



Prescribed lack: The prevalence and dangers of deficiency theories to explain the Latina/o schooling experience in Toronto.

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ABSTRACT Based on my experiences in projects relating to schooling and Latina/o youth, this reflection calls for a new way of describing the Latina/o schooling experience. The paper begins by discussing the prevalent use of deficiency frameworks to refer to Latina/o culture, families, and students in community gatherings. It then describes student and parent narratives that counter such racist rhetoric. With this in mind I call on educators, agency representatives, and community members to deploy more critical frameworks that center the voices of students in their analysis, recognize the inequities and violence present in the ways our youth experience schooling, and hold school boards accountable.

Key words: Schooling, Latina/o students, Latinas/os in Toronto,

In November of 2013 the Latin American Education Network (LAEN) invited members of the community to attend a forum regarding the current state of schooling for Latina/o students. The forum consisted of three different workshops to identify barriers experienced within Toronto schools by Latina/o youth and to determine steps to address them. The forum consisted of a welcoming reception followed by attendance to a short workshop. To determine which workshop to join, attendees were organized according to the categories of “student”, “parent”, and “educator/community member” and asked to attend the respective workshop. In these workshops attendees were asked three main questions: 1) What are the barriers experienced by members of the Latina/o community in schooling? 2) What can the school boards do? and 3) What can we do? Following the workshops, spokespeople from each group shared the dialogue and ideas that came out of the conversations in a collective debriefing.

Within the forum, and particularly during the debriefing period, there were noticeable differences between the ways students narrated their experiences and the discourses employed by some parents regarding necessary steps to address the barriers discussed in their workshops. While students discussed how systemic racism affected their schooling aspirations and the treatment of their families in the school system, some parents denounced the community for not caring “enough” about schooling.

This discursive divide showcases a conceptual dissonance to the framing of Latina/o engagement in schools. On the one hand, deficiency frameworks are prominently used

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to condemn the perceived shortcomings of Latina/o parents and their communities. These discourses follow familiar tropes regarding the supposed disinterest in schooling by Latina/o parents (and subsequently their children) as well as extolling the virtues of assimilation². On the other hand, more critical discourses reject deficiency as an explanation and point instead to the ways systemic forces operate to push out racialized students and construct barriers that can affect academic engagement, all the while demanding respect for the community (Baca Zinn, 1995; Dei, 1996; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Fernandez, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

Given the wide divergence between the discursive formations used to explain the schooling of Latina/o students, this paper is a personal reflection on the disservice brought on by the use of deficiency theories and the need to move towards more critical understandings of the ways our youth experience schooling. The intended audience for this paper is educators, community agency workers, and other similarly interested parties, particularly given the open access format of this journal and its link to the Latina/o community in Toronto. To pursue these goals I reflect on my experience as a past coordinator of a tutoring and mentoring collective (SALO), an attendee at various community initiatives regarding Latina/os and schooling, and as the facilitator to the youth workshop at the aforementioned LAEN forum. Finally, I make no claims to groundbreaking work within this paper as many of the arguments presented here have been made by countless students, community members, and academics. However, in spite of the presence of these knowledges, we continue to experience a bombardment of deficiency rhetoric in public spaces created to discuss the Latina/o schooling experience. Thus, in this paper I attempt to embed my personal experiences and recollections as a way to describe the divergence between dominant discourse and the reality on the ground.

Prior to unfurling my argument, I wish to take a moment to discuss three points: my point of departure for this discussion, the use of student narratives and personal experience to drive the argument, and the terminology employed throughout this essay. Firstly, I do not claim to know what it is like to be a Latina/o student in a Toronto high school. I came to this country seven years ago and underwent most of my formal schooling in the U.S. Having said that, my involvement with Latina/o students in Toronto started during the first year of my Ph.D. studies in the University of Toronto and stems from my prior work in the U.S. to not only expand the schooling pipeline but to change the context under which we receive schooling. Thus, I write from the positionality of a U.S. raised Chicano (and not Mexican American) who has worked in a number of different endeavors to discuss and transform schooling for Latina/os in Toronto.

Throughout this paper I employ my recollections to develop my argument. I write this paper from my memory of these events as well as public materials and make no claims towards objectivity or complete accuracy (nor do I believe either is possible). Instead, I reflect on the discourses employed to speak about the Latina/o community and the ways race and culture have been used to signal to deficiency. I also take my discussions with students seriously. That is, rather than infantilizing them or downplaying the effects of their experiences, I center

² These discourses appear to have broader components that include the ways “culture of poverty”(Ladson-Billings, 2007) narratives are deployed as well as racist deficiency theories such as the “mañana syndrome” (Gonzalez & Fernandez, 2003).

them throughout this paper. In relation to the LAEN forum, I write from the perspective of a facilitator of the workshop and refer to the notes taken (see LAEN, this volume). Individuals who participated in the workshop had full knowledge that notes would be taken and met the notetakers. Finally, the confidentiality of attendees is protected throughout this paper and instead of references to individuals, I focus on the broader themes discussed.

As a final preliminary point I speak to the issue of identity. As many of us are aware, identity and the label(s) we employ to speak of ourselves and our communities are complicated. While there are many ways to identify individuals from the space known as Latin America, I employ the term *Latina/o*. Although far from perfect, I believe this term to be more useful and less pervasive than the often-used “Hispanic” as it does not privilege a Eurocentric perspective on the peoples of the colonial construct known as the “Americas.” I recognize that there are other identities such as “Chicana/o” and “Boricua” that recognize the effects of empire and are embedded within an anti-colonial framework. However these terms do not relate to such a broad group of people as *Latina/o*. As such, given the need for a larger panethnic label and limited choices that are widely recognizable, I employ the term “*Latina/o*” throughout this paper to refer to those who trace their ancestry and identity to the peoples of the landmass constructed as Latin America.

Individualization of “the problem”

We live in a neoliberal time where individualism is rewarded and results are framed as consequences of individual choice. Within the context of schooling, it is not uncommon to hear that *Latina/o* students fail to exhibit a drive to “better themselves.” As Dei et al. (1997) remind us, the blaming of students for their negative experiences in schooling and academic results is a widespread phenomenon and “embodies socially constructed notions of individual failure” (p. 6). This exclusive focus on the individual is part of a process where the responsibilities of institutions such as schools are offloaded onto individuals, their families, and their communities³. Individualization is particularly prevalent in discussions about “student underachievement,” its causes and the ways to address it. These discussions often focus on the production of particular peoples in need of saving (e.g. “at risk” youth, most often constructed as racialized youth) as well as statistics about standardized testing and the “drop out” rate. In terms of causes, as I stated earlier, the reliance of deficiency theories individualize blame onto specific actors—students and parents—and their associated “cultures” (read as race and implied value towards education). By placing the onus on racialized students, families, and communities, the schooling institution maintains a meritocratic façade of a neutral site where all can succeed but some do not due to personal or cultural deficiencies. This process influences how the perceived “problem” is addressed. For instance, there are many programs in the city that seek to “supplement” a prescribed lack⁴ and can fall into this trap by re-inscribing negative

³ At the same time schools are quick to take credit for “positive” outcomes such as improved test scores.

⁴ This can include beliefs that racialized students lack respect for themselves or authorities, lack an enriching environment (most often at home) in which to learn, and/or lack the capacity to learn.

tropes onto students. These tropes are not only then communicated to students by members of the school board, but also by community members who purport to want to “help” them.

One way presumed deficiency is communicated to racialized students is by devaluing knowledges and experiences. This leads to their construction as unintelligent or unwilling to learn. Schooling environments matter and it is difficult to learn in a space where one is treated as having an absence of knowledge and an inability to learn. Through the discussions at the LAEN student workshop, individuals expressed a feeling of being disrespected by the assumptions of teachers and administrators that they lacked the capacity to do school work and that their cultures and knowledges lacked legitimacy in the schooling context. The inscribing of deficiency (read as lack of knowledge in this case) on racialized bodies is not a new phenomenon and students are affected by an incongruous school system that proclaims equity while dismissing students’ capabilities. One way this occurs involves respect. Dei et al. (1997) and Valenzuela (1999) see respect and the awareness of disrespect as pivotal to students’ perception of schooling. Disrespect, can happen through school officials’ dismissal of students’ cultural practices, personal knowledges, and ways of being. Dei et al. (1997) found that students “held firmly to the belief that authority figures (e.g., teachers, principals) must respect them in order to wield authority over them” and “they perceive[d] these power structures [in the school system] as intended to subordinate them further” (p. 106). This displays the conflicting messaging from school officials to students: schools are portrayed as meritocratic and respectful of difference while educators scorn and devalue students’ cultures and knowledges. According to Valenzuela (1999), “the overt request[s] [that students care about schooling] overlie a covert demand that students embrace a curriculum that either dismisses or derogates their ethnicity and that they respond caringly to school officials who often hold their culture and community in contempt” (p. 24). The results of such an experience can include student resistance to assimilative pressures, and in their resistance, students undergo further marginalization in the schools and the eventual subtraction of their bodies from their schools and campuses.

“Tuning out” and the possible result of attrition are often conceptualized as processes that occur in a short period of time. However, as Schugurensky (2009) states, attrition involves “a slow process of disengagement with academic activities that takes several years” (Schugurensky, 2009, p. 4). At the LAEN forum’s workshop for youth, many students spoke of the recognition that schooling was not intended for their benefit. They received these exclusionary messages in subliminal and overt ways, including being ignored by teachers, treatment as inferior students because of ESL designations, and being actively discouraged from pursuing an academic stream that would make university attendance a possibility. In short, there were myriad ways in which students at the forum felt discouraged, humiliated, and disrespected within their schools. This reflects Leonarda Carranza’s (2009) argument that our students and communities are often met with derision in Toronto schools.

In order to conceptualize student disengagement at the TDSB, Carranza (2009) utilizes the lens of humiliation. She states,

At the structural level humiliation takes place within the lived experience of surveillance and the mark of criminality that characterizes the experience of racialized student’s in school. Humiliation lies in the language of security that demands that

racialized bodies be searched, stopped, ordered, and consistently checked. It hides in the language of responsibility and discipline and is authorized to restrict the freedom to move, to go to the washroom, to eat, and to speak.

This lens, documented through her work beginning in 2006, provides an understanding of the violence Latina/o youth face in TDSB schools. I have witnessed the humiliation of students with whom I have worked as well as its effects. As an example, a 10th grade Latino student in SALO (a tutoring and mentoring collective) had been consistently placed in the lowest streams in schools that would make him ineligible for university or college attendance. I became involved with him at his mother's behest when we realized that school counselors were unwilling to create a course schedule for him that would lead to higher-level courses and a path to post-secondary education. In fact, when looking at his file we were told that he had been pegged for the lowest stream for quite some time. In meeting with his teachers it became evident that little was expected of him and that there had been significant effort put towards finding deficiencies. One example occurred when I first met his guidance counselor who expressed disappointment in an assessment stating that the student did not have a learning disability. There was also a great concern regarding his and his mother's desire to place him in a higher stream as they did not wish to challenge him because they thought it was too great a task for him. These low expectations from teachers and the attempt to attribute their cause to cognitive learning deficiencies became a constant during my time working with him. Late in the year he worked on a history assignment with a tutor and was accused of plagiarizing. The teacher, expecting extremely low quality of work from him, did not believe he could have written the assignment, publicly embarrassed him, and gave him a zero. While we met with school officials regarding this issue and came away with an agreement, much damage had been done. Our student went from displaying pride in his assignment to frustration and pain. In this way, we can see the humiliation this student experienced as well as the degree to which the quality of his work was already prescribed. Many students receive help in the course of a school year. In fact, many wealthy students do so as a common practice in order to upgrade school marks and enroll in prestigious schools. However, for this student, given his racialization and the ever-present suspicion regarding wrongdoing and criminality, the only possible explanation for his teacher was plagiarism. In this way, the discourse of deficiency justified the placement of this student in the lowest streams within the school given the ways school administrators and faculty understood his capacities. When the student worked to disprove the assumptions of his teachers, he was met with suspicion and prescribed misconduct. This was not an isolate case.

As a member of SALO, I witnessed the violence Latina/o students experience in school when they shared their stories or when meeting with their educators. These stories parallel many of the findings in the literature. High school students in the program were regularly called "dumb" in class by their educators, were the recipients of racist labels such as "beaners" and were consistently discouraged or outright prevented from pursuing higher education. One high-achieving Latina in the 11th grade came to us in tears one day. She had visited her guidance counselor a number of times wanting to discuss career paths. She began by asking about becoming a veterinarian, to which she was told her goals were too lofty. A different day she contacted the same counselor and asked about becoming a pharmacist only to receive a similar

response. In total, she contacted this counselor over eight times with similar career questions ranging from becoming a psychologist all the way to a flight attendant. All were met with the same negative response and deflating result. The amount of pain and spirit injury incurred by such a student caused her to ask herself, and later on to ask us, about the point of remaining in school. In all, reaching out to her guidance counselor had led to frustration and helplessness regarding her future.

The experiences outlined above and those described by students at the LAEN workshop push our students out of schools and reflect a multi-layered process that takes time, repetition, and involves a multitude of school officials (Dei et al., 1997). While it may not be a nefarious plot on the part of educators, the process demonstrates the ways that race and the resultant discourse of deficiency is inscribed in our students' bodies when read by faculty and school administrators. In this way we can speak to systemic processes that not only discourage our youth from schooling spaces but also actively work to remove them. However, returning to my discussion on individualization, these structural factors are seldom questioned within the logic of neoliberalism. Thus, rather than engaging with the barriers illustrated by students, "tuning out" is often constructed as a personal failure that stems from Latina/o culture.

In response to the TDSB's report outlining the 40% "drop out" rate among Spanish-speaking students, Daniela Mantilla, Daniel Schugurensky, and Jose Francisco Serrano (2009) issued a "call to students, parents, teachers, youth and anybody concerned with this situation to share their perspectives" (p. 4) to discuss the problematic and offer possible recommendations. Many of the contributors adhered to the abovementioned deficiency theories regarding Latina/os. They characterized them as undervaluing educational outcomes (Chacon Castro, 2009; D'Andrea, 2009), experiencing chronic domestic violence (Bascuñán, 2009), being absent from schooling associations (Bascuñán, 2009; Romero Cachinero, 2009) and having pre-determined schooling paths due to parents' demographic characteristics (Betancourt, 2009). These responses serve to further the already racist, sexist, and classist understandings of Latina/o bodies and the institutions to which they belong (family, church, community, grassroots organizations, etc.) rather than provide solutions. These responses also ignore the context under which Latina/os undergo schooling, employing a framework whereby the Latina/o student or her/his family and community are inherently understood as deficient.

In line with a neoliberal understanding of student performance, Dr. Romero Cachinero (2009), at the time a member of the Toronto Catholic District School Board, outlines "ten factors that can improve school attainment of minority students" (p. 65). Sadly, not one includes interventions that the School Board, or an individual school, can take. Rather, all focus on assumptions of deficiency in the realms of "family demographics", "parental involvement in children's education", "cooperation between parents and community support organizations", "motivation and self esteem", "cognitive abilities and learning styles", "raising of cultural awareness", and "nutrition and neighborhood" (p. 65-66). While these factors certainly affect the ability of students to remain in school, the analysis locates the sources of deficiency at the individual, family, and community levels and fails to account for institutional factors that affect student persistence in Toronto schools. As such, according to the author, the intervention necessary to stem the attrition of Latina/o students is to supplement the individual and those around her/him in order to overcome those deficiencies.

While stories of violence and disrespect within schools are often told by youth, I have attended too many meetings where the onus of achievement continues to be placed solely on the shoulders of students and their families while neglecting the effects of institutions. For instance, I have been to meetings organized by local tutoring groups for Latina/o students that aim to teach parents about the value of schooling and I wonder, do these individuals recognize to whom they are speaking? At times I attempt to interrupt these discourses by inserting my own experience. I come from a family that has never surpassed the poverty line and where my parents did not receive a large amount of formalized schooling (second grade education for my dad and middle school diploma for my mother). However, I witnessed daily sacrifices to assure my sister and I had necessary school supplies. Of course, when I relay this personal story, the distributors of deficiency theories proclaim my parents to be part of the few “converted,” that I come from an exceptional family. To be fair, I believe my parents to be quite exceptional. At the same time, how can I explain that my experience is part of the norm, that I have gotten this far because I am one of the lucky survivors, that I have been lucky to receive institutional support at key times and that everyday I recognize that I inhabit an academic space that is not meant for me? So I ask, if my case is “exceptional”, how do you then describe the parents of countless students that sent their children to the tutoring program at the University of Toronto known as SALO?⁵ How do we explain the pride and love exhibited by parents yearly at the Latina/o & SALO graduation at the University of Toronto?⁶ How do we explain the presence of so many parents at so many workshops where my community is bombarded with racist rhetoric? Finally, why do I continue to receive so many phone calls from Latina/o parents regarding SALO, a program that no longer exists? We must recognize that our parents have always considered education important. To begin from this point of departure can provide the means to develop new frameworks that cater to the specificity of our community’s experience. This would include listening to the voices of our youth and the ways they describe their schooling experiences as well as holding public institutions responsible for responding to the needs of the community.⁷

Deficient parents

Regardless of the years of work to debunk racist ideas about the Latina/o family and community we continue to hear them. At the LAEN forum, I heard some parents demanding that parents stop watching novelas and work on school assignments with their children. At other meetings, I have heard people say that parents should lose a job so that they can do more to facilitate their children’s learning and I wonder, how privileged must one be to tell someone to lose a job? What kind of rhetoric will be deployed if a parent cannot feed/clothe/provide shelter for a child? What will it take to disrupt this logic to a sufficient extent that we stop employing internalized racism and tropes regarding a culture of poverty? When will we recognize that, particularly for working class families, attending meetings during work hours or on weekends may not be feasible?

⁵ For more information about this defunct project please see <http://salotutoring.com/about/>

⁶ An event that includes high school, undergraduate, and graduate students finishing their respective degrees

⁷ This includes attending events like the LAEN forum where every trustee for the TDSB and TCDSB received multiple invitations and out of thirty-eight only two attended.

Deficiency theories are also present in ways school officials treat our communities. While speaking of the American context, Suarez-Orozco et al (2008), found that

[w]hile teachers tended to be quite positive about immigrant students, they did not think much of immigrant parents. They tended to see them as uninterested in their children's academic welfare and reported that immigrant parents were often absent and uninvolved, without taking into consideration their difficult work schedules and language barriers (p. 136).

The quote above refers to racialized migrant students. These discourses expressed by educators follow racist ideologies regarding the degree to which racialized individuals value schooling, and follow a generational theory of deficiency that flows from the parent down to the children. Although these theories have been proven wrong time and time again (Carter, 2005; Gaztambide-Fernandez & Guerrero, 2011; James, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Noguera, 2008), they continue to gain currency as they are quoted throughout the literature. It is interesting to note that in relation to this perceived disengagement of parents from their child's schooling, many immigration authors have cited schooling, or giving children better life opportunities through schooling, as one of the primary reasons for migrating (Suarez-Orozco, et al. 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). In addition, parents and family influences have also been cited as reasons for children to remain in school (Dei et al. 1997).

Conclusion

Rather than focusing on the individual as a source of the problem, Dei et al. ask "how is it that schools engage some students while at the same time disengage others?" (1997, p. 4). To which they posit, mirroring Schugarensky (2009), that the pushing out or subtraction of students from schooling is not a spontaneous decision but rather a process affected by a large number of factors. This tuning out occurs as a result of years of violence and disrespect experienced by racialized students in school including the disparaging of their families and knowledges as well as the low expectations and belittling by school administrators and educators.

Valenzuela (1999) situates part of the answer to Dei's question about differential student engagement in the politics of caring. In her study at Seguin High School in Texas, she found that "the predominantly non-Latino teaching staff sees students as not sufficiently caring about school, while students see teachers as not sufficiently caring about them" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 61, emphasis in original). In relation to the politics of caring, she found that students who did not appear to fit the expectations of caring about their "education" are often marginalized in the schooling experience (Valenzuela, 1999). This could include the way students dress, talk, and react in classrooms. Conversely, some students who felt stereotyped as not caring or scapegoated by faculty or administrators became less interested in their schooling. This dynamic was discussed at the LAEN forum when students narrated experiencing racism, being criminalized, receiving incorrect designation as English learners, and experiencing difficulty or outright denial in enrolling in "academic" streams. These experiences caused at least one of the attendees to leave school, another to switch between numerous schools, while most of the

attendees, who also appeared younger, voiced ongoing difficulties. We must treat the experiences of our students as representative of consistent and continuous violence at the hands of schooling institutions rather than redeploying the same deficiency frameworks that provide further injury to our communities and youth.

Given the breadth of racist experiences communicated to us by our youth, why do we continue to hear deficiency framings when we attend meetings about the condition of schooling for our students? Perhaps it is time to quell the derision to our own communities and join a stronger movement that maintains the highest standards for our communities and our students while simultaneously demanding that the systems of oppression outlined above are addressed⁸. At the same time, we must question the institutions that purport to serve our communities and resist hegemonic understandings of our communities. I propose that the first step be quite humble and begin by listening to those most affected. As George Dei (2010) reminds us, it is vital that we prioritize and trust the stories of students currently experiencing schooling. Furthermore, we must employ frames of analysis that go beyond colonial constructs of schooling and deficiency. As such, I look forward to further conversations about transformative possibilities and interventions that foster resistance to the racist, sexist, and colonial logic of curricula and pedagogy. At the same time, we must ensure that not only are youth part of the discussion regarding these collective mobilizations, but that they are the driving force behind them. To that end, I am encouraged by the final resolution passed at the LAEN youth workshop: to develop and facilitate a youth committee within LAEN that can dictate and mobilize all parties within the network. I hope that these efforts are prioritized and that our collective resources are made available to ensure the fulfilment of the goals of this committee while questioning and resisting dominant framing regarding our peoples, families, and communities.

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⁸ This is not to say that our communities do not need to work on specific problems. However, these problematics do not stem from an inherent deficiency and must be interrogated in relation to the ways that multiple modes of oppression intersect including patriarchy, racism, and colonialism.

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