



Working from Within: Chicana and Chicano Activist Educators in Whitestream Schools

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Title: Working from Within: Chicana and Chicano Activist Educators in Whitestream Schools
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As the United States prepares to undergo a census count, new figures are likely to validate estimates that show drastic demographic changes within its borders with disproportionate increases in the population of non-Whites. These population changes have not gone unnoticed, and have elicited a variety of responses from xenophobic and nativist groups alike. Recent examples reflecting negative and damaging sentiments include the anti-immigrant bill (HR 4437) proposed by Wisconsin congressman James Sensenbrenner in 2005, as well as current attempts by conservative state legislators in Arizona. These legislators have introduced two separate bills that, if passed, would eliminate Ethnic Studies programs in the K-12 public educational system, and deny non-citizen students access to public education. Attacks by cultural conservatives upon Raza and Ethnic Studies have focused on how such programs supposedly encourage “ethnic chauvinism” that are “harmful and dysfunctional” to students. The mischaracterization of Ethnic/Chican@¹ studies programs ignores the historic racist and unequal treatment that

Chican@s experience in schools, and the “subtractive” (Valenzuela, 1999) aspects of whitemstream² schooling that seek to eliminate students’ Mexican identity (San Miguel, 2001; Valencia, 2002).

Luis Urrieta Jr.’s *Working from Within* critically explores the important role that Chican@ social circles, usually in colleges and universities, have played in shaping the Chican@ identity formation of Mexican-American students. He conceptualizes variations in Chican@ spaces for reinterpreting worldviews and challenging hegemonic whitemstream schooling through activism. Through the life histories of Chican@ activist educators, Urrieta explores the “creative and subversive ways” they create democratic spaces for students of color within whitemstream schools. He defines Chican@ activists as “people with a critical literacy of the world who understood the issues affecting not only raza³ but also all oppressed people” who possess a “sense of urgency to act upon the world in support of, and for the educational rights of, the communities they felt committed to” (p. 24). Urrieta’s own biographical sketch serves as a template of how other Chican@s’ identity development and activism were manifested in hopes of creating greater social equality.

Born in the community of East Los Angeles to Mexican immigrants, Urrieta narrates the many challenges his working-class family endured to survive. One of the few lucky Latin@ students in school to be “positioned” as smart, he accepted the label uncritically and thrived. Though his parents had less than an elementary education and limited knowledge of the U.S. educational system, they instilled in Urrieta and his siblings a strong work ethic. Although employed at a very young age to assist his family financially, he became the first in his family to graduate from high school. Similar to other Mexican Americans from his cohort, his time at the university was one of exposure to more critical perspectives. He, therefore, undergoes an identity shift and becomes Chican@. Prompted by this identity shift, Urrieta “gives back” and becomes a social studies language arts teacher in Los Angeles at one of the poorest elementary schools in the area. His explicit goal was to empower and motivate the youth. After several years of teaching and the completion of a master’s degree, Urrieta continued on to earn a Ph.D. These questions around identity, activism, and transformation are the impetus for his research and writing *Working from Within*.

The strength of Urrieta’s work lies in his conceptual and methodological approach. Relying primarily on life histories and ethnographic interviews, he focuses on the negotiation of identity and commitment to a Chican@ worldview when examining the self reported practices of activist educators. He selects twenty-four, self-identified, Chican@ activist participants equally representing four groups and gender. The groups consist of: undergrads that were planning to go into K-12 teaching; K-12 teachers; graduate students in education; and professors in schools of education. The general focus of his study accounts for three key areas: Chican@ activists’ identity production; their agency as activists; and how they managed to negotiate change within whitemstream

schools (p. 8). Urrieta presents eight case studies to highlight the “multiplicity, creativity, and variety” of the participants’ work and their “dedication for change and social justice” (p. 14).

A key finding in the study, and a critical factor accounting for the variability in academic achievement of Mexican Americans in general (Conchas, 2006), is that most participants benefited from being positioned as “smart” students by their teachers in whitestream schools. They were separated into honors or AP “spaces,” gaining a self-awareness of their positioning which leveraged certain forms of power and privilege in their “figured worlds.” Urrieta uses Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain’s (1998) concept of figured worlds to mean socially produced, culturally constituted activities, “where people come to conceptually and materially/procedurally produce (perform) new self understandings” (pp. 28-29). Unfortunately, their privileged status within these “smart” spaces came at the expense of a physical and social distancing from other Latin@ students. This led to internalized notions of meritocracy all while subscribing to “negative conceptions of their own people” (p. 38). Despite the broad age range of participants (pp. 19-57), they all experienced similar K-12 whitestream schooling practices. These practices consisted of invisibility in the curriculum, uncritical portrayals relying on stereotypes, or negative and hostile portrayals implicitly channeling “the message that Mexican Americans were less or not [as] important” (p. 64). As an antidote to combat the painful effects of whitestream schooling, Urrieta prescribes population parity for students in “coveted spaces.”⁴ He also prescribes for the serious implementation of a “critical anti-racist curricula” that “examine[s] the United States’ troubling historical experience with race and other ‘isms’ and our current unresolved problems with them” (p. 67).

For most of the Mexican-Americans in this study, their production of Chican@ identities was a consequence of their exposure to the local figured worlds of Chican@ activism, usually in colleges and universities. These figured worlds consisted of the epistemological diversity experienced in Ethnic/Chican@ studies courses, involvement in ethnic student organizations, mentorship received through peer groups, and work related training with diverse student populations. Urrieta argues that for Chican@s, this exposure resulted in a reanalysis of their past experiences through more critical racialized⁵ perspectives where they “develop[ed] new understandings of themselves” or a critical consciousness (Freire, 1973), where they sought to fight for social change.

Urrieta found his participants using the metaphor of “playing the game” and “selling out” when negotiating within mainstream school practices. To be victorious at playing the game meant making gains “towards social justice and change,” whereas to be defeated consisted of losing hope and uncritically participating within the system. Examples of creating change by participants (even if at times minimal) varied from taking leadership roles on campus, raising consciousness of students by teachers, helping change language policy at the national level, to promoting cultural awareness. Facing the prospects of an

increasing Latin@ population majority, Urrieta rightfully calls for the end of whitestream schooling. He suggests that the best interests of an aging and changing U.S. population lie in sharing power and democratizing schooling.

Urrieta's book will be of value to student teachers and educators interested in the schooling experiences of Mexican-American students in whitestream schools, and the many challenges they face. We concur with the author's recommendations for colleges of education to actively seek and recruit future teachers of color from ethnic and Chican@ studies departments, and for pre-service teachers to enroll in ethnic studies courses. These recommendations make sense, as the United States faces major demographic changes and schools become increasingly more diverse. *Working from Within* is highly readable and takes us one step closer to challenging the nation to promote democratic schooling practices for all.

Notes

1. We utilize the term Chican@ instead of the terms Chicana/Chicano, in keeping with contemporary Latin American feminist practices.
2. Urrieta builds on the work of Grande (2000) and Denis (1997) and defines "whitestream schools" as "all schools from kindergarten through graduate school and to the official and unofficial texts used in U.S. schools that are founded on the practices, principles, morals, and values of white supremacy and that highlight the history of white Anglo-American culture. Whitestream indoctrination or the teaching (either formally or informally) that white supremacy is normal in whitestream schools is not exclusively the work of whites. Any person, including people of color, actively promoting or upholding white models as the goal or standard is also involved in whitestreaming" (p. 181).
3. Urrieta is careful to clarify that the term Raza, "contrary to most whitestream analyses of the term, does not mean 'race' in the literal sense of what race means in the U.S. white supremacist context. Raza connotes a people with a similar social, cultural, and historical experience with oppression...and alludes to the solidarity that exists between people who are the products of local and enduring struggles, and thus they respond with intensity to these intense struggles (Brayboy, 2005)" (p. 186).
4. In defining population parity Urrieta argues, "that all designated categories of students in school reflect a parallel percentage with the population" (pp. 66-67). For those from privileged background "equality generally sounds great, until they are asked to give something up to make things equitable, like their child's slot for AP Calculus.
5. For Chican@s, Urrieta argues that they also experienced a transformation in the way they viewed issues of gender and sexuality.

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