"MARTIN LUTHER KING STOPPED DISCRIMINATION": MULTI-GENERATIONAL LATINO ELEMENTARY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how multi-generational, middle-class, fifth-graders from Latino families responded to classroom discussions of social issues—particularly discrimination—and draws upon sociocultural views of culture, educational theory, and sociological perspectives of immigration to provide insight into the learning experiences of one group of children of the Mexican diaspora. Findings include students: 1) perceived discrimination as historical; 2) maintained a distance from personal experiences; 3) understood social conflict through popular culture; and 4) promulgated American values of equity, fairness, and justice. Children's perceptions reveal complexities in negotiating their ways of knowing gleaned from varied in-school and out-of-school experiences.

Keywords: Sociocultural perspectives; social conflict; personal experiences

Latinos are the majority minority in the United States (Darder & Torres, 2004), and despite advancements in their socioeconomic status (Catanzarite, 2003), ethnic and racialized identities still persist in this country (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Frederick Erickson contends that classroom pedagogy can play a role in opening a space for educators to ~~"a~~cknowledge that experiences of oppression exists" (2004, p. 49), and many classroom teachers try to address issues of domination and power. But how do children from first, second, and third generation Latino immigrant families perceive the historic and on-going reality of discrimination in their lives?

This study looks at the experiences of multi-generational, middle-class, fifth-graders from Latino families as they respond to discussions of social issues—particularly discrimination—in their classroom. The research is part of a larger case study on Latino students' interactions during reading and writing engagement and draws upon anthropological and sociocultural views of culture, educational theory and sociological perspectives of immigration.

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Perspectives

Sociocultural theory in which an individual is shaped by the community and situated within particular historical, social, and political contexts (Rogoff, 2003) provided the overarching framework. Two complementary perspectives included: multicultural educational theory (Banks, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004); and a sociological perspective of ethnic diaspora's affiliation with American creed (Shain, 1999).

Cross-disciplinary Perspectives of Culture

Culture, once considered as static and essentializing of particular groups, has been broadened by more current transdisciplinary views. Anthropological perspectives conceive of unbounded and deterritorialized ethnoscapes (Appadurai, 1996) and a permeable product of political, economic, and historical relations of power (Merry, 2006); the field of education notes culture's fluidity (Erickson, 2004); and cultural historical views recognize dynamic cultural communities (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). These orientations have bearing on what constitutes "culture" in multicultural pedagogy and in educational research with individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Multicultural Education

Since the Civil Rights era of the1960s, multicultural pedagogy in schools has sought to meaningfully incorporate the history, perspectives, and contributions of diverse groups previously underrepresented (Banks, 2004; Olneck, 2004). The recent 2003 position statement of the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) calls for schools to prepare children to become active participants in a democracy and advocate for a socially just society through a curriculum that addresses individual differences including race, ethnicity, language, class, gender, ableness, ageism, religion/spirituality, and sexual orientation.

Critical multicultural pedagogists have sought to move beyond educational formulations such as additive approaches (e.g., a focus on an ethnic group's language, food, and traditions) towards a critical perspective examining hegemony and dominant discourse (McLaren, 1994). The NAME position statement supports children's questioning, critique, and interpretation of historical and contemporary oppression and inequitable power relations to consider how cultural differences are sociopolitical and historically constructed (c.f., Janks, 2010).

Interestingly, the research into classroom's usage of texts with strong social themes has revealed a complexity of elementary-age students' response. A curriculum that focuses on ethnic and racial discrimination can create a degree of student discomfort (Möller & Allen, 2000) and not necessarily compel all students to be politicized (Dauite & Jones, 2003). Sipe and Maguire (2006) presented read alouds in primary grade classrooms and identified six aspects of student resistance. One response, "engaged resistance," described young children's paradoxical involvement in texts yet disconnection from difficult themes and experiences too close to their own reality. It is worthwhile to note in the extant research the nuance of children's agency in their response to socially themed texts and multicultural texts.

Ethnic Diasporas and the American Creed

In light of this recent research and in an attempt to understand this study's Latino multi-generational children participants, an additional framework of an ethnic diaspora's adoption of the American creed, i.e., values of democracy, equity, and fairness was incorporated. This framework, as proposed by Shain (1999), notes the dynamically shifting adaptation of ethnic diasporas, such as Latinos and other immigrant groups, to the United States. For example, ethnic diasporas are transnational citizens simultaneously maintaining an affinity for their homeland and their newly adopted country. Their adaptation varies with individual and within group orientations. This perspective is congruent with assertions that Latinos, and other ethnic or racial groups, are not monolithic groups but have within group differences representing varied interests, histories, experiences, generational status, linguistic abilities, and economic status (Orellana & Bowman, 2003; Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2002).

Methods, Data Sources, and Analysis

A qualitative case study of a fifth-grade classroom was used for intrinsic and instrumental purposes (Yin, 2003). The public school, recently recognized by the state for academic excellence was in a primarily Latino populated middle-class suburb of a large metropolitan city in Southern California. The school's demographics of 83% Latino, 12% White, 3% African American, 1% Filipino, and 1% American Indian were reflected of the overall district. Through peer collaboration, student choice, and frequent class discussions, the teacher encouraged each of his 32 students to tap into their background knowledge, personal history, and cultural resources during class engagement.

Over a nine-week period, I positioned myself as a visitor while I used ethnographic data collection methods of participant observation, field notes, interviews, and document analysis. Although children initially attempted to view me as a second teacher, I repeatedly reiterated my observer role. Data analysis incorporated a constant comparative method, facilitated through HyperRESEARCH™ qualitative software, to categorize themes and patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researcher reflexivity from a Chicana feminist epistemology (Bernal, 1998) allowed me to be aware of the strength in using my own cultural background yet acutely mindful that merely being of the same ethnicity and a second-generation immigrant did not privilege my understanding of these research participants.

Findings/Discussion

The classroom teacher, Mr. Harris, was a 10-year veteran who integrated social issues such as poverty, immigration rights, and ecology in classroom conversations, as the topics arose in the school's literature, basal readers, and content area texts. Discrimination, he noted, was an ~~–o~~ngoing theme in [students] American history." While the teacher encouraged students to problematize school texts and to consider silenced voices, these students perceived discrimination as historical; maintained a distance from personal experiences; understood social conflict through popular culture; and promulgated American values of equity.

Perceiving Discrimination as Historical

To these students, discrimination seemed to be an historical event culminating during the 1960s civil rights movement and erased through the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks who as several students declared, ~~"~~saved our lives and stopped discrimination" (Figure 1). When asked why they felt that the teacher included discussions about discrimination, Geraldo observed, *"[It exists] in Africa…[and] in different parts of the world."* Another student Michael rationalized, *"So you can know about things that happened back then."* Their responses indicated a geographic and temporal distance.

Figure 1

Students' Perceptions of Discrimination as Historical

PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION AS HISTORICAL	
1	*It means people treat others unfair. Like white people used to treat black people. Like slaves.* (Eddie)
2	*It's good since we're knowing history and how the people were treated. That's sad. And we go like, "Why did they do that?" He wants to make us think like why'd they do that.*
3	*They have freedom now thanks to Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King stopped discrimination."* (Anthony)
4	*So you can know about things that happened back then.* (Michael)
5	*[The teacher] wants us to know how people were treated in the old days.* (Eddie)
6	*White people treat colored people bad. I took my history book home and read the whole thing on history. I'm glad it happened [because now things are better]; you want to know about what happened.* (Tarry & Alexis)
7	*Most of the people in this classroom are Spanish people and we wouldn't be playing with them. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks are like a team and now everyone is equal.* (Tarry & Alexis)
8	*People who don't like other people's culture. For example, a white person doesn't like the black people. And the black people was really mad." And some people from other countries that come to the U.S. don't have freedom. They have freedom now thanks to Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King stopped discrimination."* (Anthony)
9	*It means the blacks and whites getting separated. The colored always had dirty bathrooms. When I was watching the movie, <u>Our Friend Martin</u>, I saw a part, where the colored were on strike. The police had the dogs on them. They sprayed them with a water hose.*
10	*If Martin Luther King hadn't spoken up, we [as White students] would be in good classrooms and we wouldn't have broken chairs [like Latino peers would have].* (Tarry & Alexis)

Further, Eddie, a Latino, revealed his understanding of discrimination as primarily a binary concern:

For example, a White person doesn't like the black people. And the black people was [sic] really mad. And some people from other countries that come to the U.S. don't have freedom. They have freedom now thanks to Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King stopped discrimination.

Several explanatory reasons may account for this perception. First, conceiving of discrimination in terms of blacks and whites expunged its relevancy to these Latino students' lives. Secondly, in the ethnic homogeneity of their neighborhood and school environment, students perhaps did not encounter nor could they imagine discriminatory interactions. Another explanatory reason was the school's sanctioned texts including basal readers, social studies text, and multicultural literature typically included historical—not contemporary—stories. Even a literature selection about Mexican-American migrant farm worker's experience such as Esperanza Rising (Munoz-Ryan, 2000) had little relevance to these students' contemporary middle-class neighborhood. Furthermore, these texts often had narrative closures for social and racial conflicts. Inadvertently such positive accounts may have helped shape a perception that racism and discrimination were archival events.

Maintaining Personal Distance from Discrimination

Although students distanced themselves from discussions about current discrimination (Figure 2), during individual conversations they recounted specific personal episodes.

Figure 2

Maintaining a Distance from Discrimination

DISCRIMINATION KEPT AT A DISTANCE	
1	In Long Beach, there was always discrimination in my neighborhood. Not to us because we didn't play outside there were colored people upstairs and there were white propel downstairs. Colored people's kids were downstairs playing and the white adults would say, "We're selling chocolates." Adults would tell their kids not to play. I though, "How sad, we're all human beings." (Virginia)
2	I used to live in Compton. I went to school called ____ Elementary and there were a lot of African Americans there. I was there nine months and I was this thing called Safety Monitor, the whole school had. There was this one kid. I was monitoring on the street and he would tell people that I was stupid. His mom was a teacher and she was mean. (Victor)
3	[Incident occurring in a neighborhood where he used to live] "The manager had a sink. The kid pushed me [and the sink broke]. His mom started to tell her son, 'You don't want to be like Michael.' Made me look bad." (Michael)
4	"I know Governor Schwarzenegger doesn't like Mexicans. He wants to send them back." (Natasha)
5	"…My friends used to talk bad about Mexico. Here in [_____ School's suburb], the kids don't know anything about Mexico, they don't talk about it 'cause they've never been there." (Corina)
6	I was at my nana's house. My cousin was riding her bike. These black people said to her, "You don't belong to me." She cried and told her mother. (Brenda)

Virginia, a Latina, recalled overhearing adults using weakly disguised racial remarks and derogatory ethnic slurs:

> *...[T]here was always discrimination in my [previous] neighborhood. Not to us because we didn't play outside. There were colored people upstairs and there were White people downstairs. Colored people's kids were downstairs playing and the White adults would say, "We're selling „chocolates'." Adults would tell their kids not to play.*

The physical geographic distance used in retelling this incident seemed to reassure her that discrimination although part of adult discourse was not directed at "us." Corina, a Latina, contrasted her prior neighborhood of newly arrived Latin American immigrants to her current middle-class suburb, "…My friends in [previous neighborhood] used to talk bad about Mexico. Here in [her current suburb] … they don't talk about [Mexico] 'cause they've never been there." Corina considered the relatively infrequent movement back and forth across the California-Mexico border as a factor in keeping her peers from forming derogatory opinions.

Natasha, a Latina, adamantly stated, *"[Discrimination] doesn't happen here" yet a short while later remarked, "I know [California] Governor Schwarzenegger doesn't like Mexicans. He wants to send them back."* Natasha held paradoxical beliefs about the existence of discrimination and tenuous residency for immigrants. In her own youthful understanding, political leaders wielded power to transport people back across the border.

While the comments made during these individual conversations, reveal students' racial awareness, it does not explain what held students back from bringing up these examples during their whole class discussions. Dauite and Jones (2003) noted that not all young students were politicized when reading texts with ethnic and racial discrimination.

Students may have been avoiding discussions that would trigger anxieties about what it means to be a person of color in this country if revealing differences means exclusion (Joppke, 1999). This alternative explanation resonates with López and Stanton-Salazar's (2001) study with second-generation Mexican American adolescents who, although acknowledging discrimination, elected to "downplay their personal vulnerability" (p. 75-76). Also, the students' disinclination to connect to discrimination issues may have been shadowed by a negative societal sentiment towards Mexican immigration. These multi-generational children had parents and grandparents who had lived through a series of anti-immigrant and anti-bilingual legislation in the 1990s that all but outlawed bilingual education. As Halcón has noted, the negative societal sentiment of the media filters into the collective consciousness of individuals (2001). For these fifth-graders, personal stories had the potential to be personally humiliating rather than educational illuminating.

Understanding Discrimination through Popular Culture

Some students gleaned knowledge about racial and ethnic discrimination from popular culture Brenda recalled portrayals of inter-group tensions in the Walt Disney movie Remember the Titans (2000) about forced high school integration. Virginia, a Latina, recounted an episode of the teen television show *That's So Raven*, when a black character was denied an opportunity

to apply for a job. Michael recalled the movie Mississippi Burning with racial tensions. The contemporary Disney animated film, Madagascar reminded Kenny, a Latino, how newcomers to a country struggle for acceptance. These repeated media exposures and personal experiences shaped children's notions of how the social world operates (Cortes, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2004) and draw attention to the need for educators to be aware of students' multiple and out-of-school knowledge sources and the discomforting depiction that discrimination can be neatly contained and resolved within the time-frame of a feature film or television show.

Promulgating the American Creed

During the classroom's language arts and social studies' reading, students empathized with the historically negative treatment of African Americans, injustice towards Native Americans, and atrocities of the Jewish Holocaust. During a read aloud of a biography of the African American, Matthew Henson in Arctic Explorer (Ferris, 1989), students discussed how although Henson had proved to be an indispensable member of Admiral Robert Peary's team, his status upon returning home was contextually dependent:

Mr. Harris: *[Matthew Henson's] doing all these things for Mr. Peary but when he returned to the United States, he is just a Black man.*

Geraldo: *Maybe he should have stayed there [exploring Greenland]*.

In one history lesson, the teacher purposely problematized the lack of an explanatory text for loss of Native American land. Students keyed into the injustice with indignation:

Teacher: (Reading from school text) *"After the American Revolution, the United States claimed all land from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River. This land had been inhabited for generations by Native Americans. It included an area called the Northwest Territory."*

Teacher: (interrupts) *There's something that happened there.*

Jessica: *They forgot to say that the people who came stole the land.*

Ray: *They kicked them off.*

It was not surprising that these students inculcated in the American creed of equity and justice would be empathetic to the unwarranted plights of others. Students empathized with unfair treatment; however, pressed for time the lesson moved on without further elaboration. In studying elementary students' responses to texts dealing with racial and ethic discrimination, critical race theorists Dauite and Jones (2003) assert that empathy is a typical American value.

Shain contends that ethnic diaspora groups with unwavering convictions in American creed, that is, beliefs and values serve a vital role as a "moral compass" (1999) in nurturing, and promoting the American value of justice. Pluralistic views, espoused through multicultural pedagogy, portray an American society eager to accept the cultural, intellectual, and artistic

contributions from varied groups (Banks, 2004). Such an optimistic rhetoric of American values may have unintentionally made it difficult for these fifth-graders from upwardly mobile families to conceive of ongoing discriminatory practices in this country.

Conclusion

Children are active constructors of their world and navigators of their current experiences. For these Latino children, their negotiations and understandings are nuanced as first, second, and third generational immigrant status. These students wove in views and beliefs stemming from their modern world interests, concerns, and their social adaptation process. They were developing perceptions of discrimination and ways of knowing are shaped by their school texts and out-of-school experiences from their neighborhoods and media exposure. Popular culture and political currents influenced them. While some chose to keep personal experiences at bay, they were collectively indignant over injustice and unfairness towards others. Such awareness and expressed sensitivity towards others‘ plights can be transformed in developing student agency for bringing about social change.

Educators support children in making sense of their world through engagement with quality literature selections and historical accounts. Children‘s perceptions and misunderstandings (i.e., Martin Luther King ended discrimination) provide insight for an educator‘s next steps. Based on the guiding feedback from children, teachers can provide opportunities for quality discussions to tease out misunderstandings and refine critical thinking. Educators can link history to the present and lead individuals to compassionate, tolerant, and viable social insights.

Scholarly Significance

Banks (2004) suggests that educators must start early to help students ~~–a~~cquire the attitudes needed to survive in a multicultural and diverse world” (2004, p. 23; c.f. NAME, 2003). Understanding the complexity of responses that students may have to multicultural education can lead educators to developing methods and supports in guiding students‘ deep awareness of historical, social, political, and institutional power and pressures and equip them with necessary tools to transform society.

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