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Chicanas and the California Public High School Experience

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Education

by

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June 2023

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Introduction

As I maneuver through American society in my mid 20's, I often find myself struggling in trying to maintain and preserve my own cultural roots. I ask myself: how and when did I begin to let it slip through my fingers and lose touch with it in the first place? It took several years of learning and unlearning to pinpoint the social constraints that had affected my own life. The fact is that my social and academic experiences combined convinced me early on that someone like me was not going to amount to anything. The K-12 public education system failed me in ways that I did not understand before. I was too young and did not have the lexicon to articulate the dynamics behind systems of power that all too often persist in certain spaces, including educational ones. Throughout my adolescent years, I had a long and troubling record with my teachers along with administrators. I was labeled as a delinquent, a problem, someone who did not value education, someone that "isn't going anywhere in life... a lost cause," a phrase that is a stain in my memory. For a while, I internalized these beliefs and I often find myself trying to heal my inner child from this form of institutional violence. When I reflect back on my high school experience, specifically, I come to the conclusion that this perception of my personhood and abilities were misguided and distorted in so many ways. I was disheartened, demoralized and discouraged by educators and authority figures who failed to really *see* me. I always had more than enough potential to succeed in academia, and my performance in school had a lot more to do with how others perceived my social, cultural and gender identity rather than my actual capabilities. Truth be told, our

institutions are embedded in Western thought, heterosexual patriarchy, classism, racism and other systems of oppression, leading to covert racism and microaggressions that cloud the everyday lives of those who do not fit into dominant narratives.

I'm a product of immigration, a first generation Chicana student chasing higher education in a white middle-class dominated society, which is a privilege that is not tangible to many of my people. Newly found knowledge through literature gave me the power and insight to view the world from a gendered, race conscious and culturally relevant lens. Before my higher education experience, school was irrelevant to me, there was a disconnect I could not comprehend at the time. Seeing the world through someone else's lens, which more often than not is the white-male perspective, molded my perception and ideologies as a young adult. Although I could not put it into words, in a sense, I knew what whiteness was and what it meant for us who were non-white. K-12 never once provided me with literature written by someone who belongs to my community or the space to share my perspective in a classroom setting. I was not aware of it at the time, but it made me feel inadequate, insecure about who I am, where I'm from, like our stories and experiences did not matter because we were not in a place of power and we would never be. In a subtle way, I attempted to push my cultural identity to the deepest parts of me, locked away and rejected out of shame. I made it a point to never speak my native tongue outside of my home. I would attempt to scrub my brownness away with whitening soap. I straightened my hair everyday so I was not perceived as that "dirty," "lazy" Mexican that we often hear of. Time passed, and I came to higher education with an introduction to a wide range of Chicana scholars, writers, poets and

artists. Literature that is relevant to our experience helped me heal, embrace what I was once so ashamed and fearful of. I find myself wanting to trace back to the roots I have lost through years of internalizing Western thought and ideologies in the name of “classic literature.” Still, I wonder how much of a difference it would have made to see a reflection of my community within state mandated texts and literature.

Considering my experiential reality, the question arises as to how other Chicana students navigate their K-12 public educational experiences around literature that ultimately silences them while centering eurocentricity and rendering this perspective the norm. Although often overlooked, stories can be one of the most considerable ways in which our youth conveys and understands information. Storytelling empowers children to join the discussion based on their own lived experiences. However, if those stories do not reflect students’ experiences, they can be left to understand the world through someone else’s lens, which can have significant consequences since the dominant lens invisibilizes and marginalizes non-white communities. The English Language Arts curriculum and its lack of representation and diversity of Chicanas becomes a focal point when referencing systemic racism in American schooling. Given that Chicanas do not see themselves or their experiences within traditional literature used in high school English courses, this study seeks to better understand how Chicanas navigate Eurocentric dominated spaces not designed for them or their experiences.

Literature Review

For the course of this literature review, I will touch on three main themes that were present throughout my search: (1) the historical context of Mexican-Americans and education, (2) contemporary educational realities for Chicanx students, and (3) the composition of curricula in American K-12 public education. In the first theme, I touch on the foundation of educational inequality faced by the Chicanx community since Spanish colonization. Immediately after, I bring us to the reality of how the American public education system works for or *does not* work for our community. In the final section, we come to see how state mandated curricula across the nation has hegemonized the white, eurocentric perspective while invisibilizing and subtracting Chicana feminist ways of knowing from the classroom. As a whole, the system in place is not relevant to marginalized communities of children in general, but Chicanas specifically.

Historical Context of Mexican-Americans and Education in the Southwest

In 1848, The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed while putting an end to the Mexican American war. Through this treaty, Mexico ceded 55 percent of its territory which includes what we know as the American Southwest: California, Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado (*National Archives, 2022*). As many Mexican-American activists have put it: “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us” (Little, 2018). Mexicans remaining on the land meant that, during the next several decades, there would be new political, economic, social, and educational realities. Considering new developments in education, San Miguel (2003) asserts that “... those in control of education sought to use

it for two major purposes: to establish the political and cultural dominance of their own group and to promote the subordination of racial and ethnic minority groups and the elimination of their cultural differences" (p. 2). Between the decades of 1850 and 1880, public school officials successfully subtracted Spanish and Mexican culture from the curriculum in response to fears and anxieties of the growing presence of Mexican-origin children in the United States (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998; San Miguel, 2003; Leibowitz, 1976). The Anglo-centric curriculum arose through the elimination of Mexican culture, classes pertaining to the topics of Catholicism and Mexican history, and the enactment of English-language policies (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Through the process of subtraction, the Americanization of public schools in the Southwest extended from mid-century through the late nineteenth century (p. 360). By this period, segregated schools were strategically imposed and significantly expanding based on racist nativism, dominant ideologies and deficit thinking (San Miguel & Valencia, 1998; San Miguel, 2003).

Contemporary Educational Realities for Chicax Students

Through donations from John D. Rockefeller to the General Board of Education in 1880-1925, the education system was strategically structured around the notion of "I don't want a nation of thinkers. I want a nation of workers" (Fleming & Saslaw, 1992). Most Chicax students today are not tracked toward college readiness but rather vocational tracks structurally based on gender: young women are pushed towards home economics, typing, etc. and young men are connected to areas such as construction and

auto repair (Covarrubias, 2011). Research shows that Chicanx students are pushed out of school at higher rates compared to any other marginalized group in the nation. As a whole, we earn less high school diplomas along with higher education degrees (Covarrubias, 2011; Covarrubias, Solorzano, & Velez, 2010). Mariana Pacheco and Laura Chávez-Moreno (2021) state: “The goals of education hence focus on developing skilled and flexible workers in service to global capitalism rather than developing critical thinkers who critique injustices and their lived realities in ways that could lead to sociopolitical-economic transformation (Apple, 2001; Darder, 1991; McCarthy, Pitton, Kim, & Monje, 2009)” (p. 528). Indeed, the Latinx¹ community remains overrepresented in the service industry with the highest percentage of workers at 43% in farming, fishing and forestry, building, ground cleaning and maintenance at approximately 38%, construction and extraction at 35.7%, serving at 27%, and transportation and material handling at 24% (Dubina, 2021). In the context of education, these ideologies still remain in place and manifest into overcrowded and underfinanced schools where curricula is

¹The Latinx community roughly accounted for 61 million people who stand and have been standing as the nation’s largest racial or ethnic group for more than a decade. People of Mexican origin hold the largest weight as a subgroup at 61.6 percent (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2023). To be more specific, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2022), indicates that the population of Latinx students in public schools across the nation rose from 22 percent to 28 percent between 2009 and 2020. It is important to note that “Latinx” and “Hispanic” are umbrella terms and used interchangeably as they include: Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central Americans, and other subgroups. For the purpose of this study, I will only be using “Latinx” instead of Latina/o to be all inclusive and to steer away from the “Hispanic” term that has a history of colonization. When speaking about the ethnic group with a Mexican-American background, I will be using “Chicanx” instead of “Chicanos” when referencing the whole community. If I use “Latina/o” or “Chicanos” it is because that is the original framing of a theory or a certain period of time in our history.

oversimplified, low graduation rates, and overrepresentation of these students in special education classes or compromise that majority of “English-language learners” (Covarrubias, 2011; Pacheco & Chávez-Moreno, 2021; Kozol, 1991; Valencia, 1991). Although identified as the largest subgroup (*U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2023*), Chicana students remain as the most underserved minority group in the nation (Covarrubias, 2011). This illuminates the social reproduction, at the hands of educational institutions, that follows the sociopolitical and cultural dominance of those in power and the subordination of those who sit at the bottom tier of the racial hierarchy (San Miguel, 2003).

The Composition of Curricula in American K-12 Public Education

While turning attention to the anatomy of state curricula across America, Apple (1993) states: “the decision to define some groups’ knowledge as the most legitimate, as official knowledge, while other groups’ knowledge hardly sees the light of day, says something extremely important about who has power in society” (p. 222). The notion of “decolonizing knowledge” cannot be addressed without pivoting our focus towards the forms of knowledge within state mandated curricula that our public school children are bound by (Valenzuela, 2019). In this context, state curricula must be seen as foundationally grounded in a history, epistemology of settler colonialism and the “curricular genocide” (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016; Valenzuela, 2019) it manifests. Valenzuela (2019) alludes to the differential weight children of Mexican descent carry as it pertains to “... current hegemonic structures like curricular frameworks work, in a

patterned manner, to systematically exclude, misrepresent, and other our experiences astride a human hierarchy of socially-constructed difference” (p. 200). Even today, Chicana students struggle against whiteness and white supremacy in K-12 curricula and the reinforcement of their subaltern status through state standards (Puente & Alvarez, 2021).

The public education system has narrowed the scope of knowledge through a subtractive and cultural assimilationist lens (Valenzuela, 1999; Valenzuela, 2019) and, in turn, pushed our community to the perimeters. Since everyday linguistic repertoires and cultural assets continue to be discredited in educational practice, Pacheco and Chávez-Moreno (2021) assert that bilingual/multilingual students who belong to Chicana/Latina backgrounds navigate contradictory conditions in education where they undergo marginalization and denied opportunities based on ideologies that maintain inequities, not only in school, but society as well (p. 523). Bilingual/multilingual students are oftentimes invisibilized or not seen, especially in traditional English classrooms, given that their experiential, cultural and linguistic knowledge are equated with being “not smart” (Pacheco & Chávez-Moreno, 2021). With invisibilization in mind, the literal silence around race and its collision with gender needs to be brought forth and explored further. Mexican-American or Chicana women in education face not only racialized but gendered inequities that the American public education system is founded on (Taylor & Fernandez-Bergersen, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; McCall, 2005). We have continuously been seen through a culturally deficit lens that has

stereotyped us as: ugly, dumb, dirty, lazy and unambitious (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Deficit thinking has manifested into reinforced stereotypes that lead people to believe our community is intellectually inferior (Taylor & Fernandez-Bergersen, 2015), and after decades of harmful language, these ideologies became naturalized and oftentimes internalized, a detrimental consequence to young Chicana women.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Theory in Education

Critical Race Theory (CRT), as we know it, originally emerged from the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) field and developed by a group of legal scholars such as: Derrick Bell, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, and Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Derrick Bell (1988) and Richard Delgado (1989) argued that racism should not be viewed as acts of individual prejudice that can simply be eradicated. Rather, it is an endemic part of American life, deeply embedded in our institutions. In the present day, we see CRT in various disciplines including education. The tenets that fall under the critical race theory branch expose the ways in which race and racism affect the lives of those who are considered non-white. Additionally, CRT allows us to reframe and re-envision the systems which perpetuate racial hegemony and white supremacy. With race and racism as the core, decentering whiteness in literature becomes a mechanism that enables subjugated communities of children to envision themselves within these texts.

Although Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) are closely related, they still differ in ways where LatCrit adds dimensions such as: language, immigration, culture, identity, etc. that critical race theorists often ignore (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Researchers such as: Dolores Delgado Bernal and Daniel Solórzano (2001) developed the theory to advance their work on Chicana/o school resistance in order to address the intersectionality of the various forms of oppression (p. 312). More specifically, when considering Chicanas from a LatCrit perspective, we come to realize that this group undergoes erasure and are rendered invisible through curriculum and systemic racism (Leslie, 2021). CRT coupled with LatCrit elucidates how Chicanas are alienated from our public education system and how these unjust practices manifest themselves into larger social issues in society (p. 92).

Chicana Feminist Epistemologies

Delgado Bernal (1998) states that very little is known about the educational mobility of women who belong to marginalized communities but Chicanas in particular. It was not until the end of the 20th century that studies around “... the barriers to education experienced by Chicanas (Gándara, 1982; Segura, 1993; Vásquez, 1982), the marginality of Chicanas in higher education (Cuádriz, 1996), and in the college choice and resistance of Chicanas (Talavera-Bustillos, 1998)” were explored (p. 558). The author goes further to explain how research around the field of education plays a major role in what is being taught or what is *not* being taught in educational institutions (p.

556). To consider these systems of knowledge as legitimate, objective, and a universal foundation of knowledge (p. 560) is an injustice for girls, young women, and women of color, specifically Chicanas. This is not only a matter of epistemology but one that clouds power, politics, ethics and survival. Introducing a Chicana feminist epistemology to the existing body of educational research then becomes a form of resistance to epistemological racism (Scheurich & Ypung, 1997).

Behind the master narratives and dominant ideologies of the Chicana community, to this day, the epistemological orientation that follows this group stands by deficit thinking that continues to silence and exclude these communities. Whether it may be cultural deficit thinking or genetic determinist model, Chicanas invert these deficits into assets. Delgado Bernal (1998) shines the light on Chicana feminist ways of knowing and understanding by pointing out ancestral or generational wisdom that is learned through generations of storytelling. In essence, the author argues that deploying a Chicana feminist epistemology would bring forth familial and community based relationships, experiences, histories, culture, and language that have been undervalued, unrecognized, and dismissed by Eurocentric epistemological orientation as a new form of resistance, empowerment, and community resource (p. 113).

Critical Race Theory in connection to Latina/o Critical Theory allows us to speak back to power that is embedded within our institutions. It is through these frameworks that we are able to recognize and pinpoint structural racism within the K-12 curriculum, policies

and practices that do specific communities an injustice by only mirroring and reflecting the white gaze in literature. By bringing Chicana feminist epistemology in the picture, we transcend the perimeters of policy and practice to put our specific ways of knowing, our forms of knowledge that have been passed down through generations at the center of this analysis. In the same direction, with these frameworks at a cross, Chicanas can be seen as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, 2002) while embodying a counternarrative to resist universal systems of knowledge.

Methods

My data collection process consists of observations, interviews, and document analyses around literature in K-12 English Language Arts. As far as my observations go, I observed 3 undergraduate courses “Educational Perspectives of the Chicana/o/x” on Mondays and Wednesdays between an hour and an hour and 20 minutes. Through these observations I took notes and a few pictures of class content in order to gather descriptive and rich data for the purpose of my extended field notes. My participants were recruited from said class and encouraged to share their personal educational experiences through a semi-structured interview. The interviews themselves lasted approximately an hour through zoom and transcribed personally from an audio recording. I then went through the transcriptions multiple times in order to develop open codes, focused codes and overall themes to form an analysis. The document analysis portion of my data collection consisted of analyzing pages from Common Core State Standards in California

juxtaposed with a current 12th grade English syllabus provided by a former educator or mine who still teaches at my former high school: Cathedral City High School (CCHS). Cathedral City HS is one of 6 schools in the Palm Springs Unified School District (PSUSD), and according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), CCHS has an enrollment of 1,531 students. The total minority enrollment is 94% and 95% of students are economically disadvantaged (*US News, 2021*). Throughout this document collection and analysis, I break down the Eurocentricity and the white male perspective within literature in K-12 English classrooms. For the purposes of this case study, I will be focusing on the largest subgroup, particularly young women of Mexican descent. By using the term “Chicana,” I honor and remain faithful to my participants’ self-identification (Taylor & Fernandez-Bergersen, 2015).

The period of the 1960’s was a pivotal moment for Mexican-Americans as they began to gain critical consciousness as an ethnic group. People of Mexican ancestry reorganized and coined the term Chicana/o as a form of self-identification (Alarcón, 2006). Identifying as Mexican-American always came with a negative or derogatory connotation, however, Ruben Salazar (1970), stated that “A Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself.” With this recodification, the “Chicano” community, which I refer to as the “Chicanx” community in this contemporary period, made their voices heard by demanding recovery of their silenced and marginalized history. The rearticulation and formation of what it meant to be Chicanx stood as a counternarrative to how the United States perceives those who come from Mexican

descent. In the U.S. context, being Mexican-American is often intertwined as a binary or contradiction. One is simply not Mexican-American, they are considered to be “Mexican or not-Mexican, American or not-American, and being a citizen or not a citizen” (Alarcón, 2006, p. 248). Identifying as Chicax does not come naturally, claiming this identity stands as a conscious and critical resistance to “... historical conjunctures of crisis, confusion, political and ideological conflict and contradictions of the simultaneous effects of having ‘no names’, having ‘many names’, not ‘know(ing) her names’, and being someone else’s ‘dreamwork’” (p. 250).

Considering the very limited research behind Chicanas and their educational paths, I intend to engage in discussions that uplift Chicana experiences and voices within traditional K-12 English classrooms. Since classroom practices and teachings revolve around mandated texts to shape the minds of our youth, it is critical to understand the limited information being distributed by literature ingrained in Eurocentricity and white dominance (Leslie, 2021). As previously mentioned, given that Chicanas do not see themselves or their experiences within traditional literature used in high school English courses, this study seeks to better understand how Chicanas navigate English dominated spaces not designed for them or their experiences. When Chicanas cannot see themselves reflected in the literature, there is a sense of disconnect, alienation, and overall lack of interest in what is being taught. Additionally, if these young women cannot see themselves in educational settings, how could they ever envision themselves in higher education or pursuing a professional career?

Findings

The Black/White Binary Paradigm

According to the California Common Core State Standards (CCSS), page 78 of the English Language Arts 6-12 provides “Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading 6-12” (*California Department of Education, 2022*). The 92 page document is illustrated in very general terms, however, page 78 is the only page that gives a specific reading list that exemplifies the English Language Arts standards. In conjunction with the recommended literature for students in 11-12th grade, I also work closely with the syllabus (inspired by CCSS) retrieved from an English teacher at a predominantly Latinx high school in order to analyze what stands as a proper execution of said standards.

By using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) framework, I explore a racialized analysis with Chicanas at the center. Pulling from the CCSS “Literature: Stories, Drama, Poetry,” the 11th-College and Career Readiness (CCR) section has a total of 7 recommendations. Of the 7, the majority of the authors (4) are white, 2 women and 2 males. The last 3 authors are (2) African-American women and (1) woman from Indian descent. From the high school English syllabus, the literature selection for this course merely reflects a Eurocentric and white male dominant perspective. 7 of 8 authors are white males and the remaining one is a white woman meaning that 90% of these texts are white male dominated leaving 10% for white

women. These novels lack diversity and representation, as mentioned before, decentering whiteness in literature becomes a mechanism that enables subjugated communities to envision themselves within these texts.

Equally important, through my analysis I've come across that manifestation of what Juan Perea (1998) defines as the Black/White Binary Paradigm: "the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and White" (p. 361). Since the canon is to be considered a core standard that reflects "Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading," In a school where the Chicax community substantially makes up the majority of students, I wonder how these young women, specifically, navigate their way inside a box where they are nowhere to be seen. It is no doubt that the experiences of every racial and ethnic group in the United States hold a unique part of history, however, Latina/o Critical Theory allows us to move past the Black/White Binary and consider other dimensions of language, immigration, culture and identity that Critical Race theories do not take into account (Delgado Bernal, 2002). The invisibilization and strategic silencing of the Chicax community is grounded within our traditional English Canon of Literature and can serve as a tool of dominance by dismissing the experiences, stories, values, and opinions of those who come from a background of Mexican descent.

Being "Stripped" from Language and Culture

Both of my interview participants, Jenny and Dee, shared similar sentiments when

reminiscing on their high school experience within the K-12 public education system as they claim that this point in their lifetime was a pivotal moment in which they started to lose their touch with language and culture. Both of them feel that their broken native language was due to the practices of conventional schooling. Dee recalls: “Once I got into high school it was really frowned upon to speak Spanish especially if it was amongst us or especially in class setting. The teachers didn’t really like that.” Almost akin, when I asked Jenny if she was ever encouraged to bring her home language into the classroom she instantly expressed a hard “No. We couldn’t.” and continues to illustrate how teachers couldn’t understand while assuming they were speaking bad about them. She proceeds as:

So, I definitely felt like that sense of language was kind of like stripped from us. I've kind of lost my connection with Spanish. Now I feel kind of disconnected because I don't talk... I don't articulate it anymore. I used to be very good at Spanish but after all these years of being in school and like having been told to not speak Spanish... um, it's like “We're in America, you know, we speak English here” even though I don't believe the US has an official language.

While expressing that linguistic assets and abilities were not encouraged or embraced in the classroom, Jenny feels a sense of being “stripped” from her home tongue. She equates this from the “years” of English language reinforcement and teacher policing of Spanish within the public education system. Jenny is aware of dominant narratives that cloud the lives of marginalized groups. She makes a connection to the years of English language reinforcement to the dominant ideology surrounding language. Western culture has an

agenda of becoming objective and this process has turned things and people into “objects” when there is a separation between them and Westernization. “Losing touch” is a result within this contrast, which is violence within itself (Anzaldúa, 1987). In the United States, it can be said that the English language holds linguistic hegemonic weight. In reality, as Jenny mentions: there is no official language in this nation. These ideologies that bleed into our everyday lives are tools to uphold and maintain systems of oppression and domination. When Chicanas bring their native language into the classroom it is perceived in a negative context where teachers assume students are using their linguistic abilities for the wrong reasons.

Jenny expresses that she used to be a fluent Spanish speaker, but now, she has a hard time articulating the language to other Spanish speakers. In a sense, doubts within identity and culture began to surface as ramifications for both Jenny and Dee as their linguistic, cultural, and forms of knowledge have been excluded from the classroom as a whole. Dee mentions that her family back in Mexico thinks that they have been “white washed because [they have] assimilated to how things are done here in America.”

As she continues, she voices her feelings about being “insecure” when speaking Spanish:

Often our elders correct us on how to say something or pick on us because we said something differently. I think sometimes when both groups come together, sometimes the environment doesn't always feel safe when we communicate.

In a similar way, Jenny too, speaks about a “language barrier” with her family. She expresses: “There’s sometimes where I’m like, I’m not Mexican enough, you know? Either it’s my language or how I speak...” This sense of being stripped from their language and culture due to classroom practices that center Western ways of thinking and eurocentricity have manifested into issues beyond the classroom. Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1987), quotes "Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?" (p. 53). The fact is that Chicanas have been left in a contradictory space (Pacheco & Chávez-Moreno, 2021) where we have to navigate living on the border of two different cultures, “forced to become adept to switching modes” (Anzaldúa, 1987) while simultaneously trying to keep one’s own shifting identity whole. Anzaldúa describes this as a “psychological conflict” as we try to move through the every aspect of our lives with dual identities from American and Mexican cultures we do not fully identify with but also do not fully reject, as she puts it, “we are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness” (p. 63). These feelings of “I’m not Mexican enough” or feeling insecure about speaking Spanish because family from Mexico will dissect every word that is said are significant, reoccurring moments that lead to doubts within oneself and personal identity. Being “stripped” from their language and culture through years of subtractive schooling has led to difficult realities for Chicanas.

Chicanas as Creators of Knowledge

After posing a question that provoked Jenny and Dee to recollect the first time they were ever introduced to any literature, short stories, poems, or other literary works by a person

from the Chicana community, they both affirm that they did not come across any significant material that represented their community until after high school when they came to higher education. To reaffirm I asked: “You never saw a representation of your ethnic group in literature throughout high school?” From Jenny’s perspective she states: *Oh, no. Definitely not, uh uh. It wasn't until higher ed... that was the first time actually seeing my people. I guess people like me and like my parents, our culture in a classroom setting. Before that, no. No way, no.*

Having gone through the majority of one's schooling without “seeing [your] people” is a form of structural violence. Considering Westernization and objectivity, the literature in traditional high school English classrooms used to *reflect* or *not reflect* “Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading,” become a matter of epistemological and systemic racism. However, wisdom that has been passed down through generations of storytelling, *platicas*, or *consejos* stands to reject Western, Eurocentric epistemological orientation that has undervalued, unrecognized, and dismissed our community’s ways of knowing (Valenzuela, 2019; Delgado Bernal, 1998). By placing Chicanas at the center of discussion, they can be seen as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, 2002) who embody a form of resistance against these systems of knowledge.

Through my observations of the undergraduate course “Educational Perspectives of the Chicana/o/x” on Mondays and Wednesdays, I came across literature and discussions that uplifted Chicana voices in the midst of their absence in other academic spaces. There were a number of lively discussions, a willingness to engage in reflections

about personal experiences, familial *historias*, *consejos*, *dichos* and community struggles around the struggle between internalizing and resisting systemic racism and deficit thinking. With this course in higher education, Dee found a way to retrace and pave the way back to her cultural roots. “We really wanted to integrate our culture back into our everyday lives by touching back on those roots and making sure they aren’t forgotten.” She says the sense of loss “started more in high school” and it was “in order to make [herself] more secure... to fit in a little better.” Continuing she expresses: “I was almost, like, embarrassed. I was starting to doubt myself and my identity within my culture.” Something that she once tried to steer away from out of insecurity and embarrassment, became something she wanted to “touch back on.” When reminiscing about what resonated the most with her in this course she states:

It was such an open and safe environment for everyone to share their experiences. It never felt like you were being judged but it felt like it was a shared experience, what we’re going through or like the struggles and hardships we face... it almost made me feel validated and seen, in terms of my identity and culture. Now we’re accomplishing and going after the same goals and it made me feel like, if they can do it, I can do it too.

Having an “open and safe environment” that allowed students to draw from personal experiences through journaling and reflections within the classroom gave students the opportunity to engage in meaningful ways. The feelings of “doubt” she once had about herself and her cultural identity were in connection to educational experiences that have excluded our community from the curriculum and rendered our forms of knowledge invisible and unworthy of acknowledgement (Leslie, 2021). Now, being in an educational

environment where Chicana ways of knowing are at the forefront of discussion, she felt “validated and seen in terms of [her] identity and culture,” something that she had not felt prior to higher education. Jenny had a very similar response in connection to this course as she communicates that “storytelling and sharing your experience within your culture and identity within the classroom is what resonated with me the most.” She goes on to say: “Those kind of possibilities make a person, like myself, feel validated. You know? Like seen and accomplished... it’s kind of crazy.” It is through bringing knowledge from outside the classroom that students feel “validated,” “seen,” and “accomplished” in education. Jenny describes this as “crazy” and it is telling of what the K-12 public education system has done *or not done* for our marginalized students. With this new sense of security and validation, Dee states: “I can now really embrace who I am and embrace my language and I don’t feel like I should have to or shouldn’t have to be ashamed of who I am.” While Jenny, in the same way, expresses how she is “now proud to be Chicana...I used to not be.” Moving away from conventional literature along with praxis allows students to be creators of their own knowledge while acknowledging their experiences as a form of true wisdom. With a critical consciousness, a student, Perla, asked wholeheartedly: “At what point will we have to stop proving our existence and our strengths just to be here? When can we just be?”

Conclusion

When it comes to the K-12 public education system, education is not relevant to our Chicana student population in general, but Chicanas in particular. The Eurocentric, Western curriculum in place manifested through generations of successful subtractive

schooling (San Miguel and Valencia, 1998; San Miguel, 2003; Leibowitz, 1976). Since the border crossed *us* back in 1848, our community has been fighting for equity in education and it is no shock that there is little to very minimal research around the Chicana educational pipeline (Delgado Bernal, 1998). It is crucial to investigate how English literature is being taught and interpreted by young high school girls of Mexican descent. The way in which Chicanas navigate their K-12 public educational experiences around literature and classroom practices that ultimately silences and invisibilizes them has consequences that bleed into larger issues in American society. CRT coupled with LatCrit puts race and racism at the core and elucidates how Chicanas are left with no guidance to maneuver a Western world that is primarily colorblind and only sees a Black/White Binary. Moving past our current systems of knowledge that are held at a pedestal allows us to embrace other ways of knowing. In this sense, Chicana feminist epistemologies can be brought into the classroom to recognize and validate our community's form of education. Feelings of inclusion or exclusion often have a significant impact on how students connect to education. Storytelling in English classrooms that excludes our community is a form of violence that stands to reify subordination along with the removal of our cultural differences (San Miguel, 2003; Puente & Alvarez, 2021).

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