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## *Towards a Transformative Curriculum: Critical Resources in a Social Studies Classroom*

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## **Towards a Transformative Curriculum: Critical Resources in a Social Studies Classroom**

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In the social studies classroom, transforming the curriculum requires a re-examination of the very social contexts and frameworks we employ as educators. Accordingly, this study considers the relationship between the educational curriculum, identity, agency, and citizenship. Through critical resources (i.e., criticalities) learners explore power dynamics and examine how issues like sexism, race, and racism, contribute to patterns of social injustice (Hernandez & Dunlap, 2012). This engages learners through dialogue which integrates different perspectives and shapes new knowledge.

Pérez Huber (2009) contends that a curriculum challenging White ideology (i.e., Whiteness), delivers on a foundation built on a democratic and sustainable process. This helps raise students' critical consciousness through practices of critical self-reflection and decentering Whiteness (Valdes, 1996). The current curricular model, however, does not effectively engage learners in critical processes nor does it include the histories of oppressed people. Expanding the written record on race must then include the realities, experiences, and insights of marginalized voices (Valdes, 1996). Brown et al. (2017) assert that revisionist histories give a false impression that race (and racism) is a settled issue or imagined. Through a revision of history, however, an interpretation on "how race has operated socioculturally" is explored (p. 25).

Banner (2021) states that in relation to knowledge, history is not and has never been inert, certain, nor beyond interpretation. Rather, historical interpretation remains non-linear, fluid, and open to many meanings. An evaluation of dominant historical interpretation (i.e., revisionist history) seeks to recognize knowledge that has been disregarded and ignored in the past. In this manner, critical resources help displace and confront the narratives that make-up revisionist histories.

Since privilege determines what constitutes knowledge and how it is distributed within systems of education, criticalities which help transform the social studies classroom into an environment where students reflect on and feel empowered are crucial (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). As students engage in consciousness raising, they better connect how individual issues of social inequity exist within a much broader social context. Sosa-Provencio et al. (2018) explain how cultivating a critical consciousness shakes the foundations of a hegemonic curriculum built on white supremacist ideals. This positions students to deepen their awareness for the world around them and to potentially develop collective responses to social issues.

As layers of racialization intersect in education, they bring about new narratives, moving beyond uniformity. Composing an anti-racist curriculum becomes an active rejection of the institutional and structural forces which manifest in U.S. society and bring about racism (King & Chandler, 2016, p. 4). It is the social responsibility of the educational system then to instill democratic values that directly address how we can live together in the world (Schubert, 2017). This contributes to the development of students as intelligent, mindful, community centered citizens (Vickery, 2021). As such, this study considers the relationship between the educational curriculum, student identity, agency, and citizenship.

## **Theorizing through Critical Interpretations**

Understanding the role of historical context in interpretation, as well as the relevance of linguistic and unconscious elements of text, is what constitutes the basis for theorizing through critical resources. Disrupting the apartheid of knowledge helps students identify how certain knowledge has been discounted and delegitimized (Pérez Huber, 2009). Critical resources offer a standpoint that counters the dominant perspective, challenges outdated curricular models, and alters educational practices (Calderón et al., 2012).

### **Curricular Inclusion in a Social Studies Classroom**

Historically, the social studies curriculum has been situated within myth-making processes which give history its more definite shapes (Trouillot, 2015). Social studies educators are expected to center pedagogy on standardized assessments, memorization, and narratives which strengthen the core curriculum. This drives assimilationist nation building through its anglocentric tradition, ideals, and values “symbolically transferred as truth into books” (VanSledright, 2008, p. 115). This continued assimilation of student identities strips away cultural autonomy in support of ethnoracial divisiveness. For this reason, an examination of the past must be taught so that learners deconstruct dominant historical narratives, construct a critical interpretive lens, and acknowledge race and racism in their lives (Brown, et al., 2017).

The origins of the U.S. educational system are rooted in distorted histories, screening a world of contradiction through narrative fallacy (Ortiz, 2015). Accordingly, helping students acquire a sociopolitical consciousness requires an understanding on how race and racism have “operated in the historical arc of U.S. social relations (Brown et al., 2017, p. 23). As Anzaldúa (1990) explains, schools, as places that produce knowledge, exist as centers from which racism emanates. History is messy and contradictory, and the “history of the West is not retold in ways that bring forward the perspective of the world” (Trouillot, 2015, p. 110). Hence, forging a path towards new theorizing and negotiating a space for the recovery of racial-ethnic identities requires the use of a critical resources.

Seixas (1993) explains how schools have the power to shape meanings, drawing on interpretations which emerge within a larger setting. Following Yosso and Burciaga (2016), critical interpretations provide sanction for marginalized groups to re-write their place in history “in spite of and to spite efforts of historical erasure” (p. 3). The novel *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, for instance, constitutes a composite that can be triangulated within the broader social studies curriculum (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). As a “manifesto on behalf of an ethnic group” and community seeking a rightful share of power, this is both empowering and socially conscious. Menchú, a Quiche Indian woman from Guatemala, shares the experiences of her collective group fighting for the recognition of the Global South (Menchú & Burgos, 1985, pp. 147-148). Consequently, as a critique of dominant discourses this critical resource extends efforts to recognize how institutions alienate certain groups, while privileging others (Salinas & Reidel, 2007).

Working from within the contradictions of the master narrative becomes possible through a critical curriculum. By addressing issues related to the experiences of living in hybridity, in-between, and within a space of constant confusion, educators have the power to center on multiple intersecting identities (Anzaldúa, 1987). Growing up, I juggled these same contradictions from within multiple intersecting worlds; the constant pain and trauma of living a life in-between. This is the space where

I gained *conocimiento* (an awakening), and from where my borderland identity flows. Survival in this case meant forging a path in which I could create my own identity, one capable of communicating the realities, experiences, and values true to my body of lived experience (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 76).

## My Body of Lived Experience

### A Borderland Identity

At a very early age, I had a strong character and sense for what was fair and just. But there were also parts of who I am, the rebellious and liberal-minded side, that always made me feel like I didn't quite fit in with the traditional values of my Mexican culture. In truth, I had a stubborn will, constantly trying to mobilize my life on my own terms, no matter how unsuitable it was to others (Anzaldúa, 1987). I questioned my Catholic faith, was opinionated about the ways of the Mexican macho, and frequently found myself speaking out in contradiction of my elders. Yet, who I am now is not merely a product of my DNA, but also a direct result of an educational system that indoctrinated me early on with the values of the dominant White culture.

In reflecting on my many academic experiences, I recall my 11th grade U.S. History teacher Mr. Markley explaining to the class that "history was written by the winners." Those words have stuck with me ever since, although I interpret them differently now. I now understand how history has been rewritten, grounded in the interpretations of those who claimed victory. The way I learned about my community on the border and its history, was meant to force my conformity and allegiance to White American values.

The dominant historical narrative portrayed Mexicanos as savage, rebellious, and ignorant people (Paredes, 1958). These distortions have become salient features of legend, folklore, and stereotypes that profoundly affected how I learned about the history of the Rio Grande Valley and in how I came to view myself. As a Mexicana, society perceived me as a foreigner, my linguistic and cultural knowledge inconsequential in comparison to the Eurocentered culture and language I learned in school.

Through the practices of my teachers and the traditional curriculum I came to view the Valley as a place with little opportunity and where "the other" resides. With few positive representations of the community, I found it difficult to relate to or connect with the culture. It is that people form personal, emotional, affirmative attachments to the places that are meaningful to them (Semken et al., 2017), but how could I think of the Valley as a place with meaning and beauty if what I learned in school was based on misconstrued histories?

Accordingly, through the works of Américo Paredes and Gloria Anzaldúa, I gained an appreciation for the Rio Grande Valley. Their writings and portrayal of the borderlands existed in opposition to the fictionalized histories generated by the mainstream curriculum. Brannstrom and Neuman (2009) express how the Valley was portrayed as an unruly wilderness of barbarism, a space of turbulence, and ignorant superstitious character. These racist misrepresentations underline the 'Hispanophobia' that influenced my perspective growing up. In comparison, Paredes (1958) described, in *With a Pistol in His Hand*, the Valley's beautiful ecology, cultural wealth, close-knit families, cohesiveness, and a rich but complicated history. Paredes' writings specifically detailed how the space separating the people of the Rio Grande Valley constituted a line between two conflicting worlds. He wrote how a once peaceful, isolated community and the heart of the old Spanish province became lands occupied

by west-ward pushing Anglo American ‘pioneers’. He expressed how colonizers devastated the community when they arrived on the border, bringing about shameful things, and leaving death and destruction in their wake (Paredes, 1976; Valdez & Steiner, 1972). By branding Mexican people as lawless transgressors, Anglo invaders seized control of the territory.

Nevertheless, Aztlán, situated on the bank of the Nueces River, a body of water that today runs through present-day central Texas, is rightfully home to the indigenous people, my people (Gonzalez, 1969). Reclaiming the spirit of Aztlán, the homeland to so many indigenous communities, requires a space for what Anzaldúa coined “borderland theorizing.” As an action of resistance, working with and within not only physical spaces, but defining cultural and psycho-social ways of being, it seeks to obtain emancipation for the colonized identity (Freedman & Ball, 2004).

### **Borderland Theorizing as an Act of Resistance**

Life on the borderland is a “processes of many things, psychological, physical, and mental,” something which does not apply to one thing but many (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2000). For this reason, Anzaldúa (1987) conceptualized a space belonging to the people of the borderlands, a liminal space where a “juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized; they die and are born” again (p. xiii). The “in-between” represents a border culture constituting a third country, understood as both a geopolitical and a psychic space. The border, Anzaldúa described, is understood within the context of two worlds, merging to create a vague and undetermined space constructed by the emotional reminder of a vast and complicated past. Those living from within this complicated space exist in a place of chaos, trauma, and constant transition. The borderlands as theory makes people question the order of things, contests authority, challenges the social construct, and works against the institutional forces which marginalizes people of color, queer people, women, and other groups. Through borderland theorizing students critically examine the interconnections between identity and politics. This approach is not linear, meaning that it is construed in a hybrid way where multiple aspects merge. Accordingly, borderland theorizing supports an analysis of liminal spaces and the practices of transgression within an interconnected local and global context (Anzaldúa, 2000).

### **The Development of My Critical Consciousness**

It was during my first course as an undergraduate, at the University of Texas at Brownsville, where I learned the power of critical narrative and counter-story. What I recall most is how Professor Elsa Duarte Noboá informed my class about the true workings of the educational system. She spoke on her experiences as a Mexican American woman, she also detailed the systemic barriers she encountered in pursuit of her graduate degree and in academia. Her stories stood in contradiction to what textbooks claimed were Latinas lagging behind other groups due to cultural deficiencies (Crisp et al., 2015). What her dialogue revealed was new knowledge supporting my educational development and identity formation (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). In speaking on her experiences, she helped foster my critical consciousness, encouraging me to critique traditional norms, gender roles, practices, and the institutions which produce and preserve the ways of the dominant group (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Consequently, I sensed an awakening of my mind and spirit, and an awareness for the way in which the traditional curriculum marginalizes people of color and women.

## **Making Sense of the World through a Critical Curriculum**

Though a cultural shift has moved towards the democratization of culture and broadened the spectrum of educational materials that are available, marginalized people continue to yearn for a space to tell their stories (Flores, 2003; Rosaldo, 1994). In the state of Texas (and the U.S broadly), policymakers and political officials continue to bureaucratize education, restricting educator autonomy and scaling down the educational curriculum (Kohli et. al., 2015). Whereas the current curriculum backs an agenda built on standardized testing and Eurocentered knowledge, a critical curriculum supports a reconfiguration of Western discourses. This transforms student thinking so that learners acknowledge multiple perspectives, recognize the voice of oppressed people, and connect past occurrences to the present (Castro, 2010). A critical curricular model supports a culturally relevant pedagogy, helping learners make sense of the world, fostering critical reflection and social consciousness. This supports students in the construction of new knowledge, in negotiating a space for their hybrid identities, and as a place to navigate social toxicity found in and out of schools (Pour-Khorshid, 2018).

## **Teaching and its Bearing on Identity**

Teaching requires patience and an open-ended curriculum in crossing cultures and finding intersections of lived experience (Jupp, 2013). As a social studies educator, I've confronted several instances where I am reminded that my purpose is to work in support of state expectations and the core curriculum. The more time I've spent in education, the more affected I've become by the academic inequality, unjust policies, micro-management, and lack of a critically conscious curriculum. Balancing my place as a purveyor of the dominant curriculum, along with my role as a critical pedagogue, is oftentimes an unbearable struggle.

I've learned that the purposeful engagement of the critical pedagogue is a threat to the business-as-usual work of education. Invoking a critical curriculum in the classroom requires finding a point of entry in the "cracks" (Anzaldúa, 1987). It necessitates a discussion where my students can engage critically, challenge master narratives, and confront traditional discourses. Critical resources have helped deliver on a more humanizing education, creating an opportunity for my students to reflect upon their own meanings and understandings (Guajardo, et al., 2019).

During my first-year teaching Mexican American Studies I remember speaking directly to my curriculum specialist. He explained that the course was devised as a supplementary discipline to standardized US history curriculum. In other words, I was positioned to align lessons in support of a high-stakes tested subject. On another occasion, he explained to me that although it was a M.A.S course, US history should always be at the forefront. In our curriculum writing meetings he reminded me that the class should not be taught from too much of a progressive/liberal space, so no critical race theory. I remember these conversations vividly because in these moments I realized that my role was to appease the mandates of a conservative curriculum and to drive home the ideals of high-stakes testing.

I was disappointed and discouraged, but I also recognized that if my students were going to make sense of the world, to engage critically and become civically responsible humans, then it was up to me to help instill a more democratic citizenship education in them (Castro & Knowles, 2017). Castro and Knowles (2017) contend that addressing political activism in the social studies classroom

advocates for the learner as a social being, and aids in their consideration for the social issues afflicting the world. Guiding learners as creators of knowledge, however, cannot take place if, as their teacher, I am not committed to my own self-reflexive identity (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Critically reflecting on my own moments in education, I have thought deeply about my perspectives, beliefs and values, which has helped me create a more transformative and emancipatory learning experience for my students.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The following frameworks delink the educational curriculum from a more deeply colonialist, Western/Eurocentric perspective: 1) Critical Race Theory, 2) Critical Curriculum Theory, and 3) Itinerant Curriculum Theory. Consequently, these theoretical frameworks prompt a critique on how best to provide an equitable and sustainable education through critical resources (Paraskeva, 2016).

#### **Critical Race Theory**

Since the 1970's Critical Race Theory has been utilized as a framework in analyzing race in education (Delgado Bernal, 2002). CRT attends to the multiple positionalities of historically marginalized groups, and explores the intersections of race, racism, power, and their impact on subjugated communities (Delgado, 2014). This connects certain social processes and inequities to the exclusion of certain groups. Accordingly, Delgado Bernal (2002) explains how critical frameworks reveal multidimensional identities by promoting conversations about racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of marginality. As an activist approach, this situates the individual in communion with an experience centered on oppression, brutality, and injustice. Consequently, as an action of resistance and survivance, critical frameworks act in the face of historical and present-day exploitative interpretations. Pointing out these elements rationalizes how a more critical perspective in the social studies classroom serves as an approach to political activism.

Freire (2005) argues how the banking model of education contributes to an oppressive system which stifles student creativity and limits teacher autonomy. His work inspires a critical curriculum centered on human agency and that which recasts the educator as a critical pedagogue. Through a critical lens, the social studies classroom transforms educators into intellectuals who combine scholarly reflection and practice, in the service of educating their students in becoming more thoughtful, active citizens (Giroux, 1985). Hence, critical traditions best evaluate and critique the contemporary structures, which perpetuate, exclude, silence, and alienate marginalized communities (Morales, 2015). In this way, a critically centered curriculum provides a helpful heuristic and problem-solving approach for educators committed to providing a more analytical exploration (Mills & Gay, 2019).

#### **Re-envisioning History through Counternarratives**

In expanding on sociopolitical consciousness, teachers have the power to deepen the intricacies and contradictions of race and history (Ortiz, 2018). Re-envisioning history so that it represents every community opens a window towards a broader evaluation of the truth. Hence, counternarratives empower and humanize in their representation of new visions, voices, and in delivering new narratives. The stories of repressed communities, those whose voices have been historically silenced and omitted, have the power to disrupt traditional storytelling. Except that counternarratives do not arise from shaping one monolithic story after another, rather this is achieved through the expression

of diverse interpretations (Heath, 2018). In the classroom, this critical approach promotes collaborative knowledge and the examination of taken-for-granted truths that shape individual assumptions and actions.

### **Curriculum Theory and the Problem of Education**

Curriculum theory is related to the prescribed content of schooling, but also concerns itself with connected issues such as the consequences of teaching a traditional curriculum. As a result, the current educational model constrains educators as critical change agents capable of and responsible for addressing the injustices of their communities (Duncan-Andrade, 2005). Unfortunately, culturally conservative legislation and neoliberal educational reforms have propelled curricular management and bureaucratically systemized education so that the educational machine continues to run. Thus, educational policy and the curriculum require a shared agenda in support of an inclusive and equitable education.

Magill and Blevins (2020) suggest that in most social studies classrooms the “exchange of critical perspectives remains purely academic” with very few educators employing transformational critical dialogue as an approach towards democracy, agency, and citizenship (p. 2). They argue then, that transforming the educational curriculum entails a dialogical approach that supports consciousness raising. Social studies educators have the power to transform the learner into civically responsible humans, and to engage in critical praxis for the improvement of a more just society. The role and responsibility of the social studies teacher should be that of an activist, to challenge the hegemony and foster student affiliation for community and society (Montaño et al., 2002).

The current social studies curriculum must align not only to meet state standards, but the needs of an evolving society. The system must transform as a model dedicated to critical thinking and civic engagement, rather than an organization that backs a business model. De Lissovoy (2013) argues how the regime of accountability has moved education towards “an extensive network of mandated procedures and a ubiquitous culture of surveillance from which there appears no escape” (p. 427). Freire (2018) contends that our educational institutions work towards acts of domination rather than acts of freedom. In this way, the institution centers education on the ideals of capitalism, preparing students for the workforce rather than as actively engaged citizens.

### **Expanding Beyond Individualism**

The Global North and Westernized perspectives of individualism approach thinking and being based on individual needs. The discourses of neoliberalism advocates for government policies, practices, and standards which prioritize the individual over the collective. Moving beyond this perspective requires a critical approach in challenging the structurally rooted social conditions that constrain marginalized groups (Gerlach et al., 2018). Davies and Bansel (2018) argue that as individuals we have been seduced by our own perceived powers of freedom and have therefore let go of significant collective powers at a heavy cost to women, people of color and other communities. So, because academic institutions have yet to address inadequate practice and policies, the current educational model continues to uphold and reproduce “the structural arrangement that creates and sustains injustice and inequity” (Davies & Bansel, 2018, p. 2).



## **An Itinerant Curriculum Model**

An itinerant curriculum is a call for justice, especially within the formation of what content is taught in schools. The educational system's ongoing epistemicide of non-Western knowledges signals a systematic repression of history and the "eugenic politics and praxis perpetrated by Western ideological apparatuses" (Paraskeva, 2016, p. 200). A more critical curriculum helps students in the creation of their consciousness and identity, so that they better understand the power dynamics that control the social order. Through critical interpretations, the social studies classroom transforms so that problem-solving and meaningful decision processes, with a specific focus on socio-political contexts, endure (Ross et al., 2013). Anzaldúa (1987) maintains that the danger of not using critical perspectives lies in denying the connection between the individual's personal experience and view of the world to contemporary issues of social justice.

## **Reconfiguring the Curriculum**

### **The Erasure of Gender and Race**

An effective teacher understands that racism is an endemic facet of U.S. society that has profoundly shaped the lives of people within it and that it is deeply rooted in the history of U.S. and Western culture (Ifthikar & Museus, 2018). In the Western world, the majority leverage their Whiteness and gender as a means of claiming cultural, historical, and intellectual property. As a Mexican American woman, my race and gender are used as vehicles to allocate, and deny me my power, knowledge, and basic human rights (Pérez Huber, 2009). Lipsitz (1995) argues how since colonial times efforts towards the creation of a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans have culminated in conscious and deliberate actions of institutionalized group identity within the United States. Since women of color have systematically been excluded from traditional texts on both race and gender, deconstructing common historical narratives on the path towards a more inclusive curriculum is necessary. Accordingly, employing race and gender as an analytical tool supports students in connecting injustice to power and privilege (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995).

In the United States, people of color and women have historically been treated as second class citizens who find only humiliation and solitude (Marcos, 2001). Marginality has existed for centuries, with discrimination and exploitation forcing women, people of color, queer, and other subjugated communities to be viewed as outcasts and invaders (Takaki, 1998). In any society it is the politics of race, class and gender which determine what is valued and known (Collins, 2006). In the United States knowledge and what we learn has historically centered on those who own the intellectual property. As it relates to the knowledge of suppressed groups, it is through the telling and retelling of their stories that we construct a more realistic account of who we are as Americans (Takaki, 1998). In the social studies classroom, infusing counter-storytelling centers on the values, preconceptions and beliefs that inform the experiences of these groups.

### **Reconfiguring the Curriculum through Feminist Literature**

Critical Race Feminism (CRF) differs from other tenets of CRT in that it offers critical details of how race and class relate to gender in a variety of contexts (Wing, 1997). As an approach to these conditions, CRF considers circumstances through multi-intersecting identities and multiplicative

praxis. This reveals distinctive experiences and contests the oppressive structures and practices that embody educational experience (Pérez Huber, 2010; Wing, 2016).

Espinosa-Dulanto (2018) explains how “status defines social space and opportunities, but most importantly restricts basic human rights and creates an under-class” (p. 177). Hence, the legacy of colonialism has contributed to an uneven distribution and the loss of knowledge. In creating democracy in action, the curriculum must then align with a more transformative vision that carries us forward, not backward.

bell hooks (1989) argues how intellectual property is controlled by the patriarchy and Whites. The voices of women and young girls are constrained, forbidden from speaking out, their stories serving as a threatening political act that challenges the domination of women. The critical novel, *Let me Speak!* by Barrios De Chungara and Viezzer (1978) shares the narratives of a Bolivian mother, wife, and militant female leader. This testimony is a narrative on the exploitation of women and a portrayal of how the “liberation of women is fundamentally linked to the socio-economic, political, and cultural liberation of [all] people” (p. 9). Likewise, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* expresses the marginalization of Chinese women and presents an authentic retelling of the immigrant experience. Her memoir challenges patriarchal standards, contradicts sexist ideologies, and contests racist stereotypes. As a critical resource, her memoir reveals the isolation that exists for most immigrant groups, the patriarchal dominance that seeks to silence the voices of Chinese women, and aids in the recovery of her own identity. Consequently, critical works examine multiple forms of oppression and the many intersecting factors that mediate the educational experiences of women of color (Pérez Huber, 2010).

### **Teaching through a Critical Curriculum**

As I have shared, my teachers seldom discussed the history of my border community, and when they did, they only upheld negative depictions of the Rio Grande Valley. This made it very difficult to gain an affiliation for my community and to embrace who I was. It also caused some deep-seated conflict and shame, and I entered the state of *nepantla*, (Anzaldúa, 1987) a liminal space of struggle and confusion. For a long time, I only ever rejected my Mexican culture, hence my space within the educational sphere was solidified. As a Mexican immigrant from the borderlands, I was a foreigner, unworthy of opportunity, or respect.

Dejected by these negative representations and shamed by the history of my people, I was eager to escape. You see, I was being manipulated by a series of myths, those which served the interests of the White class, the patriarchy and those with privilege (Freire, 2020). As I’ve embarked on these reflective moments, I now question issues of power and oppression. I understand that the educational system here in the United States has feigned aspects of my history as a means of upholding the dominant knowledge (Berry, 2010).

As an educator, I hope to provide my students the learning experience I obtained from Professor Elsa Duarte Nobóa. She encouraged me to think “outside the box” about the issues which most effect people of color. When I began teaching, I vowed to move toward this same process with my learners. I swore to approach teaching through critical thinking and to construct a curriculum where students would confront the intervening systems that oppress them. Within my time, I have done my best to create a space centered on agency, citizenship, activism, and towards the creation of a better society.

In my high school social studies classroom, I teach 9th through 12th grade students. These include: 1) at-risk students, 2) dual level learners, 3) honors and advanced placement students, 4) special education students, and 5) English language learners. Since my start almost fifteen years ago, I've taught several disciplines, from World Geography to Sociology to Mexican American Studies. In that time, I've gained enough experience to understand that as a social studies teacher my role exists as a critical educator, that of a dreamer and doer (Montaño et al., 2002). That is, I prompt my students to transcend mere facts in recognizing how "constraints prevent them from changing the world" (Giroux, 2016, p. 163). Above all else, applying a critical lens in my classroom begins with an understanding that what I am trying to construct is a sense of community. In the section below, I delve into my integration of strategies toward a more critical curriculum. These strategies are focused on Mexican American Studies and Dual Sociology courses but are adaptable to any social studies discipline.

### **Teaching for a Transformative Education through 'Yo Soy Joaquin'**

My M.A.S. classes make-up a blended environment where I have a mix of 9th-12th grade students and multiple student populations (e.g., English learners, students in Advanced Placement classes, students with disabilities). During our unit on Chicano Activism, I have the students from each of my M.A.S. classes work cooperatively to examine excerpts from Corky Gonzales' poem "Yo Soy Joaquin." Written in 1967, this poem references many historical events and the people that have shaped the Mexican American experience/history. The poem speaks directly to the struggles of the Chicano/Mexicano/Latinx people and their struggle in gaining equality and opportunity. Gonzales expresses the constant conflict, contradiction, and feelings of 'otherness' that involve being Mexicano/a in the United States.

At the onset, I place students in groups of three and provide each group a different excerpt from the poem "Yo Soy Joaquin." In their groups, students are told to analyze this passage, highlighting two historical events and/or people that are mentioned in this section of the poem. They are asked to consider the following questions: 1) Why might Corky Gonzales have included these historical references in his poem? 2) What historical relevance do these events or individuals have within the larger context of the struggle for Mexican American/Chicano/Latinx rights? and 3) What do you think is Gonzales' overall purpose in the creation of this poem? Lastly, they are asked to reflect on what they've read, and whether any pending inquiries remain.

After students complete their research and respond to these questions in their group, they will present their findings to the class. They are expected to not only share their responses to the questions, but to detail their section of the poem, and to discuss the significance of the two historical references they researched. Giroux (2016) explains how in the social studies classroom "modes of reasoning, interpretation, and inquiry develop a critical capacity to the degree that [students] pay attention to the flow of history" (p. 164).

Once this portion of the activity is completed, I engage learners in a complete reading of the poem "Yo Soy Joaquin" (I use an audio recording of the reading). Throughout this reading, I stop and discuss certain sections of the poem, making connections with what the students shared with the whole class, especially the historical references and/or people. At the conclusion of this activity, students journal independently in their notebook in response to the three following prompts: 1) How does "Yo Soy Joaquin" make you feel? 2) What does this poem say about the Mexican

American cause/experience? and 3) Are there ever moments where you want to reject aspects of your culture or family? Why or why not?

bell hooks (1989) explains that writing as a way of capturing voice helps the individual express sorrow, pain, inquiry, and reflection. Reflective journaling, as a process of this activity, serves as a teaching tool by which students examine and record their thoughts. In this way, learners become more aware of themselves, expressing their feelings, and gaining a better understanding for the processes that shape identity (Kessler & Lund, 2004). In many ways journaling leads students through the process of *conocimiento*, a practice that provides a space where learners can share their thoughts or concerns, a place to explore feelings that trigger intense emotions for conceptualizing perspective (Solis & Gordon, 2020). Examining the social processes that uphold the marginality of the Mexican American people, students are led to question and critique institutional power structures. With the students' permission, I have included some of the journal reflections. In keeping with their privacy, I have used pseudonyms:

Javier explained: *I've never understood the Chicano movement. I never heard of it, but I get it now it was its own thing, people fighting for the rights of the Mexican American people. I wonder why we haven't learned about it before. The poem made me understand that the Mexican people have their own history, but that we don't really learn much about it. idk why. We need to learn more its important. And yeah, I have wanted to reject parts of my culture, especially when it's not like everyone else's.*

Likewise, Veronica says: *I felt sad and angry when I read the poem with my group. The poem is saying that Mexican Americans have been a part of wars and history and that they don't get treated right. Corky says, "the Mestizo must yet overcome" and that the "country has placed a different weight" on them and that the land is theirs. It just makes me think how unfair things are for our people even today. Things haven't changed and its 2022.*

Vanessa reflected by writing: *This poem makes me proud. Even though its depressing. Just the way he talks about being Mexican and how we work hard, and that we aren't treated the same as other types of people. It also makes me mad that the Mexican people have had a hard time. My grandparents are from Mexico and they came here and it was hard but me I have it easier because of them.*

The critical interpretation of *Yo Soy Joaquin* challenged my students' notions of equality and justice, leading to their consciousness raising. It helped them process the way certain groups are viewed, the way they learn about history and what is valuable and what isn't. This classroom activity provides an excellent opportunity to engage students in thinking analytically about how dominant historical narratives have repressed aspects of their history. This forges new understandings and appreciations for their identity as students of color.

### **Teaching About Race Through 'They Called Us Enemy'**

Creating a space to discuss race and racism in the classroom is a complex and complicated process. At a time when we continue to house children and their families in detention centers, the reading of George Takei's *They Called Us Enemy* brings about an opportunity to engage learners in an awareness of similar happenings in present-day.

Often considered the model minority, further examination into Asian communities reveals an exclusionary past and a history that has long been overlooked (Luo, 2021). Through Asian CRT

(AsianCrit), we can examine the impact of colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and xenophobic attacks against Asian communities (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). Rodriguez (2020) expresses how AsianCrit helps “reveal the invisibility of Asian Americans within the curriculum and educational narrative” (p. 10). Theorizing in this way advances the histories of oppressed communities within an educational setting.

To understand the Sociology of race, my students read and examine several resources throughout the semester. In this section, I will share several sample activities related to the graphic novel, *They Called Us Enemy*. I begin this unit by employing a digital whiteboard (which helps keep all responses anonymous). Here, students are asked to type out and share a post-it note with their responses to the following questions: 1) What does it mean to be a citizen of the United States? 2) What rights, protections, and/or privileges do United States citizens have? And 3) What is privilege?

Once they have posted their responses to the digital whiteboard, I read through some of these responses, and we hold a brief class discussion. This process helps students explore the concept of citizenship as it relates to people in the United States. It also helps them think through their own thoughts regarding privilege and make connections to their own experiences.

Following this activity, students will begin their reading of *They Called Us Enemy*. As they read along, they will also be required to complete a daily journal log. In their journal they are asked to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and what they’re learning about the internment of Japanese Americans from the reading. Hubbs and Brand (2005) contend how reflection, as a significant aspect in experiential learning, leads to purposeful and effective education.

As a second strategy of this unit students work in partners in the completion of several open-ended questions regarding Participatory Democracy. They discuss as a group and then write their responses to the following prompts: 1) What do you think George’s father means when he says, “our democracy is a participatory democracy?” 2) Do you all agree or disagree that American democracy is a participatory democracy? Why or why not? 3) Why is it important for individuals to speak out against injustice? 4) Give an example of an occurrence that you have witnessed, experienced, or heard about when an idea was formed about someone based on a stereotype? and 5) Based on your reading do you believe that privilege and racism, like what George described, still exists in the U.S. today? Why or why not? While these responses will be shared on their Participatory Democracy sheet, students are informed that they do not have to share out with the entire class; this is optional.

As a final component to the unit on the Sociology of race, I ask students to independently analyze several primary source documents related to the internment of Japanese Americans (images and news articles from the 1940’s). Students are asked to consider: 1) Why the American government forced Japanese Americans from their homes and into internment camps simply because of race? and 2) Why would the rest of the country allow this to happen? 3) Provide explicit or implied evidence given from the articles/images for the roundups. 4) Give clues from the article/images that reveal bias or prejudice against Asian Americans. 5) Identify whether the article includes the voices/perspectives/points of view of Japanese Americans, and 6) whether the article and/or image’s message might have differed if their perspective was included? If so, then how?

The following are some of the responses I gathered, pseudonyms are used:

Larissa had this to say: *If the Japanese experience was shared it would have been more positive, so it wouldn't have been all stereotypes or negative. There is always two opinions to what really happens.*

Michael shared: *I think the country and people allowed them to arrest the Japanese people because they were scared, but it was still wrong. They were U.S. citizens not from Japan, so I don't get how come they weren't allowed to be free. It's like the centers that are holding the small children today, people shouldn't be treated that way, it's wrong. I feel bad, especially for George as a kid, and the little kids stuck in these places, I know I would be scared.*

Brandon said: *I think that if there were different voices, like of those of the Japanese people then we would have gotten a different opinion. Americans let it happen because they were taught to believe that Japanese people were bad. I mean the way the article describes the Japanese as traitors and communists, it's like brainwashing.*

Through reflective journaling and other engagement activities students worked through their own experiences and explored their sentiments (Kessler & Lunds, 2004). With the graphic novel *They Called Us Enemy* at the forefront, students thought critically about race and racism. Most significantly they considered the consequences of xenophobia, and how discrimination culminates in instances where people of color are persecuted.

### **Delivering on a Curriculum Centered on Critical Literary Resources**

“Education is a battleground between, on the one hand, modern/colonial schooling to maintain the core-curriculum and, on the other, decolonial education/pedagogy delinking from the core-curriculum” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 241). Students are consistently indoctrinated within the Westernized curriculum, their cultural identities wiped out in favor of conformist consumer identities. Monopolizing these perspectives only preserves the Eurocentered systems of education, further controlling who students are.

The use of critical interpretations delivers the “bigger picture,” hence we are not all in the same place, nor are we affected by experiences in the same way. Stories that contradict hegemonic narratives and focus on forgotten experiences, realities, tragedies, hopes, and dreams culminate in liberatory identities (Episnosa-Dulanto, 2018). In a truly progressive social studies classroom, the curriculum embraces a space where critical thinking, awareness and active inquiry take place. Hence, at its best, critical traditions promote the formation of identity, pursue the creation of knowledge, and recognize the role that educators play in transforming learning. Counts (1932) asserts that to become an authentic institution, education must

...emancipate itself from the influence of [the dominant curriculum], face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relation with the community, develop [a] realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare, fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny, and become somewhat less frightened than it is today at the bogeys of imposition and indoctrination. (p. 4)

Through critical resources students address complex issues and work through experiences to support possibilities for current consciousness and future civic engagement. Speaking out against the distorted perspectives of the mainstream curriculum and truly transforming the social studies

classroom achieves an understanding of the world in terms of its contradictions. Decentering the social studies curriculum empowers the learner's level of engagement, so that they have access to narratives that are both personal and collective. In this way, learners examine the aspects which seek to destroy their ways of being, so that they may recover personal power. This expands beyond traditional notions of social studies and supports learners in their construction of identity within the broader social world.

In an era of social justice, reclaiming power as an act of achieving equity, agency, and citizenship is critical. For the marginalized, institutional forces have given a fixed group of people all the power and rendered 'the other' subordinate. As an empowering act for those who exist under multiple forms of marginality and oppression, critical theorizing aids in recovering lost and stolen knowledge. Hence, a critical curriculum has the power to transform the social studies classroom so that students examine, critique, and challenge the 'American values' of justice and equality (Ross et al., 2013). In civically engaging students so they are active and supportive in their communities, teachers help construct a world not in opposition to, but in contribution to political, social, and institutional equity.

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