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# Examining Latina/o Students' Experiences of Injustice: LatCrit Insights from a Texas High School

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## **Examining Latina/o Students' Experiences of Injustice:**

### **LatCrit Insights from a Texas High School**

#### *Abstract*

We used Latina/Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) to re-analyze survey and interview data from earlier research in which we found Latina/o students reported less positive experiences than other students in this high school. We found racial injustice in class enrollments, in students' experiences with stereotypes and prejudice, in student-teacher relationships, and in school policies and norms. LatCrit principles illustrate interconnections among racism, interest convergence, and colorblindness that create racial injustice for Latinas/os. We argue that counterstorytelling could emerge to resist that injustice and that educators must understand how racism functions in their schools and interrogate relevant policies and norms.

*Key words:* Latinos, Critical Race Theory, racism, high school, equity, engagement

## **Examining Latina/o Students' Experiences of Injustice:**

### **LatCrit Insights from a Texas High School**

A primary responsibility of educators is to ensure that all students are treated equitably. Yet, equity often gets lost amidst the chaos of daily high school life. As diverse students flood hallways, crowd locker rooms, and fuss with the minutiae of assignments, concerns of 'racial justice' may get overlooked for more pressing demands like monitoring hallways, teaching, and communicating with students and families. Left unaddressed, however, structural and experiential inequities among diverse students can create racial injustice (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Often, such injustice is subtle yet impactful on outcomes for students in different racial and ethnic groups. Such appeared to be the experience of the Latina/o students at Riley High School (pseudonym) in Texas. In prior research on student engagement and instruction at Riley (Author, 2014; Author & Author, 2014), we found that Latina/o students reported relationships with teachers and overall levels of engagement that differed from those of their white, black, and mixed race classmates. Although racial differences were not the focus of our prior research, it was clear that Latina/o students at Riley were experiencing school differently from other students. Thus, we reconfigured our research team to re-analyze our survey and interview data using Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). Our new research team examined the experiences of Latina/o students at Riley High School in an effort to explain how and why such injustice was so pervasive in their daily high school experiences.

### **Racial Injustice in US Schools**

Although de jure discrimination has become less overt since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), de facto attitudes and practices have maintained racial injustice in US schools through levers operating at societal, school, teacher, and student levels (Pace, 2006; Yosso,

2002). At the societal level, the prevalence of meritocratic views and colorblind ideals have made it common to blame students' lack of academic success on their inability to work hard or adopt school values (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pace, 2006). Yet, scholars argue that persistent racial achievement gaps reflect school structures, curricular standards, educational processes, and discourses that align closely with white middle-to-upper class cultures, forms of knowledge, and values (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pace, 2006; Sleeter, 2012; Yosso, 2002). Many Indigenous, African American, and Latina/o scholars argue that the Eurocentric curriculum that is a staple in our school system is part of a legacy of colonization that continues to marginalize and racialize students (Battiste, 2013; Patel, 2015; Watkins, 1993; Yosso, 2002). Racial injustice also manifests in patterns of access to particular courses and knowledge, which often place students of color in lower tracks characterized by more rote instruction and less student-centered teaching (Howard, 2010; Oakes, 2005; Yosso, 2002). Despite the emergence of culturally relevant practices that embrace students' complex identities, such practices exist at the margins of schooling (Gay, 2010; Paris, 2012). Most students of color continue to be treated as receptors of information, as opposed to co-constructors of knowledge through pedagogies that value their beliefs and experiences. Students of color also experience greater likelihood of retention, suspension, and expulsion in US high schools (Howard, 2010), outcomes linked to zero-tolerance policies that feed the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2012).

Scholars also assert that, with a national K-12 teaching force that is 82% white and a student population that is 46% non-white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), many teachers struggle to engage non-white students beyond stereotypical, deficit notions (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pace, 2006). Teachers filter curriculum through their worldviews and interact with students by sending explicit and implicit messages about what is valued (Gay,

2010; Howard, 2010; Pace, 2006). Unaware of their and others' implicit biases, many well-meaning teachers unknowingly dismiss the lived experiences of their non-white students. Solórzano and Yosso (2001) illustrate how teachers' use of veiled terms, like *lazy*, *violent*, and *unclean*, discriminates against students of color and negatively impacts their academic outcomes and work habits. As a result, many Latina/o and non-white students also adhere to these biases; students of all races have described students of color negatively without calling them *stupid* or *dumb*, but by using veiled or coded speech similar to that of teachers (Howard, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Collectively, this multitude of forces occurring at many levels perpetuates experiences of racial injustice for many students of color in US schools.

### **Latinas/os in US Education**

Approximately 23% of the US student population, or over 12 million K-12 students, are Latina/o and are vulnerable to particular forms of injustice (Hernandez, et al., 2013). As with other students of color, Latinas/os experience inequality through inequitable patterns of course access, negative stereotypes of ability and motivation, and distant relationships with non-Latina/o teachers, but these experiences have particularly unique characteristics (Cólón & Sánchez, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Nunn, 2011; Oakes, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). Latinas/os' educational experiences are hampered by racism and intersections of gender, class, language, and immigration status, which all inform school curriculum, explicitly and implicitly (Yosso, 2002). Latina/o students are also ensnared by societal-level assumptions and stereotypes leading to marginalizing policies that limit exposure to advanced curriculum. As such, Latina/o students are disproportionally represented in low-level academic tracks (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Oakes, 2005), and many deem higher academic tracks as unattainable "white spaces" (Nunn, 2011). Such assumptions are also related to immigration and occupational discourses

such as “undocumented status and menial work as day laborers” (Nunn, 2011, p. 1246). Pérez Huber (2010) links such images to racist nativism, defined as open and intense opposition to the perceived “foreigner,” such that the foreigner is framed as a threat to the nationalistic identity of the US. Pérez Huber (2010) argues that nativism against Latinas/os manifests during class discussions around immigration and related issues. Such negative perceptions and stereotypes can be highly detrimental for Latina/o youth, and others’ perceptions of what it means to be Latina/o may lead Latina/o youth to reject their ethnic identities or academic achievement, either of which could negatively affect their overall well-being (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Distant relationships with non-Latina/o teachers and feelings of alienation also highlight how Latina/o students experience injustice. In a study of 49 Latina/o and 44 white high school students, Garza (2009) found that perceptions of relationships with teachers differed along ethnic lines. Latina/o students tended to value academic support and teacher scaffolding, while white students tended to value relationships with teachers that were more personal in nature. Similarly, in her study of Latina/o students’ experiences in a Houston high school, Valenzuela (1999) documented how the structure of schooling emphasized accountability, resulting in teacher-student relationships that focused on academics and test scores. In turn, Valenzuela (1999) found that Latina/o students perceived teachers did not care about them because of the lack of reciprocal relationships, different cultural beliefs, and different views on the purpose of schooling. Valenzuela’s (1999) work reveals that feelings of competence and belonging are both low when Latina/o students feel that bilingualism and biculturalism are not valued at school.

### **Creating Positive School Climates for Latinas/os**

Certainly, educators can work to create schools that better meet the needs of Latina/o students. As with all students, Latinas/os are more engaged in schools and classrooms in which

they experience strong feelings of competence, autonomy, and belonging (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). For this reason, classrooms and schools that are culturally responsive are sites of greater engagement (Gay, 2010; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Sleeter, 2012). For example, Lucas, Henze, and Donato (1990) identified common factors among six high schools that effectively promoted Latina/o student success, including high expectations for Latinas/os, counselor support for college applications, and culturally relevant professional development for teachers (Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990). Other scholars have also found that caring relationships with teachers are particularly important for engagement among Latinas/os (Conchas, 2001; Garza, 2009). Further, by integrating and appreciating linguistic and familial aspects of students' cultural wealth, teachers can restructure curriculum to represent the community in which the school is situated (Yosso, 2005). In addition to personalizing learning for students, this "funds of knowledge" approach has the potential to contribute to new norms of inclusivity across other domains of the school (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). In all these areas, principals play a large role in shaping school culture, as they make priorities that influence teachers' and students' actions and interactions (Howard, 2010; Timar, 2012). While unable to enact change alone, principals have the opportunity to stretch authority and decision-making powers to other individuals at the school (Spillane, Halvorsen, & Diamond, 2001). Prioritizing a distributed leadership model offers teachers and students the potential for an active role in constructing and sustaining the school culture in which they are situated.

Effective leadership requires more than a passionate, powerful principal; it entails reciprocal, interdependent interactions between stakeholders (Spillane, Halvorsen, & Diamond, 2001). In fact, Aveling (2007) asserts that schools need social justice leaders with the critical consciousness, knowledge, and practical skills to engage in such distributed leadership.

Principals assume a central role in facilitating norms for shared leadership models. For example, when principals emphasize high stakes testing, teachers are likely to align instruction with state tests (Howard, 2010; Timar, 2012). Conversely, when principals expect teachers to use diverse forms of instruction, teachers tend to align instruction to this goal (Howard, 2010). These findings suggest that principals are influential in creating a vision for the school, even as teachers retain authority over executing this vision in the classroom. Through positional authority, principals establish parameters and impact the context in which other leaders and informal actors exist (Spillane, Halvorsen, & Diamond, 2004). Beyond the goals and parameters prioritized by the principal though, subsequent interactions between administrators and teachers, and teachers and students, constitute situations in which individuals exercise agency over the school culture.

Distributed leadership models account for the situated nature of reality in that individuals are bound by socio-cultural factors and their own lived experiences (Spillane, Halvorsen, & Diamond, 2001). Young and Laible (2000) contend that white educators do not intentionally oppress students of color; rather they have not yet understood the concept of racism and its manifestations. McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) argue that educators' conscious and unconscious assumptions about what students of color can and cannot do, what they term 'equity traps,' can undermine positive intentions. By integrating relevant professional development, coordinating team curriculum planning, and fostering site-based leadership, school leaders can better support Latina/o students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To understand how and why Latina/o students at Riley High School experienced racial injustice, we draw upon Latina/Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). Building on the theoretical foundations of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004), LatCrit enhances CRT's



focus on inequality due to race, class, gender, and sexuality by integrating additional lenses pertinent to the Latina/o experience, such as oppression stemming from immigration status, language, ethnicity, and culture (Pérez Huber, 2010; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

LatCrit is not contentious with CRT but builds off CRT and is more useful for specific situations in which Latina/os find themselves. CRT and LatCrit scholars acknowledge class oppression, but CRT posits that class cannot account for racial oppression. LatCrit scholars further argue that class and racial oppression cannot account for oppression based on immigration status or language. The CRT and LatCrit frameworks share several core tenets, four of which we center in this study: permanence of racism, interest convergence, colorblindness, and counterstorytelling.

Permanence of racism indicates that racism, conscious and unconscious, is endemic to American life (Bell, 2005; Horsford, 2011; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Examinations of race and racism expose intersections of subordination. For example, Foucault examined how different structures – e.g., linguistics, economics, science, and law – work together to support racism; this premise creates an effective tool for analyzing racism and its patterns of interconnectedness (Fendler, 2014). This perspective situates racism historically as an episteme: a knowledge system or pattern of knowing that comes to be identified over time as scientific or systemic (Fendler, 2014). This *racist epistemology* aligns with Bell's (2005) theory of positioning racism in America as endemic or permanent. Permanence of racism, at times, applies differently to Latina/os as pertains to race, particularly since a federal court, in *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947), ruled that Mexicans were white (Santiago, 2013). Nonetheless, language and raciolinguistic ideologies continue to subordinate Latinas/os (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Such ideologies represent a permanence of racism specific to Latina/o students' school experiences, as raciolinguistic ideologies are disguised as objective,

standardized linguistic practices. Flores and Rosa (2015) argue that such ideologies are tools implicated in the racialization and marginalization of Latina/o students because they reveal a model of subjective Eurocentered linguistic standards. To this end, Bell (2005) argued that black and Latina/o students in majority white schools are exposed to “teaching, curricula, and conceptions of merit” that express whiteness as normative and universal (p. 166). This marginalization of multicultural and multiracial perspectives alienates black and Latina/o students. Marginalized perspectives are only shared or amplified when doing so aligns with dominant narratives of whiteness.

Interest convergence theory argues that America’s legal system legislates legal remedies in favor of blacks only when there is an interest that also serves powerful whites (Bell, 2005; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Such instances of mutual benefit represent a converging of interests. Interest convergence is an interdisciplinary inquiry into the history of the US legal system and considers how it has interjected, or refused to, on behalf of blacks and other non-whites. Although the concept is aligned with Marxist theory and its class disputes between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Taylor & Ladson-Billings, 2009), interest convergence as intended by Bell (2005) is specific to legal remedies. As a civil rights lawyer, Bell worked to disband Jim Crow in the 1950s and 1960s and was a proponent of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision and school desegregation (Bell, 2005). By the 1980s, Bell’s optimism faded as *Brown*, like other landmark cases, took an unintended form (Bell, 2005). The *Brown* decision, he contended, was a prime example of interest convergence, allowing for successful transition from open acts and discourses of racism to post-racial acts and discourses of the same phenomenon. Relatedly, in an earlier desegregation case filed by Mexican Americans, *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947), a federal court ruled that Mexican American students could not be

segregated from whites based on race because they were deemed to be white (Santiago, 2013). Although Mexican American students continued to be segregated based on fluency in English, CRT scholar Valencia (2005) argued that *Mendez v. Westminster* illustrated interest convergence because it bolstered the United States' international image as a beacon of democracy and justice.

Colorblindness is an obfuscation regarding race that aims not to seek a resolution or redress of racial conflict but to hide race from the nation's view (Bell, 2005). Such blindness makes issues of race easy to ignore. Bell (2005) called it an "attractive veneer obscuring flaws in the society that are not corrected by being hidden from view" (p. 10). CRT and LatCrit pose a challenge to the dominant ideology and its educational discourses by effectively debating the rhetoric of objectivity, meritocracy, racial equality, and colorblindness. This new framing of racism as colorblindness discarded Jim-Crow-era discourses regarding biological and moral inferiorities of blacks and exchanged them for more subtle colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). The genius of white supremacy is its discourses of invisibility (Leonardo, 2009). But as with any discourse, there are always multiple perspectives.

Finally, counterstorytelling is a means of storytelling that conflicts with accepted or normative ideals of the majority (Horsford, 2011). Carter (2008) argued that educators must be cognizant of the lived experiences of black and brown students in predominantly white schools, especially where susceptibility to racism is high. Carter asserted that understanding how African American and Latina/o "students in predominantly white schools perceive their learning context and then respond to these perceptions can allow educators to access the students' brilliance, a trait that is often suppressed in the face of racist barriers to success" (p. 494). Counterstorytelling is a powerful tool that educators can use to raise this awareness. Amidst the various utilities of CRT and LatCrit is their placement of marginalized voices at the center of analysis.

## **Research Methods**

In re-examining survey and interview data from an embedded case study at Riley High School (Author, 2014; Author & Author, 2014), we addressed two research questions:

1. *What patterns emerge in survey and interview data among Latinas/os and other students that might reveal and explain racial injustice for Latina/o students at a typical comprehensive high school?*
2. *What patterns emerge in interviews with educators at that same high school to explain whether, how, and why such racial injustice went unaddressed?*

### **Research Site**

In 2009-2010, Riley High School served 1,420 students in a small town in Texas about thirty minutes from a major city. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Riley's student body was 44% Latina/o, 44% white, and 12% black. By contrast, Riley's teachers were 95% white. The school performed slightly above the state average on standardized tests, offered broad curricular options, and enjoyed a graduation rate just above the national average. The visibility of the school's logo on businesses, homes, cars, and clothing throughout town indicated that the high school was an essential aspect of the community. The school was also well known for its award winning athletic, musical, agricultural, and academic groups.

### **Participants**

Survey participants were 1,132 Riley students (80%) who represented the demographics of the student body fairly well with 36% Latina/o, 42% white, 10% mixed race, and 9% black. Respondents were 53% female and 46% male, close to the enrollment of 51% female and 49% male. The 20% of students who did not complete the survey included those who chose not to respond, two classes where teachers forgot to administer it, and students with special needs to

whom teachers did not give the survey. The first author used the survey data to identify five classes to serve as embedded case studies that varied by subject, grade, student engagement, and students' perceptions of instruction and classroom climate. The first author interviewed the five case study teachers, all white, and then used maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) to identify 6-8 students per class for interviews. Thus, the 33 student interviewees varied by gender, observed engagement, peer group, and personality, and they represented the racial breakdown of the school (with 12 white, 11 Latina/o, 5 black, 4 mixed race, and 1 Asian). To gain further understanding of Riley's school culture, the first author also interviewed the principal, an assistant principal, and the chief of police who worked on campus. A list of interview participants is presented in Table 1.

<TABLE 1>

### **Data Collection**

The mixed-methods data for this study were originally collected to explore student perceptions of engagement and teaching. In December 2009, participating Riley students completed a survey reporting on as many as eight different classes in which they were enrolled, for a total of 6,842 class-level reports. Four survey constructs measured *academic identity* (e.g., How important is doing well in school to who you are?), *racial/ethnic identity* (e.g., How strong are your feelings about what your race group means to you?), *deviant self* (e.g., How much does each phrase describe you? – into drugs, get into fights), and *positive self* (e.g., How much does each phrase describe you? – loved, important). Five survey constructs – completed for each of a student's classes – measured *classroom engagement* (e.g., How often do you do all of your work in this class?), *connective instruction* (e.g., How much do the things you learn in this class relate to your life goals?), *academic rigor* (e.g., How often does this teacher give you challenging

work?), *lively teaching* (e.g., How often does this class include games or fun activities), and *peer belonging* (e.g., How much do you feel like you fit in with the other students in this class?). After using the survey data to identify five case study classes, the first author returned in March and May 2010 to conduct 29 classroom observations and to interview 33 students, 3 administrators and the 5 case study teachers. Interviews followed semi-structured protocols, lasted 40-60 minutes, and were transcribed. Students were asked to describe themselves and their perceptions of teachers and classes, including perceptions of teacher care and understanding, perceived relevance of curriculum, and experiences with instruction. Administrators were asked to describe the school and community and provide information on case study teachers. Teachers were asked to discuss their teaching philosophy, approaches to instruction, and perspectives on students.

### **Data Analysis**

In re-examining the survey data, we identified patterns in course enrollment, classroom engagement, self-perceptions, and perceptions of teaching using ANOVA to examine statistically significant differences by race and ethnicity. To re-examine the interview data, we amassed a team of six researchers, including four who had not yet seen this data, to re-code the student, teacher, and administrator interviews using two types of codes: (a) those that emerged from the researchers' organic interpretations of the data, and (b) those that came from the LatCrit framework. Researchers individually wrote reflective memos noting their impressions of the answers to the research questions as they analyzed the data, and each person created an analytic matrix to track patterns across study participants in regards to key concepts in the framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During two research retreats, we collectively analyzed the matrices and charted our impressions to identify themes that helped us locate and interpret subtle patterns across the comments of Latina/o students, other students, and adult educators that revealed racial

injustice for Latina/o students. We concluded by creating a series of concept maps – graphic organizers (Maxwell, 2005) – to distill and represent our interpretations of how concepts from LatCrit informed our understanding of the Latina/o students’ experiences in this school.

### **Findings**

In examining patterns of racial injustice at Riley High School, we found a complex set of interests and discourses that obscured an undercurrent of institutional racism. In Figure 1, we present our graphic model to illustrate how racism was able to operate with relative impunity at Riley. We found that interest convergence and colorblind discourse functioned as contextual buffers that prevented most individuals from acknowledging or even recognizing the core permanence of racism. Interest convergence operated through the school’s celebrated success in sports and extra-curricular activities, where Latina/o and African-American students were embraced and played prominent roles that created perceptions of equity, fairness, and acceptance of students of color. The outermost buffer was colorblind discourse, which permeated the school and emerged in notions of meritocracy, in claims that race did not matter, in references to equality in God’s eyes, and in coded language. Amidst this racialized environment, we found that these bicultural students expressed pride in being Latina/o, yet they experienced a tension between these positive feelings and the negative expectations they experienced daily. Latina/o students resisted stereotypes and notions of nativism through narratives of hardworking families with esteemed values and ideals. Yet, as shown by the wedge in Figure 1, the positive elements of their narratives, while they have the potential to become counterstories, barely penetrated the layers buffering racism. Below, we delve more deeply into each facet of our model to illustrate how racial injustice functioned and persisted for Latinas/os at Riley High School.

<<INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

## **Permanence of Racism**

Reassessing our data, it became apparent that racism was indeed an operational obstacle for Latina/o students at Riley. In the survey data, we found a number of systematic differences between Latinas/os and other students. As noted in prior work (Author, 2014), Latina/o students experienced some segregation, with Latinas/os enrolled in classes that were, on average, 49% Latina/o, as compared with non-Latinas/os whose classes were only 30% Latina/o. Latinas/os were also less likely to be enrolled in advanced courses than white students. The percentages of Latina/o students taking advanced math, English, and science were 15%, 10%, and 16%, respectively, compared with 39%, 38%, and 44% of whites. As shown in Table 2, Latinas/os were also significantly less engaged than white and black students, and they reported less positive experiences with teachers. Latinas/os had overall lower perceptions that teachers cared about them, understood them, told them they were doing well, and pushed them to work hard. Latinas/os were also less likely to feel they fit in with other students in their classes.

<TABLE 2>

Illuminating the dynamics behind these racialized experiences for Latinas/os, interviews revealed a school environment rife with negative stereotypes held by administrators, teachers, and students of all ethnicities, including Latinas/os – and many of these stereotypes influenced how teachers and other students interacted with Latinas/os. One clear stereotype was that Latino/a families were dysfunctional and their role models deficient. The assistant principal stated:

With our Hispanic population growing, I think our kids are in the same boat as a lot of families in the state, where it's a little dysfunctional – parents are divorced, living with grandma. They pretty much have free reign. There's no parental guidance or no authority



figure setting boundaries for them.

A number of white students translated how these perceptions of Latina/o home life filtered into Latina/o's educational experiences. Jack commented, "Hispanic kids don't care." Claire remarked, "I can't say everyone, but most of the kids that are Mexican or black, they just don't seem to care as much." She theorized:

I think the different races have different ways, different values, and I think like what the kids see at home, like how they see their parents talking to each other, they pick that up.... You bring these kids to school and they treat their teacher like they would their mom, which isn't very respectful. So, I think they get in trouble a lot.

These quotes illustrate that white administrators and students spoke assertively about the negative connection they saw between the home and school lives of Latina/o students – an attitude that conveyed a generally negative perception of Latina/o families.

While most Latina/o students spoke positively about their ethnic identity, three Latina/o participants revealed that their ethnic pride was somewhat clouded by the negative reputation of "Mexican" or "Hispanic" students and families at Riley. Carmen, for example, expressed pride in being bilingual in English and Spanish, yet noted, "Other people make us look bad. There's some that just don't want to work.... It doesn't look good on the ones that do want to work and work their butt off and have a family and do their best." Describing his bicultural identity, Roberto incorporated perceptions of what it meant to be "Mexican" or "American" within his school community. In the school context, Mexican aspects were portrayed negatively, while American traits were described as "typical" and normative. Roberto described,

I'm Mexican and I would not change being Mexican. Yet I act like white-ish. You know what I mean a little bit? It's like, I have a feeling white is Americanish, typical American

thing that you'd probably see on TV or something like that. I don't act Mexican because most Mexicans around the school probably hang around together, talk about weird stuff, and have their hair spiked up. I don't like those people and especially the hair spiked up. Jessica similarly noted the importance of one's ethnic group: "It does mean everything, but it doesn't really represent who you are. Some people are like because you're Hispanic you have to act this way." These statements conveyed how these students felt essentialized by negative connotations of being Mexican and how they struggled to balance positive perceptions of being Mexican outside of school and the negative images within school.

In practice, such negative stereotypes and perceptions manifested in the ways white teachers, classmates, and school leaders interacted with Latina/o students. Some Latinas/os perceived that teachers antagonized them, even when they did well academically. For example, Caesar described himself as a strong, motivated student in math and science, noting, "I just really love math. I really love messing around with numbers. Science is about the same. I just really like to work like that." But, when asked about his relationship with his Algebra 2 teacher, Caesar described the teacher as liking to "fight" and "bicker" with him, concluding, "I'm probably one of the best math students in there, and he still just doesn't like me." Jack, a white student, described his perception that teachers commonly disliked Latina/o students:

I'm not trying to say she's racist or anything, but the Hispanic kids will kind of clique out to themselves and ignore the teacher entirely. When they clique out like that, she seems to kind of dislike that group. But that's not just her, that's every teacher.

Students also perceived that teachers in the community were indifferent about – and even hostile toward – Latina/o issues. Tina, a white student, recalled how her sixth grade teacher had reacted to Latina/o students participating in the nationwide Immigrants Rights Marches of 2006:

A lot of Mexicans decided that they were going to walk out and leave school one day. We were talking about it in class, and we had a Mexican person talking about it and our teacher said, “You were wrong for walking out of school. You were wrong for standing up. You were wrong for doing everything. What you think is basically wrong.” Now that got pretty interesting. The student would not return to that class for anything. The student pretty much got up and walked out of the class.

This story reveals a community history of white teachers challenging Latina/o students and questioning their commitment to issues that were personal and political for Latinas/os.

Latinas/os were also routinely marginalized in classes in other ways, some of which impacted their participation. Mr. Knowles, a physics teacher, described why he believed Carmen – whom he called “the country and western Spanish girl” – was hesitant to speak up in class:

You have to be very careful when she starts talking, with her twang, because as Manuel said, “You’re Mexican.”... I think sometimes she’s self-conscious about her voice pattern. Every once in a while she’ll come out with something, and everybody goes likes... (makes a strained face).

Carmen’s classmates’ routine negative reaction to her Hispanic accent reveals that such marginalization was normalized and permitted by teachers – even when they recognized it was happening *and* negatively impacting the student’s participation. In all these ways, Latina/o students at Riley experienced a school culture that reflected the permanence of racism in the US.

### **Interest Convergence**

As Figure 1 depicts, we found that interest convergence served as a buffer for the permanence of racism by uniting the goals of diverse school stakeholders around the interscholastic, extra-curricular program. Notably, Riley was distinguished as a highly decorated

school, with students participating in offerings ranging from agriculture to debate to band and competing against other schools in sporting events and spelling contests. Success in interscholastic competition defined a large part of Riley's identity as a school and community, and it formed the basis for interest convergence across races and ethnicities. The principal bragged, "Other schools may not admit it, but when you walk in with a swagger because you're pretty good... it's a pretty cool feeling. Our kids are kind of getting that confidence." Riley students had to maintain good academic standing in order to participate in the interscholastic program, which fostered greater connectivity to the school and its resources for students who participated. The principal asserted, "If [students] weren't somewhat engaged in their other classes, the high level of engagement that we see in their competitive events or whatever wouldn't be there." Yet, we did not find equal emphasis on academic support for students not served by Riley's extra-curricular program. This absence suggested that students gained more access to teachers and other supports through their involvement on a school team or club.

One clear benefit of extracurricular involvement for students of all races was stronger relationships with educators. We found that coaches developed close connections with student athletes and urged them to attend tutoring sessions before school; club advisors developed more personal relationships with students outside of the traditional classroom environment. Coach Connor, a football coach, described his attitude toward getting to know students:

It's good to know them, and I think a lot of that is the coach in me, cause we get kids down there that the teacher is just constantly, "He sleeps in my class. He does this and that." And you try to help. You say, "Do you know anything about him, the fact that he's working every night from 12:00 to 4:00 or something like that? Or that he doesn't have parents, or...?" Cause you do learn. You learn all about them down there when you spend

so much time in football. So I try to bring the same approach to the classroom. Cause if you have non-football players, then you get to know them too. It's just how we get to know you and then help you along.

Although Connor acknowledged attempting to bring his interpersonal skills to his relationships with non-athletes, observations in Connor's first-period English class revealed that he held the strongest connections with athletes, as evidenced in his casual references to their nicknames and reputations. Through such opportunities to connect with teachers and coaches, students of all races, including Latinas/os, who engaged in extra-curricular activities had an advantage.

Riley's extra-curricular activities also empowered and privileged Latina/o participants by providing space for them to develop and shine. For example, Roxana described how being on the track team had helped her gain confidence. She shared, "I used to be shier when I was younger, but last year I started getting out of my shell in track." Roxana reflected:

It made me feel like I could do stuff because I usually run, and I actually got ahead, but then there's always this one person who'd be like, 'Oh, she's the fastest one.' And I didn't want to take that away from them, so I just ran right behind them. Being in track, it taught me it was a competition, so I had to actually get up there and [pass] people.

For Roxana, interscholastic participation afforded a space to blossom and realize her potential. She described that her new confidence and status enabled her to "make friends and stuff." Jessica similarly relayed persisting to make Riley's dance team, of which she later became the captain. She noted, "I went from being a rookie to captain. I didn't give up on that even though the girls put me down and said I wouldn't make it." Through such experiences, a number of Latina/o students who participated and excelled in school activities seemed to perceive less injustice than non-participants. Yet, this notion of a level playing field appeared to exist only because students

possessed athletic prowess or academic skill that bolstered the reputation of the school.

### **Colorblind Discourse**

Colorblind discourse enveloped the culture at Riley High School, resulting in the absence of discussion or acknowledgement of racial injustice. As Figure 1 shows, colorblind discourse served as an all-encompassing layer, masking both interest convergence and the permanence of racism. Major aspects of the colorblind discourse at Riley were meritocratic ideals, biological and religious arguments that race is an insignificant issue, and coded language to talk about potentially controversial racial issues. Presented against the backdrop of racism toward Latinas/os, these colorblind notions provide clear insight into how such racism has persisted.

In terms of meritocracy, numerous participants revealed beliefs that opportunities for achievement were equitable across racial and ethnic groups, and that actual achievement was due to ability and motivation. For example, numerous Latina/o students expressed beliefs that they simply needed to work hard to do well, without consideration of structural or policy barriers that could impede their success. Evidencing this perspective, Belinda asserted that the one thing she wanted to change about herself was “study a lot more harder” so she could “get in a good college.” Mariah similarly attributed graduation to hard work. She noted, “There’s some students in this school that just do not care, and they don’t do their work, and they don’t care if they fail or pass. They don’t care if they graduate.” This perception of meritocracy had racial undertones. For example, white student Claire supported her assertion that “most of the kids that are Mexican or black... just don’t seem to care as much” by connecting intelligence with class rank: “Like if you look at our top class, like the top ten, one person is black and the rest are all white.” She further explained, “If you’re intelligent, you’re more than likely gonna make good grades, and if you make good grades, then you’re gonna have a high class rank.”

Several white students also used biological, religious, and personal reasoning to argue that race did not matter. When asked whether being white was an important part of who she was, Mariane explained, “I just learned in biology that like 100% of human DNA is the same, so I pretty much view everyone as the same.” Brian rationalized that race was not important “because God created us equal,” and Sarah espoused, “I think if I was any other race, I’d be the same person.” Laura asserted,

I don’t really pay any attention to race or anything. It doesn’t really matter to me. Like if I was black, it wouldn’t really make a difference, or Mexican or any other race. It’s just a color. I don’t really pay any attention to it at all.

These white students failed to see the privilege they experienced due to race and instead claimed that race did not “make a difference.” This was contrary to the comments of Latina/o and black students, who expressed awareness of the role of race in their lives. These comments further illustrated the general attitude among whites at Riley that race was not an issue.

Similarly, white administrators and teachers talked minimally about race in their interviews, and the principal reported that teachers at the school “made some pretty nasty comments” after students took the school-wide survey. He elaborated, “One of the things was about the race of the student, how they identify with their group,” indicating that teachers were uncomfortable with the survey questions about racial and ethnic identity. In interviews, rather than mentioning race, many adults opted instead for coded language that masked race- or ethnicity-based inequalities. For example, educators referred to socio-economic class and school demographics, such as by noting a “shift” in the student population when referring to an increase in the Hispanic population at the school. Adults also use the term “dysfunctional” several times to describe students who did not come from traditional, two-parent homes, and they talked about

students needing role models. Using another form of coded language, history teacher Mr. Lifsky described his ability to relate to students by speaking both “gang banger” and “intellectual.”

Latina/o students seemed to pick up some of this coded language from teachers as well. For example, Rubi, a Latina, spoke of the value of learning to speak “properly,” referencing white middle class ways of speaking as being more valuable than other ways. Mentions of immigration status were a way in which Latina/o students responded to nativism and racism without directly talking about race – although there were clear underlying tones of racialized experiences. For example, Caesar described the arrival of his parents from Mexico to America, noting, “They were about twenty-something. They were in their twenties, and they got legalized and stuff.” Other students also offered up voluntary explanations of their and their families’ legalized status. When asked to describe her family heritage, Jessica asserted, “They’re from Mexico.... They’re all citizens now, and so all the family from my parents to here, we’re all citizens.” These voluntary, un-prompted explanations of legal immigration status illustrated one type of community discourse that attempted to mask racism through nationalist issues.

### **Seeking Counterstories**

We theorized that Latina/o students might construct counterstories to resist the negative narratives imposed on them within this racialized environment. To this end, we found that some Latina/o students countered dominant narratives and perceptions of Latinas/os and their families, but these instances did not appear bold or intentional enough to qualify as the types of counterstories that could truly challenge the permanence of racism. As our model in Figure 1 indicates, we noted *potential* for counterstorytelling to interrupt some of the racist forces in Riley, but the resistance of stereotypes and notions of nativism through narratives of hardworking families with admirable values and ideals only begins to penetrate the layers of



colorblind discourse, interest convergence, and permanence of racism. Latina/o students *contradicted* – but did not *challenge* – the normative or privileged perspectives of white students and administrators, who took for granted cultural values and norms of Latina/o students.

According to dominant narratives, Latinas/os were lazy, disrespectful to teachers, disinterested in school, and generally disconnected unless they participated in school activities. But interviews revealed that many Latinas/os held strong narratives of a community that was hard working, family-oriented, and committed to school. For example, a number of Latina/o interviewees described ambitious career and educational goals, held jobs that helped provide for their families, and described themselves as good students and hard workers. For example, Javier countered stereotypes by describing why he worked nights: “I go half and half with my mom because I’m an only child and she’s a single mother. So I pay bills and she’ll pay rent. We just split everything down the middle.” Jessica described how her father motivated her:

He came from a very poor family. He came to the States when he was twelve and started working construction....He became manager and then superintendent....If he can do it, I can do it. It like pushes me to do better for my parents.

These quotes – and others like them – illustrate personal narratives that contradicted perceptions commonly associated with Latina/o students in the school.

Further countering notions of deficiency, seven of our Latina/o interviewees stated that being Mexican was important to their identity, and they conveyed pride in their culture, associating their Latina/o identity with family practices and customs. Rubi, for example, asserted, “I’m proud of being Hispanic...That’s what I am. That’s how I was raised.” Ana described her appreciation for her cultural values, noting, “Mexicans have really close families, and we’re always throwing parties. All the time.” Javier shared that his family celebrated in the

vein of Mexican and Mexican-American traditions, “My parents are from Mexico, so we celebrate Cinco de Mayo and Christmas, I mean the way we do it in Mexico...It’s nice to be proud of your heritage.” Despite these positive remarks, Table 2 shows that, on the school-wide survey, Latinas/os expressed relatively high levels of racial/ethnic identity but relatively low levels of a positive sense of self. The correlation between these measures for Latinas/os ( $r = .16$ ) was relatively small and about half the size of the correlation for black students ( $r = .30$ ), suggesting that Latinas/os experienced a weaker connection between ethnic pride and self pride. This finding illustrates that while some students resisted negative narratives, they experienced tension between positive and negative associations regarding their ethnic identities. They were not fully enacting counternarratives that penetrated the racism and injustice for many Latinas/os at Riley, as many still grappled with what it meant to be Latina/o in their communities.

### **Discussion**

In re-examining the data to consider how Latina/o students’ experiences in this typical Texas high school were different from their classmates’, we confirmed patterns of racial injustice in both survey and interview data. Racial injustice for Latinas/os was evident in enrollment patterns in classes, in students’ perceptions and evaluations of their experiences in their classes, as well as in students’ descriptions of their experiences in school. Using LatCrit Theory, we developed the model in Figure 1 to explain these differential experiences for Latina/os. We found that the permanence of racism in Riley’s community shaped the lived experiences for Latina/o students at the high school. Long-standing structural inequalities, biases, stereotypes, and forms of discrimination persisted at Riley because they were clouded in multiple layers of context that protected the racism at the core. The first layer was interest convergence that occurred when talented Latina/o students contributed to the prominence of Riley in athletics and

other activities. The second layer was the colorblind discourse that encompassed most of the school and local community as students and adults tended to assert either that race did not matter or that race mattered but racism did not exist at Riley. Within this complex context, Latina/o students' ethnic pride and lived experiences emerged to counter predominant stereotypes of Latina/o culture, but did not reach the level of counterstories because students did not critically analyze these experiences and possess critical awareness of how racism played out in their school. As they competed with multilayered, embedded racist beliefs, structures, and practices, Latinas/os' positive narratives had only minimal ability to protect students from racial injustice. Redressing racism in this context will take long-term concerted effort, and those historically privileged by overlooking racism must face its all-encompassing injustices.

Although CRT and LatCrit have both been used widely in research, our study makes a number of critical contributions to the literature. First, we show the complex, interconnected ways in which various tenets of LatCrit can help us understand how and why racial injustice persists for Latina/o students in a fairly average Texas high school. Further, our study illustrates that these theories can illuminate racialized experiences not only in data that focuses on these issues, but also in secondary analyses of data collected for entirely different purposes. We did not explicitly ask participants to discuss racial injustice or racism in our interviews; yet these ideas emerged as our participants discussed other issues, which lends credence to the permanence of racism theory. Were these racist practices not central to daily life and classroom experiences at this school, we could not have identified how they operated when discussing such issues with students. We further found that the prevalence of racism at this school supported some Latina/o students' internalized oppression – a condition found in oppressive societies wherein oppressed individuals or groups lack confidence or come to hate themselves due to their

ethnicity, culture, race, sex, or other group membership (David & Derthick, 2013). To this end, three of our Latina/o participants voiced distaste for the prevailing reputation of Latina/o students at the school. In commenting on the behavior, the fashion choices, or the attitude of their Latina/o classmates, these students grappled with their own identities in light of dominant, essentialized perceptions of Latinas/os. In this way, not only were Latina/o students being deprived of equal educational opportunity through the structures and practices at Riley, but the experience of attending school in the environment described appeared to damage Latina/o students' senses of self in ways that could extend well beyond educational implications.

Despite these problematic circumstances, we believe the current levels of racism and racial injustice at Riley High School need not persist indefinitely. As others have argued (Aveling, 2007; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015), educational administrators have the potential to address and reverse systematic racial injustice in high schools. We argue that this responsibility must extend to leaders and actors at all levels of the school, from students to teachers to community members, and illustrate a distributed perspective in which power does not simply originate at the top. Instead, distributed leadership prioritizes a team approach in which individuals act and respond reciprocally, producing multiplicative effects and enhanced feelings of agency (Spillane, Halvorsen, & Diamond, 2004). At the most basic level, administrators must know the warning signs of racial injustice and have the willingness to see and confront those warning signs with other school leaders. This requires looking past colorblind discourse and interrogating issues like course enrollment patterns, teacher and student conduct, and school norms to become aware of how portions of the population are privileged at the expense of others (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Administrators, teachers, and support staff, regardless of their own race and ethnicity, can and should work toward inclusive environments in which discussions

of race, ethnicity, and culture become the norm, and in which educators come to recognize and challenge equity traps in their own thinking (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). To do so, educators must confront the permanence of racism and acknowledge their own role in perpetuating such racism, even if unintended. Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings (2009) contend that,

When racism is defined as specific, individual acts against persons of color, most whites can rightly deny this charge. They see themselves as good and fair... not as members of a group that enjoys special, undeserved privileges. Such a perspective is distressing, and many whites react with defensiveness and withdrawal if confronted. (p. 121)

This argument illustrates the need for white educators to resist tendencies toward defensiveness and withdrawal so as to honestly see racism in their schools. Gooden and O'Doherty (2015) suggest that prospective principals use their own racial experiences to learn about when and how race can impact leadership and what leaders can do to move beyond their own perspectives.

Importantly, classrooms represent the primary place where students and teachers interact, and so leaders and school actors seeking to address racism in schools must evaluate how classroom spaces either remedy or reproduce racial inequality (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Teachers' comments, attitudes, and behaviors produce particular classroom cultures that are then reflected in students' comments, attitudes, and behaviors. If teachers make racist remarks or allow students to make them, they are signaling such behavior as acceptable. In turn, students will feel free to say what they want, regardless of the racial implications and the impact their words have on others in the class. Individuals targeted by such remarks may feel isolated, dejected, and (wrongfully) deserving of such treatment. In light of these types of teacher- and classroom-level factors, ongoing professional development offers potential to encourage culturally relevant attitudes and pedagogy. Coupled with this, administrators may make frequent

classroom visits to better hold teachers accountable to culturally relevant pedagogy and attitudes (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). While professional development, administrators, and other school actors can encourage professional and personal reflection, teachers must reflect on how their beliefs may enforce racial or ethnic stereotypes and how their instruction and class norms privilege particular students, knowledge, and outcomes.

Relatedly, educators must address the Eurocentered curriculum that many scholars deem an inhibition to students of color and must make explicit the Eurocentric constructs that marginalize and racialize students (Battiste, 2013; Watkins, 1993; Yosso, 2002). Yosso (2002) contends that traditional curriculum development must build and originate from the knowledge of those traditionally marginalized and silenced. Historically, however, implementation of any curricular discourse that is radically different from the Eurocentered White standard is resisted. In instances when concessions are made, by the time these alternative curricular discourses reach students, they have been watered-down and are often untenable (Watkins, 1993; Yosso, 2002). The Eurocentric curriculum that is a staple in our school system is steeped in a legacy of colonization (Battiste, 2013; Patel, 2015; Watkins, 1993); therefore installing an alternative curriculum is always political (Watkins, 1993). For example Yosso (2002) contends that critical curricular approaches are not often presented or implemented to challenge the three tiers of educational inequity: structures, processes, and discourses. Furthermore, some critical curriculum techniques have not addressed the intersectionality of racism with other forms of oppression. Such weakened approaches toward critical curriculum implementation, while challenging some forms of oppression, leave crucial blind spots (Watkins, 1993; Yosso, 2002). To address racism, educators must take up the battles for more inclusive curriculum.

Battiste (2013) suggests that one valuable approach for implementing effective critical

curriculum is locating whites in position of power who are willing allies. Where tenable, this approach can allow Latina/o educators and allies to infuse better curriculum and guidelines for students. The task of finding willing white allies is immense due to a legacy of inherited subconscious notions of superiority and meritocracy (Battiste, 2013). The work-hard and pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps discourses that have been passed down to potential white allies for generations may seem insurmountable, but they can be overcome with rigor and commitment. Despite all of these suggestions, however, racism is highly complex. While teachers and students do possess agency over their individual actions, they function within larger racialized institutions and contexts, and they are thus bound by the knowledge and beliefs operating within those schools and in US society (Yosso, 2002). For these reasons, redressing racism will take long-term concerted effort, but must not be overlooked.

We believe this study illuminates a number of areas for future research. First, our study focused on a particular context, but research should examine racial injustice for Latina/o students in varying contexts. For example, we studied a diverse high school (42% Latina/o, 36% white, 9% black, and 10% mixed race), but future research might use LatCrit to identify racial dynamics within schools that are predominantly Latina/o or that have only a small Latina/o population. In addition, the teachers at Riley High School were 95% white. Findings may look different for a school with a more diverse teaching staff – particularly a school with many Latina/o teachers. Although educators who share students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds can still be oppressive (Khalifa, 2015), it is likely that a school with more Latina/o staff would, at a minimum, have patterns of injustice that are different from those we found at Riley. Second, this study re-examines existing data collected to answer other research questions. Although we see significance in the emergence of racialized experiences in such data, we believe this study

motivates future studies that more deliberately seek to collect data on Latina/o students' racialized experiences in high school. More targeted data collection methods could provide even greater insight into the dynamic workings of how racism functions and persists in schools.

### **Conclusion**

There is a plethora of evidence of pervasive injustice against Latina/o students in US schools: inequitable patterns of academic placement, distant relationships with non-Latina/o teachers, and institutional cultures that devalue Latina/o customs and norms (Cólón & Sánchez, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999); all patterns we were able to identify in our inquiry at Riley. What we found at Riley High School was an insulated structure of a permanence of racism, aided by interest convergence wherein the school admitted and accepted Latina/o students who contributed to the extra-curricular interests of the school. This façade of inclusivity led the way for colorblind discourses through which implicit racism was not named or acknowledged. While we see the potential for counterstories to emerge through Latinas/os' expressions of the positive values and dynamics of Latina/o families, students' abilities to challenge dominant, racist narratives did not reach the level of critical consciousness embodied in counterstories. To redress racism in schools like Riley, we believe that Latina/o counterstories must be fostered – in part by critical consciousness among educators who recognize the validity in such counterstories and who challenge racist structures, beliefs, and practices. Such efforts could make headway against the formidable structures and systems of inequity faced by Latinas/os in US high schools.



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