

VIVA EMILIANO ZAPATA! VIVA BENITO JUAREZ!
HELPING MEXICAN AND CHICANO MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS
DEVELOP A CHICANO CONSCIOUSNESS VIA CRITICAL
PEDAGOGY AND LATINA/LATINO CRITICAL RACE THEORY ¹

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how an anti-racist curriculum constructed on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Pedagogy (LatCrit) helped Mexican and Chicano middle school students enrolled in an alternative education program to alter their attitudes toward the use of English, and to change their forms of self-identification resulting in the development of a Chicano consciousness. In the beginning of this fourteen-month study, 9.6% of the students identified with the Chicano label. However, at the end of the study, 77% of the class selected the Chicano label for self-identification. Moreover, this investigation bridges the theoretical concepts of Critical Pedagogy to everyday practice in a middle school classroom. In short, the tenets of this theoretical framework were applied in the design and the implementation of the curriculum.

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Latino students experience language and cultural exclusion in schools on a daily basis. The children realize that their culture is of no value or interest to the entities responsible for determining and structuring the academic milieu (Moll & Ruiz 2002; Valencia 1991). Instead, school districts provide Latino students with “subtractive schooling,” a term Valenzuela (1999) uses to refer to the continual practice of exclusion and condemnation of the Latino culture. Believing that their cultural identities are inferior, some Latino youngsters develop a disdain for their language and cultural heritage. Other Latino youngsters, however, demonstrate an “in your face” attitude in response to the rejection of their culture. In short, their defiance is a result of oppositional culture. Research has shown that oppositional culture is evident among African Americans and this fact is well documented in the literature (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey 1998; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Suarez-Orozco 1991). Massey et al. (1991) define the theory of oppositional culture as a human condition in which:

Involuntary minorities compare themselves with native majority members and are painfully aware of their disadvantaged status, which generates negative feelings toward the mainstream values and institutions. . . . Involuntary minorities thus come to perceive knowledge of and participation in the dominant culture and its institutions as a betrayal of group loyalty and a threat to identity. They develop a defiant position vis'á vis mainstream institutions and feel alienated from schools, learning, and education. ... (p. 8).

This article describes how oppositional culture is alive and well in a city located on the U.S.-Mexico border. The theoretical frameworks used to develop and implement an anti-racist curriculum were Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latina/Latino critical race theory. Critical Race Theory espouses the need to study and alter the relationship that exists between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic

2001). Although CRT had its beginnings in the area of legal research (Crenshaw 1995), its influence has crossed over into other disciplines, including education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) were instrumental in introducing CRT to education over a decade ago. Since then, Critical Race Theory has become an important theoretical and analytical framework within educational research (Duncan 2002; Lynn, Yosso, Solorzano, and Parker 2002).

While the use of CRT continues to gain momentum in academia, offshoots of this theoretical framework have emerged and are gaining attention. These new offshoots include Asian critical theory or AsianCrit (Chang 1993) and Latina/Latino critical race theory known as LatCrit (Garcia 1995; Revilla 2001; Solorzano 1998; Solorzano & Solorzano 1995; Solorzano & Yosso 2001; Valdes 1996). Pursuant to Solorzano and Bernal (2001), LatCrit is comparable to CRT, however, the framework encompasses a broader range of topics and issues that affect Latinas/Latinos on a daily basis.

LatCrit is concerned with a progressive sense of a coalitional Latina/Latino pan-ethnicity and addresses issues often ignored by critical race theorists such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality. . . . LatCrit is a theory that elucidates Latinas/Latinos' multidimensional identities and can address the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression (pp. 311-312.)

Moreover, Solorzano and Bernal (2001) argue that there is a minimum of five themes that shape the basic perspectives, research methods, and pedagogy of a CRT and LatCrit framework in education.

1. The centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination.
2. The challenge to dominant ideology.
3. The commitment to social justice.
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge.
5. The interdisciplinary perspective (pp. 312-315).

With CRT and LatCrit supplying the theoretical background, this investigation is a qualitative case study in which I describe how Mexican and Chicano middle school students enrolled in an alternative education program due to antisocial behaviors altered their attitudes toward the use of English, and changed their forms of self-identification resulting in the development of a Chicano consciousness. Moreover, this investigation bridges the theoretical concepts to everyday practice in a middle school classroom. The discussion of how CRT and LatCrit were applied to the design and implementation of an anti-racist curriculum will be presented near the end of the paper.

Methodology

The quantitative and qualitative methods used for collecting data throughout this fourteen month study consisted of videotaped and non-videotaped class discussions, pre-and post- questionnaires, student interviews, student journals, student work, and drawings. The class discussions that were not videotaped were transcribed. Mr. Carlos Reyes who is the director of the alternative education program took notes of what was discussed in each section, as I did. After each session was over, Reyes and I compared our notes. When there was a discrepancy, we asked the student or students to help us clarify the content we had transcribed. It was not always possible to videotape the children. I spent hundreds of hours with them, and sometimes comments were made when I did not have the video camera set up. Also, in the beginning some of the children felt uncomfortable being videotaped. They were afraid that their comments could be relayed to their parents or parole officers.

The videotaped discussions were viewed after each session. In addition to listening to the children's responses, Reyes and I would study the videotapes to observe the children's body language. During some of the interviews, the children were angry and you could see their facial expressions. Sometimes I

asked university colleagues to view the tapes with me to gain their input. Accompanying these mediums of data collection, I incorporated three instructional strategies into the study's design: the use of cinema, the implementation of an anti-racist curriculum based on Critical Pedagogy, and teaching English as an empowerment tool via the premise that Knowledge is Power (KIP).

Design

In the beginning of this study, my desire was simply to design a curriculum that might motivate children who had been adjudicated for behaviors such as truancy, gang activity, stealing, dealing drugs, and committing assaults to become reengaged in learning. However, within the first week of the study, I soon realized that motivating the students to learn would be difficult due to their animosity toward the white culture. On the second day of working with the students, I heard five boys saying obscenities in Spanish who then continued to work on an assignment. I let it go for the first time, but the next day as they were going through one of their tirades, I walked over to their desks to see what was happening. What I saw baffled me. I saw narratives in which three or four opening sentences were written in perfect English followed by the rest of the assignment written in perfect Spanish. When I asked the boys why they were upset, they said that because they were carried away with what they wanted to say, they had forgotten to write in Spanish, but that once they realized that they were writing in English, they became angry and then completed the assignment in Spanish. They said that they hated English because it was the "language of the gringo" and that if they learned English they would become "gringos" themselves. In fact, some of the students believed that Latinos who speak English well are gringos, also. It was apparent to me that it would take more than a series of creative lessons to reengage the children in learning. I realized that my curriculum needed to reflect Critical

Pedagogy to address racism head-on.

The next day, I conducted a discussion with the entire class to ascertain if the other students felt the same way. Four additional male students expressed similar views regarding the learning of English. One of the boys said, "Miss, we have rage against gringos!" Conversely, the four girls enrolled in the program at the time of this discussion did not agree with the boys' assertion that speaking English makes you white, or a gringo. Mario and Carlos both stated that they did not want to speak English. They said that their refusal to speak, read, and write in English, despite their ability to do so, was an expression of their disdain and rejection of the gringo culture.

After this discussion, I prepared a questionnaire to ascertain if the students believed that speaking English makes you an Anglo (Fig. 1). The questionnaire was issued to the students presently enrolled in the class and to the new students that entered the program. Mr. Reyes administered this questionnaire to the entering students on the days that I was not on campus. The questionnaire was re-administered to the students as they exited the alternative education program. Students were asked the question, "Does speaking English make you an Anglo?" and to indicate their response by circling yes or no. However, the questionnaire also asked the students to describe how they felt about Anglos. Space was left for them to write their comments.

A second questionnaire was designed to ascertain how the students identified themselves.² Did they see themselves as Americans, Latinos, Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, or Chicanos? This questionnaire was administered to the students as they entered the alternative education program, and then re-administered as they exited (Fig. 2). Both post-questionnaires had an additional question added to determine the factors that were responsible for altering the students' views, if a change had occurred (Fig. 3) and (Fig. 4).

Strategies Used for Helping Students to Learn about Racism

After my initial discussions with the students, I knew that in order to reengage these youngsters in learning, I needed to help them realize that speaking English does not make a person white and that learning English might help them to attain careers and good jobs in the United States. In order to achieve this goal, I knew that I had to first determine the causes for the students' resentment of the Anglo culture. Lessons and activities were designed to draw out the students' beliefs and feelings about Anglos, and how Anglos perceive us. Drawing and the cinema were the two vehicles used to achieve these objectives.

Drawing

The first activity asked students to illustrate three objects that first came to mind when they heard the word: Anglo or "gringo," as the children preferred using when referring to this group. There was no prior discussion before doing this activity because I did not want the children to be influenced by the comments expressed by their peers. Therefore, students simply began drawing pictures. In general, the illustrations portrayed whites as money hungry individuals who steal. One child drew three illustrations: a smiling Anglo dressed as a German Nazi wearing a swastika that killed a Mexican and called him "beaner"; border patrol agents picking up undocumented workers in a van; and a green dollar bill with a large oil drum (Fig. 6). When I asked the boy what the oil drum represented, he told me that "the gringos invaded Iraq for its oil." At the top of his drawing, the child drew the Mexican flag to show his love for the country. Another youngster drew a picture of an Anglo with his tongue hanging out to one side of his mouth (Fig. 7). The child later told me that he drew the man's tongue that way to show that "gringos are sneaky because they stole land from Mexico."

He also drew a dollar bill and an oil drum to signify his belief that the U.S. went to Iraq to steal its oil. Since the U.S. had just invaded Iraq, it is probable that the students seized this event to represent their notion of Anglos stealing from other countries.

The Use of Cinema

The second strategy used to help the students learn and to express their views on discrimination and racism was the cinema. This strategy was highly effective. The children saw movies in which Mexicans and Chicanos were the primary characters. We discussed how the media portrays La Raza. Although I could not show the movie, *American Me* (1992) because of its adult rating, we were able to discuss the movie because the students had already seen it at home. Some of the children began to talk about some of their family members who were in prison, but for the most part the students chose to compare the movie with their own lock-up experiences in the juvenile detention center and the county's boot camp program. Juan raised a poignant question during the discussion of this movie, "Miss, why is there more raza than gringos in jail? Even in juvi there's more raza than gringos."

It was the showing of *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), however, that generated the most heated discussion. The children were angry at how Mexicans were portrayed in this movie. Seeing Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen save the day for a village of Mexican farmers annoyed the students. As one boy wrote in a critique of the movie, "Mexicans aren't like that. We don't need gringos to help us with our problems." Regarding the Mexican bandit (Eli Wallach) in the movie, another boy wrote, "Why do they always show us as thieves?" One girl, said, "Why does that farmer do nothing when he is being hit? Why doesn't he fight back? Mexicans fight!" Conversely, *Stand and Deliver* (1988) was a big hit with the children.

In addition to the students' resistance to speaking English, the impact of poverty on their learning was evident. For some of the students, hopelessness, anger and sadness were common emotions. One illustration of this hopelessness is "el ojo" a figure that Ignacio draws on every written assignment (Fig. 8). Early in the study, I noticed this eye with two teardrops placed underneath it on every paper and drawing that he submitted to me.³ When I asked him why he always drew this eye on his papers, he told me that he hated his life. He hated being poor, and being poor made him sad and angry. What was more surprising to me was that he told me that he had been drawing this eye on every paper for two years, and that no teacher had ever asked him about it. Unfortunately, his teachers did not realize or care to realize that Ignacio was telling them much about himself through this drawing. During my interview with him, I asked him why he chose the human eye to represent what he was feeling, and he responded that "living in the barrio—you have to keep your eyes open."

Designing and Implementing an Interdisciplinary Anti-Racist Curriculum

Once I had been able to determine how the students viewed Anglos, and how they believed whites stereotype the Mexican and Chicano cultures, I decided to design an anti-racist curriculum in order that a truce could be made with the students. My belief was that by balancing the scales of cultural content in the curriculum, the students would become less resistant to working in English if they were also learning about their own culture.

In short, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (the state-mandated goals and objectives) served as the cornerstone of the curriculum (Texas Education Agency 2002). Writing the curriculum was challenging because the alternative education program is a campus pull-out system in which the students come from the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.⁴ To address this problem, I selected the sev-

enth grade as my focal point. I reasoned that it would be easier to downgrade the content to a sixth-grade level, or upgrade it to the eighth grade if necessary.

Social studies, language arts, music, and art were the subject areas integrated into the curriculum. Students read books appropriate for middle school youngsters and that had Latino children as the principal characters in the stories. Books written by Latino authors were selected. However, the students read books by non-Latino authors as well, and stories in which the major characters were African American, American Indian, Asian, and white. I designed activities for each paperback assigned. For example, after reading two or three chapters in a book, the students were required to answer a series of questions to determine their levels of comprehension. The questions were designed to follow Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). Simple recall questions requiring students to provide the names of the characters and the settings of the stories were provided. However, questions reflecting levels of higher order thinking skills were also included. After completing a book, class discussions ensued.

Overall, the assessment of student work was done via rubrics. Rubrics in which 4 was considered the highest score and 1 the lowest were used to evaluate student performance. Also, students were given opportunities to do self-assessments.

The cornerstone of the curriculum was social studies. Sets of literary books, reference materials, videotapes, and movies that complemented the content found in their social studies textbooks were purchased. However, lessons that reflected an anti-racist curriculum were designed to accompany the textbook. For example, in the seventh grade social studies curriculum students learn about the Alamo. After the students read about this major event in their social studies textbooks, I had the students read other accounts of the Alamo to gain different perspectives than those espoused by the textbook publishers. Following this activity, I had the stu-

dents see the most recent movie version of *The Alamo* (2004). The students were encouraged to think critically about the movie. The children were then asked to answer the following two questions in writing: Do you believe this movie depicted an accurate interpretation of the events surrounding the siege of the Alamo? Explain and defend your answer; and How were the Mexicans portrayed in the movie? Is this portrayal appropriate? Explain your answer and describe how the scenes from the movie support your views.

In keeping with the study of the Civil War and the Reconstruction in Texas, I had the students view the movie *Glory* (1989) with Matthew Broderick to set the stage for learning about the Civil War. The children were surprised that there had been a black regiment that served in the war. The students, however, were not surprised to learn that the federal government's decision to allow blacks to serve in the army was a token gesture.

Authentic learning strategies, notably, cooperative learning were used to present the content to the students. Because young adolescents desire to work with peers (Daniels 2005) 65% percent of the lessons required group work. More than 80 percent of the curriculum involved reading and writing activities.

Also, the children went on a carefully orchestrated field trip to visit the local university. First, the students visited the Chicano Studies Department because in the beginning of the study, they did not believe that universities addressed Mexican and Chicano issues. The director of the department gave a presentation to the youngsters. However, it was the taking of the students to the student activities building in which they met and talked with eighteen to twenty-two year old male and female college students that had the most impact. The college students, as if on cue, knew what to say to help me. They told the children that they wanted a good career and that they were willing to go to school to pursue their dreams. Also, the students

observed a class of college students and their professor engaged in a discussion of Cesar Chavez. They became excited because they had recently completed reading about this important Chicano hero. The professor asked the children to participate in the discussion and they were most willing to contribute to the discourse.

*Teaching English as an Empowerment Tool—
Knowledge is Power! (KIP)*

Having children learn English is not the silver bullet for Latinos to succeed in this country. A person of color can be highly proficient in this language and still be unable to get a high-paying job because of discrimination. However, if our children do not learn English, how can they fight back in a legal system in which English is the language of parlance? As long as whites control the political structures—English will be the primary language taught in schools in this country. Therefore, our children need to possess this knowledge to protect their rights.

Using KIP as the foundation, I began teaching English as an empowerment tool to alter their attitudes toward the use of English. Group discussion was the primary method implemented to achieving this objective. I used KIP as the framework for my discussions. I wrote “Knowledge is Power” in a corner of the blackboard and it remained there throughout our discussions. We talked about what is knowledge and what is power. In the beginning, the children were afraid that if they learned English they would be betraying their Mexican heritage.

Educational research suggests that teachers need to incorporate the knowledge and the experiences that students bring to the classroom when helping them learn (Sowell 2005; Jarolimek, Foster, & Kellough 2005; Lemlech 2002). Therefore, I selected the youngsters’ experiences with the penal system to begin our discussions on this topic. When asked what they disliked the most about the penal system, the majority of students said that being searched and taking showers was the worst part of

being incarcerated. Others stated that what upset them the most was not always being able to understand what the judge and their parole officers were saying at their court hearings. These students claimed that they did not understand enough English. Immediately, I seized this response as an opportunity to launch a series of discussions on this issue.

Again, simply learning English is not enough for people of color to advance in the United States. According to Portes & Rumbaut “regardless of their class origin or knowledge of English, nonwhite immigrants face greater obstacles in gaining access to the white middle-class mainstream and may receive lower returns for their education and work experience” (Portes & Rumbaut 2001, p. 47). Although the students and I discussed the effects of racism on education and employment, I gave the youngsters hope. I did not want these twelve to fourteen-year-old children to walk away from our discussions feeling sad and discouraged. These youngsters are our future. When I worked with these children, I felt that it was my duty to encourage them to stay in school and to help them succeed academically. I did not see them as home boys and home girls. Rather, I saw them as future civil rights attorneys, business executives, physicians, teachers, and professors. Granted, learning English may not allow them to break through the societal barriers that impede the progress of Latinos in this country, but that fact should not prevent teachers from giving our children the best education possible, and that includes helping them to become truly bilingual—fluent in Spanish and fluent in English.

Developing a Chicano Consciousness

The three variables that helped the children to develop a Chicano Consciousness were: the environment, knowledge of racism toward La Raza, and a young adolescent’s desire for social justice. These elements were instrumental in helping the children to identify with the spirit of Chicanismo.

Environment

Having the children develop a Chicano consciousness was not a difficult process as one might expect because the seeds for accomplishing this transformation had already been sown. I simply had to water and provide nutrients for its development. To better understand the process, the reader needs to keep this statement in mind, "The war between Mexico and the U.S. is not over. It continues!"

This barrio is pro-Mexico and pro-Mexican. The children who grow up in this neighborhood, for the most part, live and breathe the Mexican culture. They mature feeling an intense pride in their Mexican heritage. The children in this study did not like the U.S. and wished that the land taken by the Americans could be returned to Mexico. In effect, to many of these youngsters and their families, the war between the two countries is not over.

Moreover, most of the children who were in this study already came with knowledge about significant Mexican heroes, such as Emiliano Zapata, Benito Juarez, and Pancho Villa, when I began working with them. They had been weaned on these legends from their parents, grandparents, and other relatives. My curriculum simply served to increase their knowledge about these famous personalities and to give them the opportunities to speak freely. During a group discussion, one of the children asked, "Why can't we have another Pancho Villa?"

Getting the children interested in learning and reading more about their Mexican ancestry was not a challenge. In short, my curriculum simply capitalized on the prior knowledge that the children brought with them. Researchers have long argued that educators need to recognize the value and richness of the experiences that children bring from home including households that reflect abject poverty (Gonzalez et al. 1995).

The discussions regarding self-identification were very lively. Before discussions of the labels American, Latino, Mexican, Mexican-American and

Chicano could take place, the children needed to develop some background knowledge. The students looked up definitions of the words in the dictionary, encyclopedias, almanacs, books, and from sources found on the Internet and shared the information with each other. Although the word Chicano has various definitions, I decided to use a more simple definition of the word for the sake of keeping the level of discussion at a middle school level. In the beginning of the study, the majority of the children could not give a definition of the word "citizen." Most of the children were unaware that having been born in the U.S., they were citizens of this country and were entitled to the same legal rights as Anglos, and could not be deported. Naturally, there were discussions on how Chicanos born in the U.S. often face discrimination by border patrol agents by being stopped and interrogated.

I believed that the students might become confused regarding who gets deported if they learned that the word Chicano can apply to Mexican-born citizens living in the U.S. who share the spirit of Chicanismo. In short, the children learned that Chicanos are persons of Mexican ancestry who were born in the U.S. and who are aware of the historically oppressive relationship between Mexico and the U.S. They also learned that Chicanos believe in social activism. The children however, distilled all they read about Chicanos and collectively came up with their own simple definition, namely, that "Chicanos are people who kick ass."

Knowledge of Racism Toward La Raza

This second variable was very instrumental in getting the children who were born in the U.S. to want to label themselves as Chicanos. The youngsters who were born in Mexico, however, considered themselves Mexicans. Like the environment, racism against La Raza was not a difficult point to get across to the students. They already came with some knowledge that as a people we have been discriminated against by whites and continue to be op-

pressed. Therefore, I only had to help the children develop a better understanding of what racism is, and how it is embedded in society.

A Young Adolescent's Desire for Social Justice

Research has demonstrated that adolescence is a time in which adolescents take risks and are passionate about ideals. As Price (2005) writes:

Take advantage of adolescent passion. Direct adolescents' enthusiasm toward productive ends. A teen's passion can become a bridge to learning about such topics as music theory, history, politics, race relations, or marketing (Price 2005, p. 25).

Young adolescents in middle school already come to their teachers with some knowledge of what is right and what is wrong, and they are curious about how justice is played out in the real world. They are constantly being told what to do by their parents and teachers and they want to feel that they have some say or control over what happens to them.

Allowing the students a say as to what to discuss in our group discussions and encouraging them to speak their minds freely, helped them to feel empowered in the classroom. This student empowerment enabled me to work with the children without any discipline problems. I treated them with respect, and they respected me. Using this general overview of how the environment, knowledge of racism toward La Raza, and a young adolescent's desire for social justice to guide us, let us now examine how the children went through this transformation. The first part of this process required the eliciting of students' perceptions regarding the learning of English and how they felt about Anglos. In the beginning of the study, the children were resistant to learning in English. The pre-questionnaire used to determine if the students believed that speaking English makes you white and how they felt about Anglos indicated for the most part, that the children were angry and resentful of

the white culture. The most derogatory statement provided by the students on the pre-questionnaire was written by Jorge, a Mexican student who has been living in the U.S. for four years. He wrote:

I don't dislike anglos, I hate them scence (since) the day I was born because they are the badest persons in the world because they discriminate my raza and ones (once) you mess with my people, you mess with me. I don't care about nobody only (*"Mexican"*) . . . White or Americans are eating because of Mexican people who are in the fields taking chiles, sevollas, and all that so some trash can eat. (Discrimination) is the word of my hate to white or (*"American trash"*)!

There was one student, however, who did express a positive comment about Anglos on the pre-questionnaire. "Yeah, I like white Anglos because I think there (sic) not a bad people because they are the same kind of people as us except for their skin colors." However, other students had mixed views of Anglos on the pre-questionnaire. Mario wrote:

"Some Anglos I like because they're funny. They talk weird and when they want to talk in Spanish, they just know a little bit. But, some Anglos I don't like because they think there (sic) better than us.

Another boy wrote, "I don't have nothing against white people, but I think they're a little dumb and besides since I'm Mexican—some whites wouldn't like me."

To help students understand about racism, the children went to the library and selected books on this topic and also searched the Internet for more information. Also, students began reading material on the classification of ethnic and racial groups. For most group discussions, I had a list of predetermined questions to begin our talks. However, these questions were not always used because I let the topics of conversation happen naturally. In other words, the students' responses served as the compass for setting the course of our topics of conversation. Naturally, if the discussions were getting off task, I redirected the conversations with one of

the predetermined questions. All discussions were conducted in a circle in an attempt to encourage the children to realize that no one, including me, could “run the show.” Also, a circle format enabled all the students to see one another as they conversed. Occasionally, I would let the students select the topics that they wanted to talk about and did not follow a list of predetermined questions.

On one assignment in which students were asked to define the word, “Chicano” Martin wrote: A Chicano it’s (sic) a Mexican American who lives in the United States. They like carne asada, and they like to go to parties. Half of the Chicanos hate Gringos because of their color.” Leticia who identified herself as a Chicana drew an illustration of herself standing under the American and the Mexican Flags (Fig. 9). Carlos wrote, “I also consider myself a Mexican American because I know both English and Spanish very well. But there are so many people that call us wet backs and dirty Mexicans.”

Talking about who they were was the most emotional task for the students because the topics that they wanted to discuss in addition to their ethnic identities included drug use, peer pressure, school, teachers, parents, gang involvement, the police, and their appearance. Researchers argue that young adolescents need to be given opportunities to express how they see themselves (Mottaz 2002; Millstein & Halpern-Felsher 2001). Interestingly, sex was never a topic of discussion because the children never asked questions about sex, including the girls. Perhaps, they viewed me as a mother figure and felt embarrassed.

The children enjoyed art as a medium for conveying their sentiments of how they felt about themselves. Instead of writing about himself, Martin drew a self-portrait (Fig. 10). He is dressed in gang attire and on his striped red, white, and green cap he has drawn an eagle in the center to represent the Mexican flag. At the top of the drawing, Martin wrote the words, “Trust Me.” He had said in class

that people were always labeling him as a bad guy because of the way he dressed and that store owners were always suspecting that he was going to steal from them when he entered their stores. Martin felt very passionately about the statement that clothes do not make a person.

As students began to talk about racism and what it is like to be a member of La Raza living in the U.S, they began to worry less about becoming a gringo if they spoke in English. Also, the students’ perceptions about labels began to change. Upon admission into the alternative education program, Antonio wrote, in response to a question on the self-identification questionnaire (What is it about being a Mexican or Chicano that makes you feel proud?) “I don’t know because I’m not a Mexican or a Chicano. I am an American. I was born in America.” At the time this student wrote this response he had just moved into the barrio. However, after living one year in the neighborhood, Antonio had changed his mind. When asked, what do you consider yourself to be? Antonio now wrote:

I’m a Mexican American because I was born here. But 4 one part I don’t consider myself Mexican American. What I do consider myself is a Mexican. Like for instence(sic) all my family is from Mexico, and besides I have pride being a Mexican. Everything I enjoy is from my Mexican culture. I don’t care what people think I am. As long as I know that I’m 4 the Raza, ese. That’s what I will always be 4 life.

Clearly, Antonio had changed labels. The barrio had worked its magic.

As time progressed the students’ resistance to learning English began to wane, but their animosity toward the white culture remained constant. Frequently, the children opted to read books written in English first, and then read the Spanish versions afterwards. In effect, they were learning how to balance the scales of cultural content in the curriculum for themselves.

Evaluation of the Curriculum

The principal evaluators of the curriculum were the children and the director of the alternative education program. At the completion of the study students were given an anonymous questionnaire to fill out (Fig. 5). The children found the curriculum fun and interesting. They said that they enjoyed reading books and short stories that described the Mexican and Chicano cultures. As one student wrote, "I like reading about Mexican and Chicano characters because I can relate to them, like if they got problems, I can say, "yah man. . .and cause its good to see Mexican authors write a book." The director of the program also completed a survey at the end of the study. However, he and I would meet after each work session with the children to discuss student progress and the overall effectiveness of the lessons. In his evaluation report, he wrote:

The curriculum was successful. I believe that their reading and writing skills have improved because they were always reading and writing and with all that practice they improved. It shows in their work, (i.e. their spelling has improved. . .They enjoyed doing the professor's work.

The children stated that what they enjoyed the most regarding the curriculum was that the majority of the lessons involved group work. They said that working in groups helped to minimize the pressure of a single student having to come up with the right answer. Also, the students stated that they enjoyed cooperative learning because it afforded them the opportunity to ask their peers for help if they did not understand the content matter.

Moreover, the students stated that the lessons encouraged them to think more critically about themselves and their environment. The children felt that the curriculum validated their culture and that it encouraged them to think openly about race and ethnic relations in the United States. As *Ana* stated, "We talked about things that we wanted to talk about. We learned more about our culture and

how it is to live in the U.S. But, more importantly, we learned about each other. Of course we did reading, writing and social studies—but in a fun way."

The school principal also stated that she found the curriculum to be a success because the students who were in the alternative education program for the longest period of time made the most significant gains in reading. One student scored 252 points higher in reading in 2004 after spending nine months in the program. This youngster was one of the children who had to attend court hearings every month due to repeated acts of antisocial behavior in the neighborhood. The principal was especially impressed with his score.⁵

Limitations of the study

The most challenging aspect surrounding this investigation was the fact that 56% of the students remained in the alternative education program for a minimum of six weeks. It was difficult for me to observe and work with the same students for an entire academic year. However, there were students who returned to the alternative education program repeatedly throughout the year. They would exit the program only to return within two or three weeks. Also, there were five students who were in the alternative education program for the entire fourteen months. I began working with this group as seventh graders and later as eighth graders. A constant pattern of offenses committed in school or in the neighborhood was responsible for their continued presence in the alternative education program.

Results

On entering the program 75% of the students believed that speaking English makes you Anglo; while 25% stated that it did not. The post-questionnaire reveals that 15% still believed that speaking English makes you Anglo; while 85% believed that it did not. The children said that presenting the learning of English as an empowerment tool via KIP

helped the majority of them to realize that speaking English is not a betrayal of their Mexican heritage, rather, it is simply a means to helping them even the playing field and that they would not become gringos if they did use the language.

Regarding the self-identification pre-and post-questionnaires, the data show that the students varied in their identification.

Pre-questionnaire data:

American	1.9%
Latino	0%
Mexican	77%
Mexican-American	11.5%
Chicano	9.6%

Post-questionnaire:

American	0%
Latino	0%
Mexican	17.3 %
Mexican-American	5.7%
Chicano	77%

In the beginning of the study, forty-three children who were born in the United States perceived themselves as Mexicans. They had assumed that if their parents were born in Mexico then they were Mexicans, also. However, after students were given the opportunity to study and learn about ethnic and racial classification, they soon realized that people born in the U.S. are citizens of this country. Of the 77% of students who classified themselves as Mexican upon entering the alternative education program, only 9 were actually Mexican citizens. As students left the program and were re-administered the questionnaire, only those 9 students stated that they were Mexican. This accounts for the drop from 77% to 17.3% in the Mexican category. What is most interesting, however, is that the percentage of

students who identified themselves as Chicanos increased significantly from 9.6% to 77%. Only 5.7% chose to identify themselves as Mexican-American.

On the post-questionnaire the children stated that they preferred being called Chicanos because they identified with the spirit of Chicanismo. Also, they did not like the hyphenated label, Mexican-American because the word, “American” was attached to it. The children stated that the instructional methods that encouraged them to select the “Chicano” label at the end of their stay were group discussions on race and ethnicity, reading literature about Chicanos, and viewing movies.

During the study, 31 of the 52 students exited the alternative education program to return to the regular education program and did not return. These students claimed that they were tired of living the “pirata” life, a term which the children of this community use to refer to the street culture involving gang activities, problems with the police, and doing drugs. Since this is only a case study involving a small localized group of students, it cannot be assumed that an anti-racist interdisciplinary curriculum was responsible for their decision to clean up their act. However, if the curriculum impacted their decision to leave even remotely, then this study has demonstrated that encouraging Latino youngsters to explore their cultural and ethnic identities is important and more research on this issue is warranted.

At the end of the study, other changes occurred for those children who were in the study for at least six months. In short, the students said that they wanted more from life. Dino stated to the class that he wanted to become a plastic surgeon and wanted more information on how to become a doctor. He said that he was tired of living in the barrio and that his dream was to move to California. Mario and Carlos, the most vocal supporters of “Spanish only,” decided that they would continue speaking, reading, and writing in English, but

in school only. They stated that they were not ready to take the next step of speaking English outside of school. Nevertheless, their willingness to communicate in English in school was an indication that they were beginning to rethink their position that speaking English makes you white.

Bridging CRT and LatCrit Concepts to the Middle-School Classroom

This study bridges the concepts of CRT and LatCrit into everyday classroom practice. First, race and racism were addressed. Students conducted research in the library and on the Internet to learn about racism, and soon discussions followed. I believe that these discussions were instrumental in helping the children to explore and vent their feelings.

Second, I challenged the dominant or traditional teaching methods currently being used in schools. Using the cinema as a major instructional medium encouraged the students to confront the existence of racism in the media. Students viewed four or five movies a month.

Third, having students read books and stories in which the characters were Latino helped the students to relate to the curriculum. The children especially enjoyed reading stories in which the characters shared similar experiences of living in a barrio. In keeping with the tenets of CRT, I made sure to allow the children to talk about situations that they encounter outside of school into the classroom. We discussed many different topics including, gangs, violence, drugs and alcohol use, "la migra" death of family members, and teen suicide.

Fourth, the curriculum was interdisciplinary. In short, it was seamless. I integrated reading, social studies, art, and music. Fifth, the students learned that they have a responsibility to help their families, friends, and the elderly in the barrio. Social justice at this age level can begin with simple acts of generosity. Discussions on how they could help children less fortunate than themselves were conducted. The children suggested that they could help

these children by collecting used jackets and coats for them to use in winter.

Conclusion

Expressions of oppositional culture, notably, the refusal to learn and speak English was evident in this group of students. Their love and intense pride in the Mexican culture is commendable. One can even admire them for their courage to resist learning the language of a people that in general has devalued Mexicans and their culture.

This study supports the definition of oppositional culture espoused by Massey et al. (1991) cited at the beginning of this paper. The youngsters developed a defiant attitude toward learning English in response to the oppressive world around them. Although they are young adolescents, these children are aware of White supremacy and how La Raza has been discriminated against in the U.S. It is understandable, therefore, that they would resist learning English, the language of the Anglo. To them the Anglo is the enemy and the war between Mexico and the U.S. is not over. Moreover, in keeping with the definition of Massey et al., most of the youngsters in the beginning of the study believed that learning and using English were acts of betrayal to their Mexican heritage and threatened their identities.

More importantly, however, this study corroborates much of the findings found in Matute-Bianchi's (1986) investigation of Mexican-American youngsters and their oppositional views toward schools and whites. Although her study was conducted almost twenty years ago, Matute-Bianchi's investigation is timeless. She examined five categories of Mexican descent students in which the Chicanos and Cholos were the two groups found to be the most marginalized on the school's campus. The data of her study regarding these two groups is comparable to the data found in this study. First, the students in her research and mine were enrolled in the school's alternative program as she

accurately describes as a “school within a school” program (p. 249). Second, the Chicanos and Cholos in her study experienced what Matute-Bianchi calls a forced-choice dilemma. She writes:

They must choose between doing well in school or being a Chicano. From this perspective, it is not possible or legitimate to participate in both the culture of the dominant group, that is, the school culture, and in the Chicano culture. . . Hence the school policies and practices are viewed as forces to be resisted, subverted, undermined, challenged, and opposed (p. 255).

The students that participated in my study were also facing a forced-choice dilemma. Marginalization and oppression have affected these youngsters. In this study the CRT and Lat/Crit theoretical frameworks were introduced as possible solutions for helping the students to learn and to explore their views toward racism. When the students entered the alternative education program, 75% of them expressed the notion that speaking English makes you white. When they exited, only 15% still held this idea. Although this investigation is a case study with a localized group of students, the results do suggest that an anti-racist curriculum constructed on the tenets of CRT and Lat/Crit can be effective in helping children to overcome their resistance to reading, speaking, and writing in English. However, one point must be emphasized, notably that the students altered their views on learning English, but not toward whites. As Jorge wrote, “With my brown skin, eyes, and black hair, they (Anglos) will never see me as one of them. So it doesn’t matter if I do English. I want a beter (sic) job than my dad has. He works in construcshun (sic). But, I still hate gringos!”

Helping the children who were born in the U.S. to identify with the Chicano label was not difficult because all the variables for this transformation were present. The environment, a knowledge of racism toward La Raza, and a young adolescent’s desire for social justice helped these children to identify more

readily with the Chicano label. I do believe, however, that the anti-racist curriculum helped the children to explore and to construct a better understanding of racism. Also, we must remember that the youngsters in this study view themselves as “piratas.” They are not afraid to challenge school principals, teachers, and law enforcement officers when they believe that an injustice has been committed against them. I know this to be true because I have seen them in action. Therefore, it is logical that they would gravitate toward a label that has come to symbolize change and defiance toward oppression. In short there’s a connection between what they perceive the word Chicano means and their life experiences. To the children in this study, “Chicanos kick ass!”

Although I acknowledge that education is not the magic bullet to ameliorating the quality of life for Latinos, I do believe that this avenue can help to empower our children. Moreover, anti-racist curricula are needed for helping our youth to understand and to cope with the detrimental effects of racism. Working with these young people has strengthened my desire to continue helping pre service teachers and veteran teachers to work with students who exhibit antisocial behavior. It was a pleasure and an honor to work with these youngsters.

Notes

1. In a videotaped session, the students expressed pride in their Mexican heritage by looking into the camera and shouting Viva Emiliano Zapata! Viva Benito Juárez!
2. In this study, the ethnic labels were defined as: Americans are whites who are born in the United States; Latinos are individuals who are born in the countries of the Western Hemisphere south of the U.S. having Spanish or Portuguese as their official languages; Mexicans are people who are born in Mexico; Mexican-Americans are people of Mexican ancestry who are born in the U.S.; Chicanos are people of Mexican ancestry who are born in the U.S. but have an awareness of a historically oppressive relationship with Mexico and the U.S.
3. Ignacio always drew small size drawings of the eye on his papers. I asked him if he would draw me a larger version of the eye, and he did. Notice how large he has drawn the pupil, and how dark he has made the tip of the eyebrow. His drawings never varied—each eye was drawn to look the same.

4. I taught the children on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The regular education teachers taught the students on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. In order to prevent the children from becoming confused, I designed my curriculum to align with the content of the regular education teachers. I asked Mr. Reyes what the children would be learning on a monthly basis, and then I designed my lessons accordingly.
5. The principal has endorsed my curriculum on videotape.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Name _____
Does Speaking English Make You an Anglo?
Pre-Questionnaire

1. Do you believe that speaking English makes you an Anglo (gringo)? Circle yes or no.
2. Describe how you feel about Anglos (gringos).

Figure 2

Name _____
Ethnic Identification
Pre-Questionnaire

1. Which word best describes how you see yourself? Please circle one label.

American Latino Mexican
Mexican-American Chicano

2. What is it about being a Mexican or Chicano that makes you feel proud?

Figure 3

Name _____
Does Speaking English Make You an Anglo?
Post-Questionnaire

1. Do you believe that speaking English makes you an Anglo (gringo)? Circle yes or no.
2. Describe how you feel about Anglos (gringos).
3. If you changed your opinion, tell me why? Also, list and describe the factors that helped you to change your opinion?

Figure 4

Name _____

Ethnic Identification

Post-Questionnaire

1. Which word best describes how you see yourself? Please circle one label.

American Latino Mexican
 Mexican-American Chicano

2. What is it about being a Mexican or Chicano that makes you feel proud?

3. If you circled a different label from the one you selected when you first arrived in this class, tell me why? Please describe the reasons for your change in self-identification.

Figure 5

Student Questionnaire for Curriculum Evaluation

1. Did you enjoy doing the lessons and activities that were part of the investigator's curriculum? Please explain.
2. Did you enjoy reading stories and books about Mexican and Chicano youngsters? If so, tell me why.
3. Did you enjoy watching movies that had Mexicans and Chicanos as the leading characters? Please explain.
4. Do you think that teachers should include stories about Mexicans and Chicanos in the subject areas? Why or why not?
5. What suggestions can you give teachers working in alternative education programs to help their students?
6. Did you enjoy working in groups? If you did, tell me why. If not, please explain.
7. Did you like being graded by rubrics? Tell me why or why not.
8. What do you think teachers can do in the regular education classroom to prevent students from misbehaving and being sent to alternative education?
9. Name three things that you learned about each of these cultures: African American, American Indian, Anglos, and Asians.
10. Did you find our group discussions helpful? Please explain.
11. Do you think that the curriculum that you have been doing reflects (KIP)? Please explain.

Figure 6

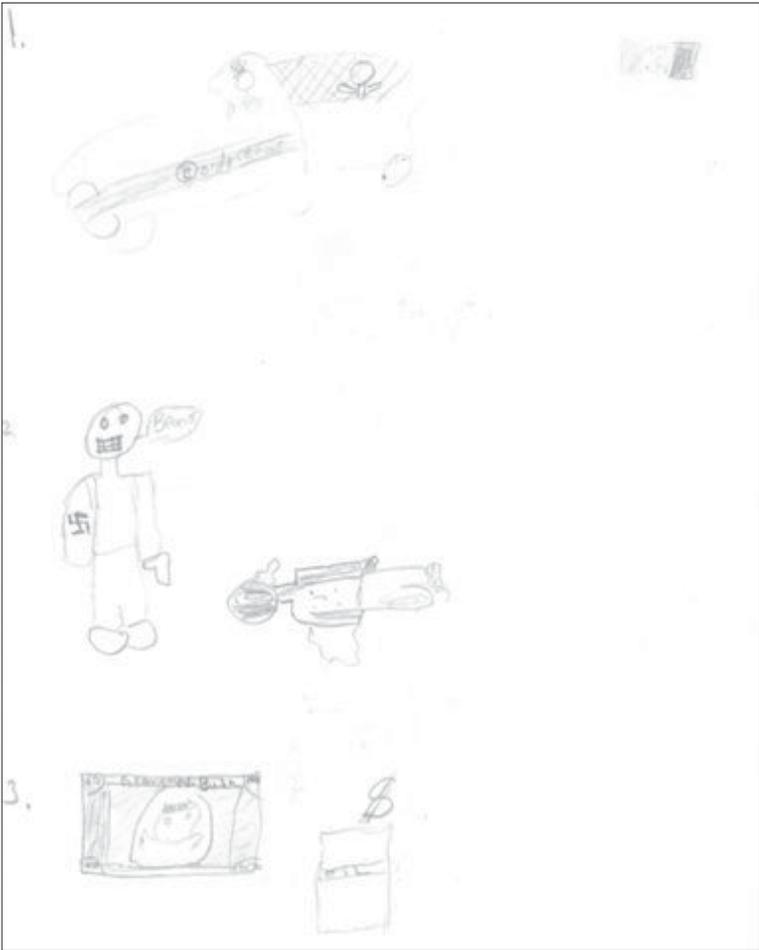


Figure 7

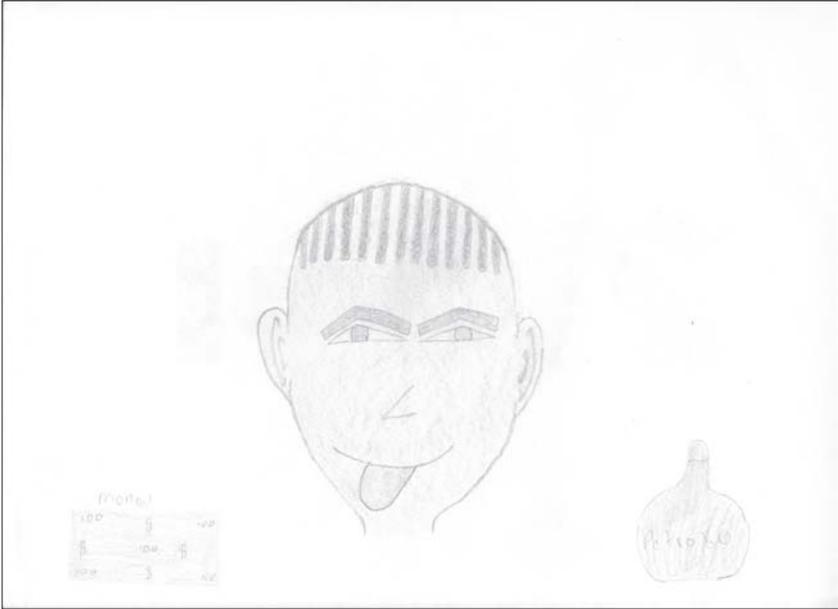


Figure 8

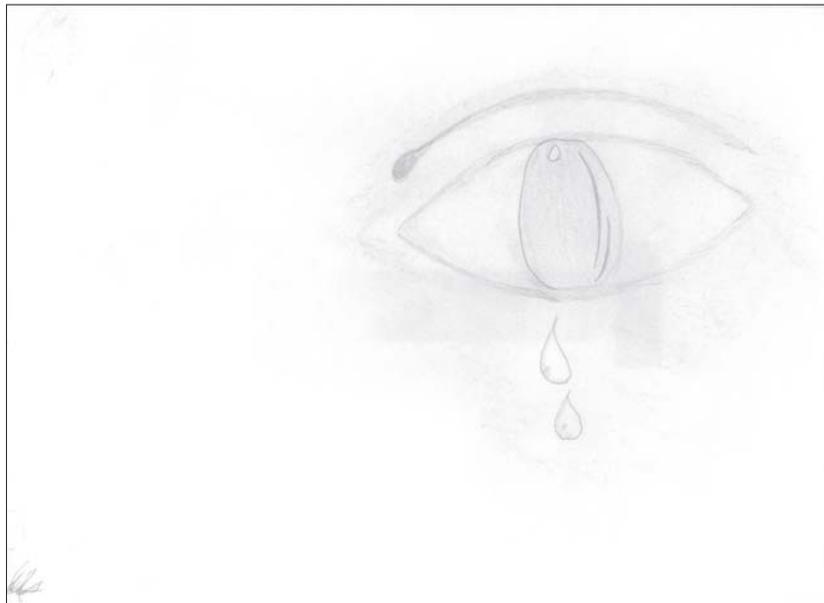


Figure 9



Figure 10

