Experience of a Latino teacher in Toronto schools
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Introduction

My name is Derik Chica and I have been teaching in Toronto as a contract teacher for three and a half years. I was born in Canada but both of my parents are from Ecuador. From the stories I have heard within my social network, I think my familial story is similar to many second and third generation Latin@s in Toronto. My father came to Canada at the age of eight and my mother at the age of 21. Their experiences influenced me in various ways. I grew up learning of the struggles and barriers my grandfather overcame to build a life in Canada with his family. I also experience privilege that my family did not have when they were in school and was reminded of this daily throughout high school.   My parents urged me to learn Spanish in high school—interestingly, Spanish was my first and only language until I was four years old— but in primary school they told me to only speak English because it was "impolite" to others who did not understand. In Grade 7, my family chose to move to Richmond Hill for fear of "bad influences" in Toronto schools. Now, as a secondary teacher, I am teaching those "bad influences" and am humbled by many of their experiences and learning of the many inequities that exist in the current school system.

This paper is a means of expression of the various injustices I have observed in the school system and how they affect countless youth. It is also a reflection on the lessons these experiences have taught me. Because of my precarious employment status as a contract teacher, I have worked at three different schools. I would like to highlight the lessons I have learnt from my students at each school. This apparent reversal in roles of teacher and student is an important decolonizing praxis central to my pedagogy and therefore, central to the organization of this paper. Through conversations with students, I have learned that the neocolonial hierarchy of power within a classroom, especially between teacher and student, push out many students from schools.   I especially take interest in an anti-racist pedagogy, noting the immense Eurocentricity of the math and science curriculum. I would like to emphasize that my experiences are not meant to affirm prejudices against anyone but instead, call for a drastic reorganization of the current education system. My critiques are directed to a neocolonial system that indoctrinates actors to form certain pedagogies and beliefs. At the same time, I understand that the challenges we face are not only the tasks of teachers, administrators, or support workers but of society as a whole (Noguera, 2008). It is my hope that anyone reading this paper will use their agency to take whatever feasible action to advocate for change.

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Human resources

I wish to share my experience to raise awareness of the fact that teacher allocations to schools are solely based on a factory-like measure of years taught, regardless of fit or desire to teach in certain schools. Because of the way I was hired, I have a paradoxical critique of the system. On the one hand, I was privileged to attain a contract job at the age of 23, shortly after completing my Bachelor of Education. On the other hand, the means by which I obtained my position were not as coordinated as I would have liked. Teachers affect countless students' lives every day and one would think that hiring practices would be based on informative and inquisitive decisions, but alas, mine was not. On a Saturday afternoon, I missed a phone call from an unknown number and that night, I noticed I had a voicemail. Listening to the interview request from the vice-principal, I was both ecstatic and confused. Before being hired to a school, candidates must be hired centrally and put on an "Eligible to Hire" list. I was not on it. The school had permission to bypass this hiring practice because there was no one who could teach math and science on the list. The school then looked at applicants with last names A to E and chose twenty random applicants from those who could teach math and science, without evaluating their resumes first. The first seven applicants to call back received an interview that same week. How is it that a school board that receives thousands of applications every year, can choose a teacher at random? I later learned many other teachers have been through similar circumstances.

Although I was hired by the board, instability continued a year and a half later when I was bumped out of my school by a teacher with higher seniority. Because of cuts in funding to education, increasing class sizes, and decreasing enrollment of students, Toronto had too many secondary teachers. This meant the teachers with the least experience in the system lost their places to those with more experience. Despite many of my students protesting to the principal that I should remain at the school, there was nothing anyone could do. Seniority was the sole determining factor for allocation of teachers and if someone with higher seniority than me loses their place in their school, they bump anyone less senior than them out of another school. This surplus and bumping process has continued every semester (every five months) and will probably continue for some time with future cuts in funding to education. One effect of this process is that every school has a local culture and five months is not enough time to familiarize myself with that culture. In addition, forming lasting relationships and attempting to facilitate equitable changes in the school system requires more time. For this reason, it has been very discouraging to attempt meaningful engagement knowing that I will be in a different school in a few months.

Teaching in "Priority" Areas

Every school where I have taught has been a school located in a "Priority Neighbourhood" (United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development, 2004). Although the label of living in a "Priority Neighbourhood" further stigmatizes and essentializes people who live there, it does identify the geographical areas that have been ignored by

different constituencies. These schools require very specific teachers who through their own experiences, can engage and relate to the students who face multiple overlapping barriers outside of school. In my experience, teachers who guide without flexing their authority are the ones who are most successful in engaging students. Teachers who do not disrespect and demean students and their opinions are able to have the best attendance in classes. Teachers who show genuine care without attributing deficiencies to their students are able to spark motivation to be pulled back into school. Through discussions I have had with community workers, most people tend to agree with this yet we still have policies in place that restrict teachers from teaching at a school where they feel they can engage with students the most because of their social consciousness and pedagogical style. This needs to change if we are looking to move forward in closing any opportunity gaps and inequities that exist for marginalized communities.

School #1 – Lesson learned: Stereotypes and barriers

Barriers within the System

I started teaching at my first school in 2009, a school plagued by stereotypes. This school was comprised of mainly Black and Latin@ students. Within a week, I connected with many of the Latin@ students and learned of their experiences in Toronto schools. For many students, I was the first Latino teacher they had met. I did not fit the stereotypical Latino: my students had been told by media that university (and sometimes Post-Secondary School in general) was not for Latin@s. Latinos "belonged" on the street, in gangs, and failing out of school. Latinas were stereotyped as over-sexualized, stupid, and also failing out of school (Schugurensky, Mantilla, & Serrano, 2009). In this way, students through different messages were informed that university was for "white people" and "smart people" who had good grades in Mathematics, Science, and English.   This intersection of stereotypes that situate Latin American students as unqualified for university is perpetuated by the lack of teachers from marginalized communities and constructs an inevitable disengagement from this institution that we call "education". Understanding university as a privileged space while thinking oneself as underprivileged may create a dissonance that leads to disengagement from school. From a high school perspective, university is seen as the top level of a hierarchical system so if it is "not for me", then why engage in the scripted behavior to get there?

There were many teachers in my school who "cared" about the students but many times, this "caring" was done in a charitable fashion by simplifying curriculum, streaming towards applied and workplace classes, and providing students with exceptions to due dates and even attendance (Schugurensky et al., 2009). It is important to note that the system encourages a culture of silence and conformity where although some teachers may disagree with certain practices, it is common to conform to the norm to avoid peer conflict. Although teachers at this school acknowledged the barriers that students faced in their personal lives, they used this as an "excuse" to explain the failures of many of the students: "Poor Juan lives in a bad area. Just give him an open book test and let him pass the course." By lowering our expectations, we inhibit learning and only perpetuate the oppressive system that is in place.

We must give students agency over their decisions and provide equitable opportunities for everyone.

Furthermore, the system encourages seeing students as failing in education rather than the education system failing them. When we label students as "at risk" or with a "learning disorder" we are only further pushing them out of the system. Special education as an entity seems to be a reactive measure to place the onus on students for their lack of schooling success rather acknowledging that the institution must change to improve education for all students. Although I have met many families say that special education has allowed them access to more resources and support for students, I have also met many families who have experienced the addition of a negative stigma attached to special education as a further barrier they must overcome. By selectively labeling students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP), schools are forming a dangerous division in schools: those with an IEP and those without. Creating this image of the "other" and attributing a deficiency of learning to them creates conditions ideal for stigmatization. I am not completely against an IEP. This document goes into a student's Ontario Student Record (OSR), a file which all teachers have access. Hypothetically, a teacher can read a student's IEP and support their learning in the classroom using past recommenda-tions, which is especially useful with growing class sizes. Unfortunately, I do not see this prac-tice commonly put into place and IEPs usually label a student as being "troublesome" before teachers are able to meet the student. To reduce the stigmatization of an IEP, I question why not every student has one. Would it not be useful to have a supporting document to aid all students? Or would this just lead to more pre-encounter labeling by teachers?

The concept of placing the onus on the education system has really revolutionized my thinking as a teacher. First of all, we need to understand that we cannot place all the blame on individual teachers, principals, social workers, etc. There is a culture of silence in many of these institutions where criticism is not received very well. From conversations that I have had, the most common reply to this type of critique is paraphrased as, "students need to take ownership over their actions and not always blame the system." However I believe that a critique of a system does not remove a student's agency over their actions; it simply acknowl-edges the environmental and contextual complexities that surround us. As a result of this common conversation, individuals sometimes adapt to the dominant culture of meritocracy to avoid conflict with coworkers, and at times, for personal gain. If there is a gap between the school expectations and achievement levels, why do we not focus on changing the system to support students rather than blaming students for not living according to the system? For example, there has been an increase in the cases of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) diagnosed in schools in the past decade. Instead of only placing the onus on ability of students to focus, perhaps we also need to look at systemic causes, like the increasing rate of access to information that technology provides and the inability of the education system to keep up.

Navigating the system and policy implementation
Throughout my time in this school, and with my newfound passion of integrating anti-racism into my classroom lessons, I started attending centralized meetings concerning equity. Through this involvement, I was able to connect with other staff that guided my ideas and taught me

how to navigate the existing structure and policies of the board. That's right, I had to learn to "navigate the system". It was not straightforward or self-evident. Navigational knowledge allows people to use the many services available to them and provides a potential avenue of accountability for the community in ensuring that their rights are met. I met staff who have worked centrally for decades and still did not know how to navigate the entire system. Through my community work, I have acted as a consultant in navigating the system and this has helped to advance many great initiatives that already exist. Why is it that to buy a cell phone there seem to be so many more support systems in place but to find a policy in the education sector, it requires skill and knowledge of existing documents?

For anyone who is interested in equity policies in education, I urge you to read "Equity and Inclusive Education: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). This is a Ministry-created document aimed towards creating equitable opportunities for students in every school. Unfortunately, the implementation of these policies is not successful. I still hear the voices of many youth who have successfully or unsuccessfully passed through the system complaining of the racism that exists. I still see acts of bullying going unnoticed by adults unless there is parental involvement, and even then it is commonly dismissed. Many youth still do not feel the comfort to express their identities freely in a classroom and many times, expression is actually oppressed. I still see our LGBTTTQ youth being pushed out of the system because it does not provide adequate safe spaces for their expression. Race, gender, sex, and sexual orientation (some examples of identity) are sometimes discussed in a unit of a course instead of being implemented into every subject and every classroom. Perhaps by understanding the clear and concise equity policies that await implementation and sharing this knowledge we can begin to provide more accountability for our schools in implementing these policies. We can also begin to retake control of public education and understand that we are the authorities in this sector.

School #2 – Lesson learned: Student voice

Religion/Faith in Schools
My next school was in Etobicoke. Here I encountered an entirely different demographic. The majority of the student population was Muslim, mainly from the Horn of Africa. Coming from a Catholic family, I was not knowledgeable of the Muslim faith and so much of my time was spent learning from my students and the way the Toronto education system conflicted with their religion. On some days (mainly Fridays) their faith required them to engage in prayer during lunch or third period (class). I had no problem accommodating my classroom for this but I started to wonder why the school would not change the schedule to better accommodate the large majority of their students. In addition, I learned that many students were denied their prayer time because teachers at this school believed they were using it as an "out" from the classroom. I question why a teacher has the right to deny someone's ability to express their religion. I feel that many teachers try to control the decisions of students in their classroom rather than attempt to guide them. More importantly, why do we engage with our students from a standpoint of suspicion rather than leading with trust?

Many of my students felt the expectation to be completely obedient to authorities such as teachers. If a teacher denied them access to express their religion, they simply had to "live with it". Others would get into a verbal argument with a teacher that usually led to being sent to the office or even a suspension. Many students were unaware of their rights or processes that already existed to legitimize their complaints. One of the most important lessons we discussed in class was the importance of keeping a record of conversations. During one incident, students were denied their right to prayer and came into my class complaining. I immediately asked them to write a statement describing exactly what happened and then collectively bring that statement to the Principal. They did so. The matter was resolved, and more importantly, the students began to learn the impact that raising their voice can have.

Student council

At this school (as well as my first school), I was the staff advisor for Student Council. According to policy, student council has the power to affect many changes in schools (along with parent council) but unfortunately, many students (including myself when I was in school) see Student Council reserved for the "successful" students and, parallel to all other governing bodies, not a representative of themselves. A local school policy that troubled me was the fact that students who were not achieving high grades were not allowed to be on Student Council. Although the argument can be made that these students may need to "focus" more on school to upgrade their marks, I argue that these students are being pushed out of the system (i.e. disengaged) and involvement in Student Council can be an attempt to bring them back in. More importantly, if Student Council is only composed of students with high marks, then we are only representing a certain demographic in a governing body of education. These Student Council members may go on to become City Council members, and once again, only certain voices will be represented in governing bodies. In addition, our Council bodies have not had the experiences that pushed other students out so the push-out factors will not be on their radar or list of priorities.

In both school 1 and 2, I successfully encouraged students who were seen as not " high achieving" to run for Student Council and they were able to become active elected members. I noticed a re-engagement with school and, more importantly, a newfound confidence in speaking out against injustices. Providing youth a comfortable space to speak out their thoughts and opinions is of outmost importance especially if we wish to institute change in the future. These youth will grow up to become leaders.

In many city and central governing meetings I attend, very rarely do I see youth representation even though the topics discussed are "how to engage youth" or "how can we support our youth". Youth experience the injustices we see in the system, they should not only be consulted but should be leading the charge against these injustices. This will not happen unless we work together in providing more spaces and more encouragement for youth to employ their voices.

School #3 – Lesson learnt: anti-racism in school

In every school, I have attempted to bring the topic of racism into conversations with students because it is a lived reality for many of our racialized students. Because of my lighter skin, my initial conception of race was purely biological and I conceived it as not a significant factor in education. With my university background in biology, chemistry, and psychology, I believed race did not exist because all races were too genetically similar to be seen as different. Throughout my undergraduate experience, I was fortunate to be a member of a new initiative, SALO (Student Aid and Learning Opportunities). At the beginning, I saw this as an opportunity to help tutor students from high school and "give back to the community". In this space, I met a now close friend who provided me opportunities to explore the world through a more critical lens. At first I was very resistant to this new method of thinking, believing that colour-blindness was much more important in a classroom. Then I realized that although the physical and biological sciences could explain internal processes very well, they did not explain group or societal dynamics. By ignoring race (and all other social identities) in any interaction, we are ignoring how these socially constructed concepts affect the lives of many people living through oppression. We are in fact, oppressing them even further. The lived realities of many marginalized groups need to be integrated into every classroom and school to create a much more inclusive space of learning.

Implementing anti-racism into my teachings was one step towards creating inclusive spaces, but more importantly, I was able to support racialized students in creating clubs. Black Student Alliances and Latin American Organizations in the schools where I taught were able to pull many students back into schooling. Many students commented that they had never joined a club before because they were not able to relate to them but felt compelled to join these student groups. Finally the schooling system seemed to be attempting to relate to them in a way that it could not before. I faced some resistance among colleagues but when I pointed at many universities having these same clubs and the potential to connect students from the two institutions, I gained much more support. In my third school I started to truly see the effect of these groups. Students openly volunteered to join the executive and we saw passion in many disengaged students to engage in the coordination of the group that many teachers did not think was possible. The led me to reflect on the often discussed idea that some students inherently lack the passion to do well in school. I believe it is a complete myth. It is the system that lacks the ganas (desire) to implement innovative ideas to engage the students. With the success of these racialized student groups, I now wonder why there has not been more of a push towards creating these groups in every school.

Concluding remarks

Through my reflections I hope to demonstrate the transformative potential in all of us. My way of thinking today is completely different from three years ago and will continue to change throughout my career. This is the same for every youth, student, educator, administrator, and

politician. Change is everywhere. With access to information exponentially increasing, we need to create classrooms that allow students to critically examine that information rather than remaining with a traditional classroom that "banks" knowledge into students' minds (Freire, 1970). Transformation is a potential in all of us, and for that reason, we also need to avoid dichotomizing the world into "us" vs. "them".

We all have a part to play in transforming the schooling experience for all students. Frontline workers must examine the transformative potential to students that decolonizing practices can create. At the same time, many frontline workers are overworked considering many schools are an aggregation of oppressed youth pushed through a system that does not work. This system of education was created during a time of the industrial revolution where factory-like settings were popularized and as a result, the grade system was a great way to fabricate "responsible citizens" (The RSA, 2010). Age was perhaps the simplest commonality between students, so why not make the grade system based on age? Looking at the school system now, we see growing disparities leading to the further stratification of society as a whole. We need to work in solidarity to steer our community in a direction towards positive transformation and against stereotypes. By acting in a united way, we can create a wave of pressure against political ideas that will only lead to the further stratification of society. We also need to demand accountability from elected officials who make decisions that affect education as a whole. Finally, we need to strive for a change in society that will positively affect the daily experiences of youth in Toronto schools.

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