baptist church, and participated in her school's youth marathon runners program.

With the Sensational Students community, Veronica was involved in several of the educational spaces I helped teach and coordinate, including the Chinatown Voice for Community Action, M+M Project, and the Chinatown Troupe. During her ninth grade year, Veronica was among the first group of students I took on California college tours. The following summer



we supported all of the M+M students in applying to college summer enrichment programs and she was admitted to a competitive program at Stanford University. M+M paid for part of Veronica's tuition, and her M+M Mentor helped raise much of the rest to help her family. During her tenth and eleventh grade years, Veronica, Daniel and others accompanied me to present on our work and experiences together at conferences across the state, including internationally recognized literacy research conferences, as well as more radical convenings of local educators of color. After becoming Captain of the Chinatown Troupe, Veronica went on to leadership positions in the previously mentioned spaces and was Valedictorian by her senior year. In an essay written for one of several accolades she won by her junior year, Veronica wrote:

"In summer '09, I attended a program at Stanford. Coming from a unique low-income community, I immediately saw that my peers came from backgrounds very different from mine. One told me that "everyone where I live has a maid." Another came from a high-class boarding school and bought more than anyone combined when we went to the mall. I could've easily felt out of place and ashamed of my background when placed next to a kid whose parents are successful doctors. But whenever these vices threatened to overcome me, the strong structure of M+M back home gave support even hundreds of miles away. The feeling of being disadvantaged always inspires me to work harder, bringing pride of how far I've gone from where I began." (scholarship essay, 7/12/2011)

From this part of her story, we begin to see Veronica's countering of the spaces of privilege and achievement she was beginning to have access to as a tenth grader. Being of the same racialized ('Asian') and ethnic ('Chinese') groups as many of her peers at Stanford, Veronica had early entrée into what are often considered elite circles of education and achievement. As discussed by other literature on working-class people of color who are able to 'achieve' in the given system, Veronica reached a pivotal moment where she had the opportunity to "pass" and become assimilated into the myths of U.S. meritocracy and the Model Minority (Du Bois, 2002; Yu, 2006). Yet Veronica shares her resistance to trying to fit in with these elite peers as it meant looking down on her working-class immigrant history and cultural practices. This alludes to earlier parts of her essay where Veronica talks about the sociocultural valuing and accessing of the linguistic and cultural practices of her family and neighborhood by the M+M Project, and the broader Sensational Students community over the years (Moje et al., 2004). This process helped her continue to develop critical literacy practices like deconstructing privilege in her college essay applications, while also being trained in traditional academic literacy practices in places like her Advanced Placement courses and Stanford (Larson, 2006). In congruence with the third Sensational Students theme of engaging in social issues, in this example Veronica identifies and challenges pressures to conform to elitist and materialist social norms in her education, even when having to individually live in such an environment hundreds of miles from her community.

Yet Veronica's counter-story concerning assimilation and fitting in to dominant constructions of a proper, high-achieving Chinese girl did not begin in high school. Her resistance to the cultural practices of her peers at Stanford stems from an earlier experience, one that extends back to when she first was bused out of her community to the valley suburbs. In her first year of high school year she shared,

"In 4th grade Mr. Chang warned us about 'colonial' brainwashing and peer pressure. I never thought it would affect me but it did in middle school. Getting bused to school in the Valley helped me realize many things. At first I felt strange and out of place, since people automatically viewed me in a different way. To them, Chinatown was a tourist attraction; a place to get cheap and bootleg stuff ranging from BB guns to "costumes." Out there in the Valley, Chinatown native students lost all pride in their neighborhood and their own culture. Valley kids, who don't know anymore than Chinatown youth, can brainwash us into feeling inferior: I was once one of those kids. Nowadays, I'll say "Chinatown is where I'm from" without hesitation, not "downtown" or the suburb that a lot of other Chinatown kids say when they try to fit in. I consider Chinatown to be my stable "roots." Because of 4th grade and the Sensational Students, I was able to survive school in Valley without loss of pride in my community and my self." (interview, 11/18/2008)

In this narrative, we see how Veronica already began to feel the pressure to conform to racist and cultural deficit perspectives in sixth grade. While she never had major academic issues, even when transitioning to a middle-class suburban school, Veronica still succumbed to the dominant discourse about how she should think and who she should act like. Veronica's middle school narrative is congruent with some well-established research on how students of color tend to 'sell out' their cultural and linguistic practices in order for their identity to fit in with what are perceived as successful dominant groups (Lew, 2004; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Yet when we apply a more long-term view of how Veronica's ideas and practices changed over time, especially at the end of middle school and on to her Stanford experience, we see that her stories are not congruent with some research as she is one of the highest-achieving students at her school, but locates her identity in a decolonizing framework of resistance that asserts her roots as a Chinese and Asian American that is also from a working-class, immigrant, and inner-city community. Non-critical or non-sociocultural lenses may attribute Veronica's achievements to simply having a stable residence and nuclear family, or perhaps Confucian ethics and Asian cultural norms aligned with school culture (V.S. Louie, 2001; Pang, 2009). Yet Veronica highlights her experiences in the Sensational Students community as a primary factor in her ability to make sense of her schooling and critically navigate them from a place of transformative resistance (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). As opposed to calling upon a culturally essentializing or nationalistic Asian or Chinese pride (which would be problematic anyhow as many of her secondary school peers were middle-class Asians), Veronica recalls our community's studies of colonization, from indigenous peoples in the Americas to African Americans in Oakland, to understand how she can move forward with her education (Smith, 1999).

In another narrative specifically geared toward her historical difficulties with speaking and her own voice, Veronica discussed:

“One day, I was encouraged to be a presenter at the literacy conference rather than just a participant in the crowd. I’m not the best public speaker. I worried about not being able to relate my story to the mass of people who come from different walks of life. I was uncertain of my ability to touch the participants with my voice, the same way good presenters do to me. After my first presentation, however, I realized how amazing it feels to share your stories with a group of strangers in hopes that they’ll take something from what’s said. I discovered more than I taught. From presenting and listening to others, I learned about social issues that personally affected me but were never acknowledged, like the absence of pride in Chinatown. From then on, I accepted the challenges to present at other conferences, learning and growing more each time.” (scholarship essay, 7/12/2011)

Continuing her story about her personal development, Veronica relates how the Sensational Students community helped her face her fears and inadequacies around articulating herself. As mentioned in Section 3.4, despite showing strong academic literacy practices on an individual level, Veronica tended to shy away from projecting her voice whether it was public speaking, speaking in her home language, or even just asserting herself with friends. Encouraging her to attend and present at conferences was a tactic of our overall community organizing strategy to get her to collaboratively work on these areas with her co-presenters (Sensational Students Theme One), and nudge her parents to allow Veronica to travel and experience different cities and social justice efforts. While there is a more obvious goal of developing multiple literacies here, a specific outcome Veronica defines is learning through teaching, and how she is touched and impacted by her audience as much as they hope to be affected by her. There is a certain openness and vulnerability that Veronica speaks to in this dialectical process which counter dominant hierarchies within educational settings (Moll, 1998), and can be tied to notions of humanization, community and the re-ordering of teacher–student relationships that were foundational to our pedagogy in the Sensational Students community (Freire, 1985). Veronica not only engaged in this pedagogy through conferences during high school, but through an eclectic group of local community-based activities including kung fu practices, weekend arts workshops, political protests, and theater of the oppressed over our years together. It is significant here to note that Veronica’s articulation of her voice did not come from simply speaking up or out in the physical sense, but rather through a shared dialogical process where she learned that articulating her voice was as much about vulnerability, silence, and listening, as it was about speaking, presenting, and performing center stage.

Like with Daniel’s narrative, Veronica’s experiences counter dominant narratives of race, language practices, Asian Americans, cultural styles and deficits, and the Model Minority. Both students vocalize critiques of dominant paradigms of who they are supposed to be, and what they are supposedly capable of achieving. However, where Daniel’s stories tend to negotiate his ‘Otherness’ and participation in and among historically marginalized groups, Veronica’s stories are marked by treading paths associated with ‘positive stereotypes,’ privilege, and the myths of meritocracy and the Model Minority.

#### 5.4. Daniel, Veronica and the three themes

In this section on findings, I have briefly outlined the effect that critical and sociocultural approaches to race, culture, language and community had on the classroom pedagogy and literacy practices of the Sensational Students community from elementary to high school. The themes of teamwork and collaboration, seeing the world through the eyes of others, and addressing real-life social issues combined to make a powerful process that brought the youth and families together through their seemingly vast differences in cultural and linguistic practices. Many of the students felt a sense of care, community, purpose, and urgency during the years of this process. In examining the counter-stories of Daniel and Veronica in multiple contexts over almost a decade, we are better equipped to see how honoring, engaging and sustaining cultural and linguistic practices of marginalized communities can help build literacies and agency to achieve in and challenge schooling institutions (Paris, 2012). Such an approach has been shown in some settings to warrant transformative outcomes for marginalized Black or Brown students (Camangian, 2008; Irizarry, 2007; Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011). Here the findings and counterstories point to nuances in working with Asian American, multiethnic and ‘mixed race’ communities, and further implications in doing critical and sociocultural approaches to teaching and community organizing.

### 6. Implications

Teachers, organizers, researchers and others dedicated to education for social justice continue to face difficult times. From school closures and turnarounds in the New York City Department of Education, to parent triggers of school reorganization in the Los Angeles Unified School District, measures that marginalize, penalize, and ultimately dehumanize the cultural, linguistic and literacy practices of historically non-dominant people of color persist in insidious ways. Yet powerful counterhegemonic pedagogies and methodologies that employ critical and sociocultural frameworks also persist, having been documented in the literature for over four decades now (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Freire, 1973; M.C. Louie, 1992; Luke, 2010). This article looks to contribute to that legacy by listening to the voices of Asian American and ‘mixed race’ backgrounds, and how they understood their experiences with critical and sociocultural education and their own agency, beginning in primary school, and over the long term until the end of their high school years. In terms of contextualizing this

literature within Asian American and ‘mixed race’ communities like Chinatowns, we find that typical binaries and paradigms within the educational literature are blatantly simplistic and inaccurate.

The conflation of race, ethnicity, language, and culture, already invalid when contextualized within other communities (i.e. Black = African American = non-standard English = non-college-going culture), fare even worse when applied to the highly disparate categories of class, language, immigration history, privilege, etc. amongst those labeled as Asian Americans. Some researchers of Asian American populations hold that Asian American students are going to college because of their ‘college-going’ culture and parenting, this includes East Asian students and their ‘Confucian’ cultural traditions. Yet ‘East Asian’ students Veronica and Daniel challenge that research and tell us that part of the reason they were able to ‘achieve’ is because their long-term educational experiences tied them to the struggles of Black and Brown peoples and a broader sensemaking which established some of the decolonizing connections across all of their communities. Of course, the story does not end with teaching and connecting histories amongst historically marginalized peoples. Daniel and Veronica’s narratives also instruct us to go beyond the decolonizing or sociocultural methods fetish, and beyond the school, to building real-world community spaces for them to exercise their critical educational experiences along with their cultural and linguistic practices. At the intersections of where the ‘old school’ (Foshan Chinese lion dance) meets the ‘now school’ (Chin-exican Spanglish), the narratives of the Sensational Students community also point out the importance of bridging school to neighborhood to broader society, with an eye toward sustaining such pedagogical projects over the long term, while being firmly grounded in critical and sociocultural foundations. As many cities in English-speaking countries continue to become more diverse with growing populations of Asians, it is the collective hope of Daniel, Veronica and I, that the counterstories from our past twelve years of working together point to some of the transformative implications when critical pedagogies, sociocultural learning, and community organizing are marshaled to bring classrooms and communities together toward educational equity and social justice.

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