Race & Racismo: Inviting the Voice of Mexican Immigrant Families

Kylie P. Dotson-Blake
East Carolina University

Dotson-Blake, Kylie P. is an assistant professor at East Carolina University. Her research focuses on the development of culturally inclusive family-school-community partnerships with a specific focus on Latino families. She has conducted research in the US and Mexico.

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Rarely are public school students in the United States (US) taught about Mendez vs. Westminster, a case that set a vital precedent for Brown vs. Board of Education by ending 100 years of school segregation in California's public schools seven years prior to the Brown decision (Wollenberg, 1976). The exclusion of this case in the discourse concerning race and education is indicative of a continued silencing of the Latino voice. Research sharing the stories of Latina/o families is necessary for the development of comprehensive awareness of the role of race and racism in family-school-community partnerships. Thus, this paper seeks to share stories of Mexican immigrant parents and the community professionals and educators who work with them in hopes of contributing to the professional understanding of this complex relationship.

These stories were gathered through a series of focus groups and individual interviews involving parents who had immigrated to the US from Veracruz, Mexico, a community

service professional who served the families and the school counselor and educators who worked at the children's school in the US (Dotson-Blake, 2006). The parent, educator and community service professional interviews were conducted independently of one another.

To explore the impact of race and racism on participation in family-school-community partnerships, critical race theory (CRT) was used as a lens for analysis. CRT posits that "racism is ordinary, not aberrational—"normal science," the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Race is viewed as socially constructed and as such binds the experiences of individuals and groups with their racial and cultural position within society (Lopez, 2004). The centrality of race in our society as a force that divides groups and ascribes power and rewards continues to remain as pertinent and prominent today as it was in 1903 when W.E.B. DuBois avowed that the defining issue of the 20 th century would prove to be the color line (DuBois, 1903). Furthermore, as long as discourse concerning the impact of racism on the experiences of Mexican immigrant families continues to be marginalized and muted in favor of discussions of cultural deficits, inequality of partnership access will persist.

A Discourse of Deficits

Deficiency theories have been used throughout history to situate the causality of marginalization within minority populations (Barrera, 1997). Cultural deficiency theories conceptualize culturally bound characteristics, including interdependency, language, and an internal present-focus, as deficiencies that manifest as academic failure for Latinos (Barrera, 1997). Out of these deficiency theories has grown the deficit hypothesis (Deyhle, 1995), which espouses that students are evaluated in public education by characteristics they do *not* have rather than by the strengths they possess. Thus, Mexican immigrant students are penalized for characteristics they lack, including English language proficiency, middle-class European American values and financial stability. Strengths dominant in Mexican culture, including interdependency, familismo and simpatía are devalued. The disconnect between the culture regarded as appropriate in the classroom and the home results in cultural conflicts (Espinoza-Herold, 2003) that serve to further isolate and marginalize Mexican immigrant families.

Initially, the language barrier superseded all other aspects of the educators' discussion of Mexican immigrant parents' involvement in family-school-community partnerships. Every question presented was met with assertions of the difficulty of overcoming the language barrier. By placing the blame for disconnects between home, school and community on language, "the burden of failure" (Nunez, 1999) was situated squarely in the deficiency of the Mexican immigrant culture. The Mexican immigrant population was accused of not making greater efforts to be able to work successfully with the schools and the school was excused from working to develop connections with these families. One educator stated

> *And I think if they had that desire for the partnership it would be there. I really do, because I know like with the ESL teacher, they've offered free courses to teach English to Spanish speaking parents and they had like one person show up* . (Rita-Educator).

Martha, the Community Professional, further explained parents are often assigned the onus of responsibility for making the partnership work.

> *I know what that teacher's thinking was, and she told me, 'If they are going to come here it is their responsibility to learn English', and not her responsibility at all that she try to work through this* (Martha-Community Professional)

She linked this assertion with an overarching sense of apathy, stating, "And she was more blunt with it than others, though I never really sensed that it was an issue with them, if the kids get it they get it, if they don't, they don't, if the parents show up they do, if they don't, they don't." She continued to express her frustrations with the institution's "not our problem" policy. "Right, it wasn't something they saw as a priority to work through. …"
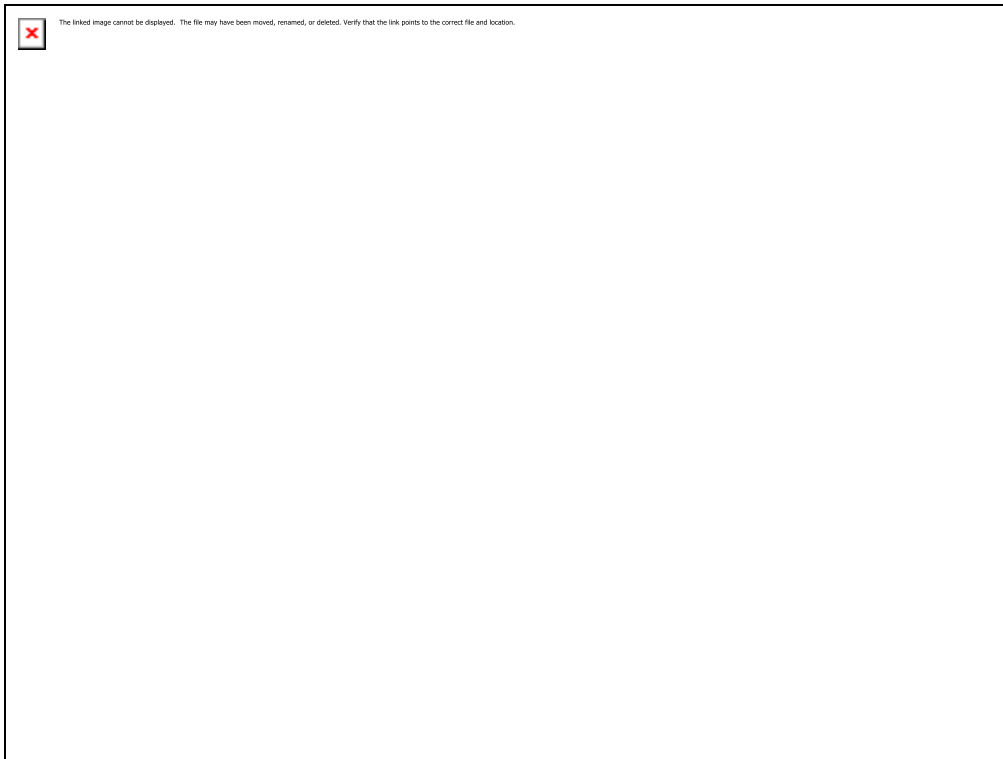
This experience elucidates the perceived power of the language barrier and the ubiquitous perception that it is the Mexican immigrant population's responsibility to make efforts to overcome this barrier. By ascribing total power to the language barrier, the school perpetuated the deficiency theory and divested itself of the burden of inviting the participation of Mexican immigrant parents. This marginalization resulted in frustration and feelings of fear, isolation and inferiority for Mexican immigrant parents, expressed most eloquently by Tania.

> *When there are trips or events when the kids go to the beach there are few Hispanic parents that go. The majority of parents are Americans, and my kids tell me that almost every parent goes and will I go too? I go but I am a little afraid. I go not with fear but also not with the security that I would like to have. Sometimes when I go to the trips with my child, the youngest one, when I go I ride the bus and the other Hispanic children go by themselves, so sometimes I feel like a bean in the middle of a plate of white rice.* Tania-Parent

Lopez (2001) definitively stated that if educational institutions continue to conceptualize the problems faced by Latinos through the deficit focus, barriers to full participation will persist. We must recognize our role in perpetuating institutional practices that firmly embed racism in the fabric of our society. In no arena is this process more powerful or more harmful than in public education.

The Impact of Embedded Racism on Experiences in Partnerships

Institutionalized racism serves to maintain a societal hegemony that empowers European Americans while simultaneously ensuring the subordination of racial minorities (Darder, 1991). Children witness daily acts of racism judged fair and even appropriate based upon the deficit hypothesis (Deyhle, 1995) and thus a racist ideology is embedded into their meaning-making. This truth is apparent from the note scribbled in Spanish that Tania found hidden away in her child's book bag. In a heart-wrenching plea, her child had written, "God help me because my teacher says I'm no good. Please help me God." A father shared that at work, "Sometimes Americans and African-Americans draw a line to the toilet and write that it is the tunnel to Mexico." Following his sharing, Maria asserted, "What happens in the community happens in the school. It is a reflection of the community!" Engagement in a culture of schooling in which a racist ideology exists promotes the internalization of an understanding of racism, oppression and discrimination as inevitable, inescapable facets of life (Nunez, 1999), depicted in Figure 1.

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Participants stated unequivocally that children learn from the models set by adults. Maria (Parent) shared, "I think it comes from the parents talking about people…and the children listen and say I don't like these people." Tomas (Parent) added, "The Teacher is an example for the kids… The teacher is the person for the kid to imagine to be like." We must ask, what is modeled for children in the US who spend seven or more hours daily in a school environment that legitimizes inequality and devalues populations on the basis of culture and race. Consequently, the final stage of this research, empowerment, lies in

encouraging participants to recognize their role in perpetuating the cycle and make changes in their individual behaviors and actions.

Creating a Language of Possibility: Empowerment in Research

Giroux (1992) stressed that educators must develop a "language of possibility" to combat oppression and resistance. This enables those who are oppressed to initiate and engage in positive action to transform their society, restructuring the current oppressive societal hegemony. By encouraging oppressed populations to share their stories and experiences, the door is opened for the development of a community in which all participants are respected and able to enjoy the opportunities and resources (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Initially, the Mexican immigrant parents were the sole focus of the empowerment component of this project. Though this was important, it became apparent that empowerment is a multifaceted process. Through focus group discussions, educators were prompted to consider the marginalization of minorities in their community and their role in perpetuating that marginalization. This process resulted in the educators feeling empowered to engage in evaluating and changing the structures in their school that embed a racist ideology in the belief systems of students. Consequently, the researcher developed significant respect for the complexities of the multifaceted empowerment process.

The community under study consisted of families who have lived in the area for many generations and the majority of community members are of similar socioeconomic status. The long-term family presence has consequently resulted in strong networks of support, similar to the networks of support evident in rural communities in Mexico. The educators discussed the networks of connection, sharing that it is often difficult for outsiders to join the community.

> *Especially non-English speaking, and in Jonesville its kinda hard because a lot of you grew up together and outsiders are automatically going to feel different in a small school whereas if it where were a larger school where people were moving in and out constantly from lots of different schools. But these people live here their mothers went to school here, their grandmothers went to school here* . (Tasha-Educator)

These close connections manifest as a strong sense of community and firmly solidify the school's position as an important community institution. People in the community are comfortable entering the school and volunteering their services as needed and events organized by the school are strongly supported by the community. Unfortunately, this same *close* system serves as a *closed* system, creating a barrier for new individuals who enter the community. This difficulty is amplified for Mexican immigrants as a function of an institutionalized racist ideology.

While there may be openly racist individuals in the community, there are also many

people who never "really stopped and thought so much about it" (Tasha - Educator). These people are also oppressed by the racist ideology pervasive in institutions and practices. Their oppression takes the form of a life limited in its connections with others, isolated from the richness of diversity and confined to a minimal awareness of one's impact on others. These people hold the power in the community and as such, must be involved in the facilitation of change. For true development of community, change must happen among all participants and a collective voice, a voice in which one hears the tenors of all participants, must be given space to emerge.

During the initial focus group of educators, one participant explained that she perceived Mexican immigrant families and "a pack of men that get out at the grocery store" differently. The group agreed and moved on to other points of discussion, but later returned to the "pack of men." After listening to the discussion quietly, Rita (educator) stated

> And we're more aware of that because they've come to our culture…we have it in what's already here, but since they are different and coming in (Maddy (educator): *The new kids on the block)* all of a sudden, "HEY" we're focusing on this. It's not any different that what we've already seen in ALL the cultures, but I think we just sort of put the negative on the Hispanic culture because of them.

The group continued to discuss the topic, expressing their fear when encountering a group of Latino men.

> I know as a White woman, I do feel uncomfortable when there is a whole bunch of maybe people that have been working in the field or out in the log woods . (Terry-Educator)

> When they're a walking and a grinning and a talking and you can't understand it. (Rita-Educator)

> Sometimes its scary . (Tasha-Educator)

When asked to reflect on their feelings when encountering a group of young European American men or young African American men, the group gave an instantaneous response. " I think we are used to it like Rita said!" exclaimed Terry (Educator). "I don't notice it, I don't notice it" asserted Maddy (Educator). Tasha (Educator) explained, "It's different!" "I know what they're saying!" Rita (Educator) adamantly replied. In the silence that followed these quick responses the group appeared to contemplate what they had just shared. Terry (Educator) stated softly, "But the reason that we don't notice it is because we know what they are saying. The language is not…We don't know what these…" This element of the unknown left the women wondering, "What are they saying? What are they thinking? And what does that look mean?" explained Rita

(Educator). After a heartbeat, Terry (Educator) exclaimed, "And they might not be saying a thing about us." The group continued to reflect on how the lack of opportunities to interact with one another created great distance between groups of people, resulting in negative stereotypes and perceptions.

Though this appears a simple discussion and shallow exploration, this discussion held significant meaning for the participants. During the conversation it was as if a faucet previously dry had been opened. The women discussed their fears and how they are founded in a deeper, more pervasive fear of difference and the unknown. As Tasha (Educator) explained, "It's just like until we came in here today, I've not really stopped and thought so much about it…" Over the course of this one conversation, the importance of reflecting upon one's fears, practices and behaviors and the interconnection of these three rose to the surface.

In the weeks between interviews, the women reflected to the researcher and other community members about their sense of increased awareness of how societal institutions that separate people perpetuate fear. Fear and separation manifest in the marginalization of the Mexican immigrant population, the "new kids on the block" (Tasha-Educator). Through this reflection, the educators explained that they felt empowered to make efforts to connect with Mexican immigrant parents and families to learn more about the population's culture and to share this connection and learning with their students by inviting Mexican immigrant parents and students to share information about their culture with the educators' classes. The shift in views of Mexican immigrants as different and separate to engagement in efforts to involve and accept this population as valued members of the community illustrates the power of reflection and discourse as components of empowerment.

Neglecting to include a focus on the strengths present in the US community of study would impair the valuable work already begun. The strengths in the community closely resemble the strengths highlighted in rural communities in Mexico; close connections, strong networks of support, and communication. However, at present, Mexican immigrants are excluded from participating in the community and enjoying its benefits. For the Mexican immigrant population to began to be welcomed and valued in the community, change must happen on many levels. School counselors and educators must serve as valuable contributors to this work. All stakeholders must be included in empowerment efforts focused on eradicating the oppressive practices prohibiting the equal involvement of all participants, and encouraging the development of a cohesive, collaborative community. In this study, the educators demonstrated the power of developing a collective consciousness of the role of privilege and racism in maintaining the marginalization of Mexican immigrants. As a function of this consciousness, educators recognized the impact of current practices impeding the involvement of Mexican immigrant parents and began to actively work to remove these barriers in their classrooms. For continued empowerment of Mexican immigrant families, stronger connections will need to be developed between Mexican immigrants and school

professionals. There must be an intensification of opportunities to interact and learn from one another. Empowerment occurs along a continuum and as such is an on-going process. Hopefully the work will continue in this community.

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