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To cite this article: Sandra M. Gonzales & Carolyn M. Shields (2015) Education ‘reform’ in Latino Detroit: achievement gap or colonial legacy?, Race Ethnicity and Education, 18:3, 321-340, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2014.911170

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2014.911170

Published online: 15 May 2014.

Article views: 220
Education ‘reform’ in Latino Detroit: achievement gap or colonial legacy?

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Using critical theory and an analysis of missionary reports and documentation describing education in colonial Puerto Rico and Mexico, the authors cross borders and time periods to socially and historically situate Spanish colonial educational methodologies and their contemporary use in one low-income Latino community in urban Detroit, Michigan. By invoking associations from the colonial past to shed light on contemporary struggles, this study problematizes US educational reform initiatives such as high stakes testing and school turnaround policies. The authors found that when the playing field is not equal, such reform efforts are but another in a long line of colonial and neo-colonial methodologies that further disenfranchise Latino youth and push them out of school.

Keywords: Latino education; urban education; Detroit schools; education reform; high stakes testing; decolonizing education; Latino achievement gap

The role of a socially committed historian is to use history, not so much to document the past as to restore to the dehistoricized a sense of identity and possibility. Such ‘medicinal’ histories seek to re-establish the connections between peoples and their histories, to reveal the mechanisms of power, the steps by which their current condition of oppression was achieved, through a series of decisions made by real people to dispossess them; but also to reveal the multiplicity, creativity and persistence of resistance among the oppressed.

(Aurora Levins Morales, via MacDonald 2004, 1)

Introduction

For many Latinos, the US–Mexican border is a geo-political construct that has been used to manipulate history and identity. Scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), in her book Borderlands: La Frontera, have built a large body of literature studying and critiquing these contemporary border constructs. Such works remind us that many Latinos are indigenous to the...
Americas. Nonetheless, constructs like the US–Mexican border establishes an epistemological framework that severs Latino history and identity from its colonial and pre-colonial origins.

It is important to remember that many Latinos have been twice colonized. For example, in the late 1840s, when the ownership of territories along the current Mexican–American border were in dispute, land and people changed nationality overnight – conquered native people who had become colonized Mexican citizens, suddenly found themselves to be reconquered Mexicans, now by the Americans. They already carried the legacy of colonization and conquest by the Spanish – a legacy that was then compounded by American colonizers and their understanding of Manifest Destiny.

Though the neo-colonial structure teaches us to think in terms of city-states and territories, these categories did not exist in the pre-contact era in the same way they do today (Rodríguez 2008). Furthermore, present-day political boundaries and identifiers were not used by pre-Columbian groups or cultures, nor do they map well onto the relationship these people had with their own physical landscape. These contemporary perspectives are based on European ways of thinking and living and are not directly applicable to native peoples of the Americas (Gonzales 2011; Rodríguez 2008).

The current geo-political borders not only separate people, land and histories, but they also serve as a psychological barrier to developing a more robust understanding of Latino educational theory and to implementing more culturally relevant practices in the education of US Latino students. MacDonald (2004, 2) argues that ‘Latino Education in the United States intersects three fields of scholarship: American history, education, and Latino studies. In each of these fields Latino educational history has been barely explored or superficially examined.’ The result is that for Latinos born in the United States, their history becomes theorized as US American history with little attention to their pre-Columbian past or historical identity. Thus, because Latinos are born north of the border, the Latino gap in educational achievement is framed as a contemporary US issue. Moreover, because the majority of Latin Americans living in the US are of Mexican descent, studies which examine diverse Latino identities and diaspora more broadly are limited, leaving a wealth of Latino histories and experiences from South America, Central America and the Caribbean at the periphery of such discourse. This is a deficit the authors acknowledge and only fleetingly touch upon within the scope of this article.

One example of this phenomenon can be seen when educational policymakers fail to understand and address the historic relationships between conquest, colonization and minoritized communities – relationships that perpetuate the societal inequities that are too often symbolized and, at the same time, minimized, by reference to the ongoing educational achievement gap.
It is therefore important for young people to be able to identify their struggle in schools as part of a larger historical movement for educational self-determination and equality; and not as a simple failure on their part to learn the designated state and federal standards, which is so often how the debate has come to be framed.

In this article, the authors contend that there are better and more accurate explanations for differences in achievement. Legislative policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTT), push educational reform methodologies such as high stakes testing that focus on school/teacher/student accountability without consideration for how such assessments perpetuate inequities on the ground. Using critical ethnography, the authors work from the bottom-up, to provide a new lens through which one can examine the ongoing debate around these current education reform strategies. They argue that when schools and communities are struggling for resources, equality and justice, high stakes testing is merely another colonial mechanism used in contemporary society to perpetuate a long history of human and civil rights abuses against Latino youth, or rather, the descendants of the colonized native peoples of the Americas.

The current discourse of education reform movements, making use of terms like ‘failing schools,’ ‘lowest achieving schools,’ and sub-groups not making ‘Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP),’ fails to consider the ongoing impacts of past inequities within educational and social systems that perpetuate a ‘Race to the Top’ mentality. Ivy (1995) contends that such systems have historically capitalized on the ‘othering’ of young people by establishing a pipeline to lucrative self-help industries, pharmaceuticals and privatized prison systems that profit from the illness created when young people are methodically stigmatized for not measuring-up; those who do not score at the grade proficiency level; those who are labeled below the national and state averages; those who ‘need improvement’.

Although much attention is paid to issues of measurement and development of better, less biased instruments, doing so, without attending to the communities where they are used or the socio-economic and historical contexts in which they were created, only serves to further disenfranchise Latino youth and systematically push them out of the educational system and into the arms of exploitive industries, a vicious cycle that has been repeated since the colonial era.

To develop their argument, the authors first position themselves vis-à-vis both the historical and present contexts. Second, within a critical studies framework, they provide an overview of the historical legacy of marginalization experienced by the US Latino community. Then, as a basis for their argument, they provide a current illustration of the ways in which assessment has affected many Latino students in Detroit and conclude with an exploration of the wider implications of this discussion for educational leadership, social justice and policy.
Do current policies exacerbate historical injustices?

Nationally, how to improve school and student achievement is a hotly debated topic. The call for stronger outcomes-based assessment mechanisms was established by the NCLB Act of 2001 which favored randomized field trials based on the medical model of research (Liston, Whitcomb and Borko 2007). Policymakers believed this model would set a high standard for authenticating student success and teacher efficacy by matching curricular design with empirical evidence collected from tests. Though NCLB provided glaring evidence of educational disparities in low-income and communities of color, moving beyond this point toward more positive directions proved to be riddled with complexities. Liston, Whitcomb and Borko (2007) noted their concern that relying solely on empirical data sets severely limited the pool of available research that could influence educational policy and inform classroom practice. Additionally, they argued that such tests narrowly define learning and ‘discount or ignore other potentially valuable aims of education’ (101). Another critique offered by Lather (2004, 760) suggested that ‘such research could be considered a “backlash” against cultural studies, feminist methodology, radical environmentalists, ethnic studies and social studies of science.’

Despite criticisms, NCLB was expanded under President Obama’s RTT competitive grant initiatives. These grants forced state awardees to place a high premium on measurable outcomes from high stakes testing environments with the goal of reducing the achievement gap through greater student/teacher/school accountability mechanisms (Vitteriti 2012). In many respects RTT went further than NCLB by linking school funding to measures of teacher quality demonstrated by student outcomes, closing and/or ‘turning-around’ urban schools and paving the way for privatized and for-profit charter school industries to take-over underperforming public schools.

In a press release by the National Education Policy Center entitled, New Study Finds Current School Turnaround Policies are ‘More Likely to Cause Upheaval Than to Help,’ Renée (2012, para. 6), the study’s author, is quoted as saying, ‘low-performing schools are placed in a terrible situation, in order to get the needed federal resources in the middle of this fiscal crisis, they must implement strategies that are more likely to cause upheaval than to help.’ Furthermore, they argue that the top-down, punitive measures implemented through the turn-around process are counterproductive to student engagement and achievement and exacerbate historic injustices rather than heal them.

While scholars are actively assessing and contesting the impacts of high stakes testing and federal ‘turnaround’ policies such as RTT on low-income communities of color, in particular, this article will take their work a step further by linking these critiques to a decolonial praxis demonstrating how struggles on the ground, in Latino Detroit, can be re-conceptualized as acts of resistance.
In 2011–2012 more than 40% of the public high school students in Latino Detroit identified as Latino; more than 44% identified as English learners; and, more than 70% were identified as economically disadvantaged. That same year, according to the Michigan Department of Education, state standardized assessments such as the Michigan Merit Exam (MME), taken in the 11th grade, reported a high need for support and services in the core academic areas of math, science, reading and writing with less than 6% of the high school students scoring proficient in math; less than 5% were proficient in science; less than 28% scored proficient in reading; and, less than 16% were proficient in writing. According to the Detroit Public Schools Annual Education Report (2012), these same schools have failed to make annual yearly progress since 2002.

While the above data might seem to confirm the need for greater student/teacher/parent accountability, Angela Velenzuela (1999) reminds us that such tests are not enigmatic of student knowledge but instead demonstrate what she calls a subtractive model of education, where academic investment and a love for learning are being subtracted out of Latino children as they age through the educational system.

Latino families and communities are at the mercy of an educational institution that has a long history of demonizing Latino people, culture and ways of knowing, by pointing to challenges such as drop-out rates, achievement gaps, primitive knowledge networks and lack of family participation. Villenas (1996), a Chicana ethnographer, also contests the problematization of Latino families, especially with regards to child-rearing, school and language. And, adds that she herself is often expected to ‘play along’ with well-meaning but colonial discourse about her own community (10).

If you only look at the problem from the perspective of the institution, you might assume that Latino ways of knowing are in collusion against student success. This is why Leitchter (1974) suggests, that scholars examine education from the perspective of the learner, not just the institution. Doing so will move practice beyond quantitative assessments, beyond cultural and linguistic hierarchies, beyond the stigma of labels, toward a better understanding of the human story; the human experience and the human capacity for knowing. Learner perspectives can help us understand the transnational complexity of the cultural divide and how to bridge it capitalizing on the diverse knowledge and strengths that each unique child brings to the classroom.

A large part of this work, according to Grande (2004), requires that native people of the Americas, go back to re-examine the language of the institution to reveal the colonial messages that work to disempower and invalidate their identities and ways of knowing. It is in this spirit, that the authors begin their analysis by comparing early colonial praxis with contemporary policies. By doing so, the authors can trace subtractive schooling practices back to their origins in colonial Puerto Rico and Mexico and more recently in Guatemala and Peru.
An analysis of educational policies in Spanish colonial Puerto Rico

In 1492, the conquistadors, under the Spanish flag, first began to take control of the Caribbean islands now divided into countries such as Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, before making their way to what is now Mexico in 1519. They then began the conquest and colonization of other parts of Latin America. It is important to begin an analysis with an examination of the educational policies of Spain during their earliest interventions in the Americas, because it is here that one can more easily establish the lineage of our current US educational structure and practices. The authors focus on the Spanish conquest, because the English did not depart from London until 1606, meaning that nearly a century had passed before the English wave of European conquest hit the Americas.

In Spain at the time of the conquest, there were two tiers of education for Spanish youth: one, a private form of education, designed for nobility and those meant to hold positions of authority; and, a second form of education, established by the Catholic Church, which gave access to a basic form of education, mostly religious, for less fortunate children (Osuna 1949).

Thus, at the request of the monarchy and scaffolding on the Spanish model that existed at the time, early colonial education for the natives in the Americas was placed in the hands of the church (Osuna 1949). In Puerto Rico, the first semblances of education can be traced back to 1503. According to Osuna (1949), it was minimal and not well implemented. He goes to describe how native children were to gather twice per day and be taught to ‘to read and write, to make the sign of the cross and to learn the prayers of the church’ (8–9). Spanish priests also made attempts to teach the language (Osuna 1949, 8). It was believed that by inculcating the native children in the Catholic faith that they would then go out and help indoctrinate others (Osuna 1949).

The authors posit that indoctrination of the children may have been necessary in order to raise the next generation of obedient laborers. Secondary sources indicate that when given freedom, the natives refused to work the mines and were perceived by the Spanish as ‘lazy and improvident: that they could only be kept from vices and irregularities by occupation.’ It was also noted that when given a choice, they ‘kept aloof from the Spaniards and from all instruction in the Catholic faith’ (Wagenheim and Jimenez de Wagenheim 2008, 21). This demonstrates that the establishment of these educational goals took place within a wider socio-political context and was not without resistance.

Though the monarchy instructed local governors, like Ovando, to teach indigenous children to read and write, it can be argued that the main emphasis for all natives was religious indoctrination because it contained
the values and beliefs that were the foundation of Spanish culture. The indigenous did not share the same beliefs and values and, as a result, were not considered to be civilized.

Two additional goals established by the colonizers were for the natives to be integrated into the market economy and to be taught to be obedient to the crown and its representatives; these measures were also necessary to secure Spain’s wealth and hegemonic control. In a 1503 letter from Queen Isabella to Governor Ovando, the queen orders him to ‘spare no pains to attach the natives to the Spanish nation and the Catholic religion. To make them labor moderately, if absolutely essential to their own good’ (Wagenheim and Jimenez de Wagenheim 2008, 21). The same edict was reinforced in 1826 with regards to the black slaves on the island. In an excerpt from the ‘Regulation on Education, Treatment and Occupation Which the Masters of This Island should Give to Their Slaves,’ it was written that:

‘They should instruct them in the principles of the Catholic religion and in those truths needed to be baptized… the masters shall make every effort to make the slaves understand the obedience they must lend to established authority; the obligation they owe to revere the priests; to respect whites; to behave moderately with free coloreds, and affably with their equals… (Wagenheim and Jimenez de Wagenheim 2008, 45)

Similarly, as will be demonstrated in the next section, schools, like those in Latino Detroit, are still constructed on this model: though teaching some basic skills in the areas of reading, writing and arithmetic, their primary objective is to assimilate the local populations within dominant American society, subtracting their home cultures and heritage languages, and punishing students whenever they refuse to submit to these attempts to subtract their knowledge or mobilize for a different kind of education.

In colonial Puerto Rico, like contemporary Latino Detroit, the people were aware of the unequal access to opportunities such as a quality education and employment. In 1864, Puerto Rican born Ramón Emeterio Betances laid forth his people’s grievances against Spain. In a call to arms, he exclaims:

The rabble of Spain – its soldiers and clerks – come to the island without a peseta, and after they have squeezed us dry, return to their homeland with millions that belong to us, who have worked for it. The gíbaros are poor and ignorant because of the Government, which prohibits schools, newspapers, and books, and not long ago refused to found a university, so that the poor, who cannot send their children abroad, shall never see them with the titles of doctor, lawyer, etc. (Wagenheim and Jimenez de Wagenheim 2008, 45)

Presently, not much has changed in Detroit. The natives, now called Latinos, understand that they are not being educated to go to college where
they might have the opportunity to become a ‘doctor’ or ‘lawyer.’ Rather,
as the authors will demonstrate, Latinos are being directed toward prison or
factory jobs or one of the many service industries that benefit the consump-
tive addictions of their conquerors.

An analysis of educational perspectives in Spanish Colonial Mexico

The authors posit that another historical legacy of the Spanish conquest is
what Valenzuela (1999) calls ‘subtractive schooling.’ The Spanish not only
attempted to teach the natives their values and beliefs but they also tried to
undermine sacred traditions, values and knowledge networks through a sub-
tractive schooling structure. In her ethnographic study of a high school in
Houston, Texas, Valenzuela (1999) found that schools subtract knowledge
and resources out of Mexican youth by discounting the values of education
grounded in Mexican culture. School authorities unknowingly promoted
assimilationist methodologies that served to undermine their student’s lin-
guistic and cultural identity.

Using missionary reports and other forms of primary documentation,
Joaquin García Icazbalcata (1931), a sixteenth century Spanish elite histori-
an from colonial Mexico, provides a telling glimpse into the development
to García Icazbalcata (1931), Spanish colonial efforts to civilize and assimil-
ate the natives were justified. He claimed that, ‘A people altogether anal-
phabetic, illiterate and unable either to preserve or to transmit knowledge
except through oral tradition that was aided partly by an imperfect system
of hieroglyphics, can make very little progress in intellectual culture’ (3).
Such assessments provided a foundation for hegemonic and ethnocentric
school practices that discounted native culture, history and literacies
throughout the Americas. Indeed, such views are informative in that they
reinforced what Semali and Kincheloe (1999) call a ‘curriculum of “re-
education”’ that shaped early attitudes about intellectual and vocational
capabilities and justified the unequal educational opportunities that continue
to thrive on both sides of the US–Mexican border.

García Icazbalcata (1931) recounts how, in the sixteenth century, the cre-
ation of unequal schools with unequal resources was acceptable. In his opin-
ion, distinctions between Indians and nobles were not due to unjust
preferences, but rather were based on six key arguments. First, poor
children would never govern, thus their education did not need to be exten-
sive. Second, poor children needed to be taught as quickly as possible so
that they could return home to help their parents earn a living. Third, sons
of nobles were not needed at home and could thus spend more time in
school preparing for leadership positions. Fourth, it was necessary for
Indians to work in the mines and fields because hard labor would protect
them from greed. Fifth, missionaries could not spend their limited time
teaching higher education to those who did not advance quickly. Sixth, girls were not taught higher education because they were to prepare for their duties as wives and mothers (García Icazbalcata 1931; Ricard 1974).

Historically, this kind of dual educational system was subtractive because it discredited indigenous ways of knowing and it dislodged conquered peoples and women from their role as knowledge producers. ‘Traditional patterns of generational authority’ (McDonald 2004, 17) were also disrupted in the process. Young people were taught to perceive the wisdom of family and community elders as primitive and to instead privilege the knowledge reinforced by colonial schools and teachers (George 1999; Smith 2001). Establishing an epistemological hierarchy where Latinos are tested on their ability to think like the dominant group continues to render the knowledge of Latinos and other minoritized groups invisible. Vandana Shiva summarizes the analysis when she says, ‘In other words, “local knowledge is made to disappear” when the dominant system negates “its very existence,” or when it erases or destroys the reality which the local knowledge attempts to represent’ (Reynar 1999, 289).

Throughout this history, it is important to note that young people and families were never passive bystanders. Though education was compulsory during the Spanish colonial era, many native parents refused to send their kids to school (García Icazbalcata 1931). Parents and youth, throughout time, have actively resisted the deculturalizing influences of what has now emerged into a Westernized model of public education. Parents have contested the religious belief system that supported Positivism and privileged traditional Western science over native elder-epistemologies, individualism over collectivism, and nationalism over interculturalism. In Guatemala, for example, during the 1933–34 reign of Jorge Ubico, when mandatory school attendance was physically enforced among the Maya’s Kaqchikel speakers, parents hid their children in the fields and sweat baths to avoid teacher brutality and attempts to ‘eradicate their language and culture’ (Carey 2001, 157). In the US, the Chicano Studies Movement of the 1970’s and more recently in 2011, the struggle to protect Mexican-American Studies in Tucson, Arizona, banned in 2011 by the Tucson Unified School District despite its widespread success are important examples of community resistance.

**Indigenous peruvian experiences of school**

Sentiments were similar in Peru, where, according to Epstein (1971), a cultural hierarchy persisted due to economic, social and political domination inaugurated through conquest by the Spanish conquistadors at the expense of the native Indians. Efforts to re-educate, through schooling proved rather unsuccessful, because for the indigenous of Peru, education represented a systematic attempt ‘to divest the Indian of his language and life style.'
Indeed, after generations of forcing the Indian to be servile and attempting to displace his culture, it is not surprising that Peru has experienced occasional bloody peasant uprisings directed against colonial institutions’ (Epstein 1971, 189).

In yet another study, Ames (2012) describes how indigenous serving schools in Peru lack true investment and infrastructure and fail to have sufficient furniture, books and other instructional materials necessary for school success. Nonetheless, they found that in interviews performed in 2007 and 2008 with indigenous Quechua families from a small rural community, families wanted their children to go to school so they learn to speak Spanish and have access to economic opportunities and resources. Interestingly the children who lived the furthest from school demonstrated the strongest interest in attending. The children who lived closest and had the most access showed the least interest in attending school. When they interviewed the students to see what was happening, they discovered that the children were being disciplined with whips when they did not understand the curriculum; children were forbidden from speaking their language; and, they were chastised by both teachers and students when they wore their traditional clothing. Ames (2012) concluded that those farthest from colonial schools and who had the least access, responded with the greatest interest because they had the least exposure to the discriminatory and demeaning aspects of the schooling process. While those who were students and who had the most access responded more negatively because they were struggling through the daily injustices of an oppressive school environment that had little regard for the knowledge or culture that indigenous children were eager to contribute.

Indeed, throughout the Americas, from the colonial era to the present, schools have been used as instruments of deculturalization. Ricard (1974), another historian who studied colonial educational methodologies, argues that integrating the heritage language and culture of the natives was never a priority of the schools. The Spanish in colonial Latin America, much like the United States’ K-12 system today, were not concerned with the integration of native beliefs, history or perspectives. On the contrary, such systems were designed to marginalize and suppress the beliefs and perspectives of native peoples north and south of the border, and they continue to be replicated without any thorough examination or meaningful correction.

The colonial legacy in education has become normalized
Morales (1997) suggests the loss of one’s connection to one’s history and identity can be traumatic and painful especially for those dispossessed of their history by another group which holds power over them. It is important for Latinos to bring their colonial past to the fore when
engaging in contemporary debates so one can examine the ideologies behind the ‘dehistoricization’ of Latinos. Many of these ideologies have become systematized and normalized school practices. Sonia Nieto (2010, 69) posits that:

[I]nequality is not achieved just through conspicuous practices such as segregation or unequal funding. It also takes place through well-intentioned policies such as retention and ability group tracking, or because of conditions such as a lack of teachers of diverse backgrounds or the level of perceived safety in schools. Another important way in which inequality manifests itself is through pressure to assimilate to the cultural and linguistic mainstream.

As Nieto notes, a hierarchical praxis is reinforced when young people are grouped by ability, mobility, language and culture. Such categories, erected in the colonial era, as García Icazbalcata (1931) demonstrates, perpetuate inequities by shaping our (mis-)understanding of students through the use of culturally biased curriculum and assessments.

Latinos continue to be disparately impacted because their knowledge, language and values are not shared by the dominant culture of their schools. In an ethnographic study of Latino immigrant parent’s understanding of schools, Valdes (1996) argues that not only are Latinos being labeled as limited in learning because of cultural and language differences, but also because they don’t buy into the time structured framework of schools, where students are punished with a negative label if they do not meet a predetermined amount of learning within a one hour class period or a nine-month school year. Furthermore, it is considered a weakness – or a form of instability – rather than a strength, when Latinos are mobile, frequently relocating in order to seek better job opportunities, neighborhoods or schools. Disparities become even more acute when seen within the context of unequal funding/unequal schools, a carry-over from the colonial era, which justifies a system where students do not receive the services, nor the resources, they need to succeed. These inequities can also be seen in school districts, strapped for cash, that use unfair assessments to push these supposedly ‘high needs’ students out of school and into the waiting arms of an exploitive industry, or worse, a privatized prison system.

When Latinos are dehistoricized and removed from their indigenous and pre-colonial understandings of education by the physical and psychological construct of the US–Mexican border, they are more easily victimized by schools and policies such as NCLB and the more recent, RTT. Invoking associations from the colonial past to shed light on contemporary struggles may compel educational scholars to more critically dissect the etiology of assessment and the declarations that frame it with an eye towards how such rhetoric continues to influence educational policy and further disenfranchise historically oppressed groups, such as Latinos.
A recent example of how a community outside of Detroit exercised its own self-determination by acting against the dehistoricization and oppression of its own group illustrates these ideas.

**An educational backlash in Tucson**

In Tucson, Arizona, a city that lies 1676 miles Southwest of Detroit, the battlefield has expanded to include public education policy. Emerging from their state of dehistoricization, students from the Mexican–American Studies (MAS) program in the Tucson Unified School District using a culturally appropriate, indigenous based praxis, had finally begun to see themselves in the curriculum used in their classroom and they began to understand their own history and identity in the Americas. Using a critical pedagogy framework, they examined how both differences and similarities among people strengthen a democracy.

Despite programmatic success and a rejuvenated interest in education as reported by students, MAS became the target of legislation banning ethnic studies from K-12 schools. This legislation, in turn, prompted an educational backlash from the Tucson Latino community. Latino students who were, as a result of the program, beginning the process of ‘rehistoricization,’ discovering their own voice and agency over their own educational development, suddenly found themselves once again misunderstood and disenfranchised. The film, *Precious Knowledge* (Palos 2011), about the MAS struggle, became the story of the broader Latino community’s plight in the face of academic misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

Teachers interviewed for the film described the rhetoric that had been used to inflame the legislators and general public. Repeatedly it was argued that MAS classes taught ethnic solidarity and hatred toward other groups and promoted the overthrow of the US government (Cabrera et al. 2013). Students and educators alike described how the program had been developed to build bridges and understanding and how erroneous was the claim that the program incited ethnic divisiveness and intolerance. In fact, in the aforementioned documentary, *Precious Knowledge*, clips are shown of how students began each day of class by chanting a Mayan proverb, ‘In Lak Ech: You are my other me. If I do harm to you, I do harm to myself. If I love and respect you, I love and respect myself’ (Palos 2011).

Although the debate over ethnic studies in Tucson was largely centered on the education of Mexican youth in Arizona, consciousness of injustice and marginalization was heightened across the country. Shortly thereafter, youth in Latino Detroit began to mobilize themselves locally against mass public school closures and what they felt were educational inequities within the system.
A story of resistance in Latino Detroit

On April 25, 2012, the national press reported that over 150 students from two high schools in Latino Detroit staged a walk-out to protest educational cutbacks and school closures within their community. The students themselves, on their own website (SWD Freedom School 2012) claimed that this number was actually double the number reported, and numbered around 300 students. In a YouTube clip produced by a member of the community (Knoxx 2012), students were shown holding signs that said, ‘Stop the Abuse’ and ‘No More Charters’ and ‘Our Schools Are Not For Sale.’ The video clip (Knoxx 2012) shows students standing across the street from their school, in a public park, yelling to their peers as they left the school: ‘You have the right… walk out!’ And, ‘Si Se Puede’ a popular united farm-worker chant, reminiscent of the work of Cesar Chavez and the boycotts he led in the mid 1960s. With a megaphone, they also chanted in a call and response style: ‘When public education is under attack, what do we do? Stand up, fight back!’ This demonstrated their displeasure at the current reform efforts taking grip over their community.

Publically archived student testimonies (SWD Freedom School 2012), reveal the motivations that fueled student discontent:

One student remarked, ‘I refuse to accept that Detroit students are unimportant. I refuse to accept that we are not good enough for books. I am sick and tired of policies that push us out of schools, treat us like criminals, and don’t engage us in the classroom. WE DESERVE MORE. WE DEMAND MORE.’

Another student indicated, ‘We shouldn’t have to fight to keep our schools open, we shouldn’t have to fight for better schools, we shouldn’t have to fight for a quality education. But because of the greed and corruption of those in power, we are forced to fight for it all.

And still another explained, ‘To me, it makes sense kids are acting a fool in the hallways or the bathrooms – they’re not being engaged in class. The solution we’ve been given for that is a bunch of big goons in rent cop jump suits ready to use excessive force against us at any time. Our prison comes complete with wardens.’

Reminiscent of the under-resourced and oppressive colonial schools of Puerto Rico, Mexico and Peru, students in Latino Detroit decried the prison-like environment, the lack of academic preparation, the lack of critical resources such as textbooks and even toilet paper (SWD Freedom School 2012). They criticized the inadequate curriculum and low expectations that failed to prepare them for college and beyond. One student claimed, in the video that the average ACT score of the school hovered around 13 – not because students could not perform better, but because
teachers expected little of them and failed to teach them (Knoxx 2012). Lastly, students denounced educational policies that were profit driven and that prioritized greed rather than the best interests of students.

On the morning of the student walkout, student protesters publically reported through news outlets and social media, that, rather than address the situation with compassion and concern, school officials attempted to restrain and physically detain students, locking doors, confiscating their cell phones, and actually deleting personal messages from their phones (Knoxx 2012). One student remarked that he knew his rights and that this was a possible violation of their constitutional rights protecting them from illegal search and seizure (Knoxx 2012).

According to a letter archived on the student’s website, posted to their parents on April 24, 2012 (SWD Freedom School 2012), many of the students were suspended for five days as a result of their participation in the walkout. The letter states:

We do not understand why we are being punished with a loss of educational opportunity when that is exactly what we were fighting for. It is unfair that we are not receiving the quality education that we deserve, that we want. We were fed up and took a stand for something we believe in and by doing so the very system that has been failing us continued to fail us by taking away the one thing we want, an education. You/your family came to this country for a better life and we respect that, now we want to fight for a better life for ourselves. (SWD Freedom School 2012)

In another archived document (SWD Freedom School 2012), students, wrote to both the Emergency Financial Manager and the Chief Academic Officer of Detroit Public Schools, asking for textbooks, a more reasonable due process for suspension rulings, smaller classes, better instruction, and, in particular, a hearing so that student voices could be respected and included in the debate about school closures. Demanding better quality education and that their voices be heard, they proclaimed:

… schools are assets to the community – they should not be privatized, schools are not supposed to be ran [sic] as businesses. Education is a long term investment. Schools should not be making money off of our students. We are students. We are people – not dollar signs. (SWD Freedom School 2012)

Many community organizations mobilized to support the youth and connect them to legal counsel. A letter dated April 26, 2012, from the Detroit and Michigan Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG), to one of the high school principals addresses what the lawyers believed to be an overly punitive response. It states:
As important as the 1st Amendment issues are, I also want to address a more practical and fundamental question, that is, how should the DPS relate to students who have evidenced their own fierce determination to secure an education? While of course, I and the NLG recognize the legitimate need of the DPS leadership to maintain order in the schools, these young people were not engaged in some willful and pointless misconduct. The students were seeking, in a time honored and constitutionally protected fashion, to make known to the public their firmly held belief that they, and their siblings and neighbors, are about to lose their chance for a quality education. (SWD Freedom School 2012)

Perhaps school officials deemed these corrective measures as necessary to maintain order. At least one spokesman clarified that the district perceived the walkouts as disruptive and in violation of the student code of conduct. In a Huffington Post newspaper article, dated April 26, 2012, this same official was quoted as saying, ‘We will fully enforce the student code of conduct, including skipping classes during a school day.’ This suggests that consequences might align with the school’s disciplinary protocol as it relates to code of conduct violations.

However, several students reported a different story. One student reported that she was strongly discouraged from participating in the walkout and was told, ‘If you walk out, you’ll be suspended, go to jail, get a 500-dollar ticket’ (Huffington Post, April 26, 2012). Another student reported that he was approached by school security guards and police officers who questioned him about the walkout. When he refused to respond they confiscated his phone and looked through it for evidence. They told him that they were trying to protect him, but he said, ‘I know my rights. I’m not a knucklehead. I know what’s going on. I have freedom of speech I can say what I want. I have freedom of press, I can show what I want, so they’re just trying to control us. They treat us like we are in prison, but we’re not. We’re in a school. We’re supposed to be being educated, not oppressed’. (SWD Freedom School 2012)

References to the police, jail and tickets were commonplace among the student protesters. Indeed, a third student took a picture of the misdemeanor ticket she received for ‘Disorderly Conduct’ and posted it under the ‘archive’ on the student’s website (SWD Freedom School 2012) demonstrating that education officials were willing to take consequences out of the education realm into the criminal realm, where young people were treated less like students and more like criminals. Such behavior on the part of school officials demonstrates a willingness to criminalize their own students and demonstrates some level of complicity with the school to prison pipeline.

Also placed in the ‘archive’ at SWD Freedom School (2012), was a document entitled, ‘Full List of Demands to the DPS.’ The full document lists a total of 29 demands. Out of the 29 demands, eight of them exemplified a
troubling response to student concerns about the effects of educational policies on the quality of their education. In the list, students make reference to the word ‘prison’ twice with regards to running the school like a prison and ‘making students feel like we’re in a prison.’ Other words that could indicate a willingness to connect students to the school to prison pipeline are ‘suspensions,’ ‘criminal charges,’ violating student rights, unnecessary searches, laying hands on students and ‘physical attacks on students by security guards.’ The full text from the eight demands, discussed above, are noted below:

- Stop making students feel like we’re in prison.
- Don’t want suspensions to go on our student records.
- Don’t press criminal charges against students involved in the walkout.
- Don’t violate students’ rights.
- Don’t take students’ phones and search through & delete their content.
- Don’t lay hands on students. No more physical attacks on students by security guards.
- Honor the DPS Code of Conduct.
- We’re students, not money signs or criminals. Stop running school like a business or a prison.

Perhaps, students were perceived as delinquents contributing to the failure and the closure of the school and unworthy of a voice or democratic participation. Valenzuela (1999) notes that schools often perceive Latino students as problem youth based on standards of achievement, manner of dress and a perceived disassociation from the teachers and curriculum. Unfortunately, such behavior, according to the students was not limited to the day of the school walkouts but rather a common everyday occurrence as documented in the testimonies archived on their website. (SWD Freedom School 2012)

**Discussion**

Resistance efforts in Latino Detroit demonstrate the ominous disconnect between policymakers and community stakeholders, like these brave youth. By closing ‘failing schools’ and pushing a high stakes testing and a ‘Race to the Top’ mentality, policymakers believe they can close the achievement gap. Students in Latino Detroit, on the other hand, signal that the opposite is true. Such policies have resulted in an increased police presence at schools; overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms; the curtailing of student voice and due process. The dismantling of democratically elected school boards and retaliatory measures such as harassment, intimidation and perpetual suspensions are all designed to silence and oppress. One student summarized this nicely, when she wrote, ‘We know that fear is a powerful tool to control people. We are students and TEACHERS who are risking
punishment, suspensions, and losing jobs BUT WE’RE HERE ANYWAY’. (SWD Freedom School 2012)

Furthermore, the terminology used by policymakers reinforces negative stereotypes about Latinos and encourages youth to internalize responsibility for the actions of their oppressors, thereby decreasing confidence in their own ability to persist and succeed. These top-down terminologies based on a top-down, educational praxis, can only serve to exacerbate historical and cross-border inequities. Stigmatizing young people with tests scores after subjecting them to colonial school policies and practices is not only discriminatory, but it is a violation of their civil and human rights.

Until these situations are rectified and schools and communities are equalized, standardized assessment will continue to be another in a long line of human rights abuses for poor and urban communities. It remains akin to measuring skulls and brain cavities (Gould 1996) in that it appears scientific, but current approaches to assessing learning and educational progress demonstrate little about the vibrant complexity of human intelligence, and indeed reveal little about Detroit’s Latino community.

In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness that traditional public schooling is being threatened in this country. Public funding is declining; teachers and administrators are being given pink slips; schools are being closed or privatized; security guards patrol the halls of urban schools; many test scores and drop-out rates are abysmal. Indeed, the comparison between urban schools and prisons is increasingly apt. Perryman (2009), studying the pressures under which public schools in Britain were operating, adopted Foucault’s (1995) theoretical and metaphorical use of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. The panopticon was a surveillance structure built in such a way as to ensure compliance because one could never know if one was being watched at a particular moment. Furthermore, human beings in the panopticon structure were reduced to objects of observation and data collection. Such an arrangement privileged procedures that maximized power and control while eliminating those that fostered communication and relationship-building.

This is the case with our current education reform efforts. Thus, it is critical that scholars and policymakers recognize the historical and transnational genealogy of abuses and how these histories repeat and regenerate themselves in our schools. Through analysis, we see that people in what is now Latin America and their descendants throughout history have exercised their discontent with education policies. Over five hundred years after contact, youth in Latino Detroit are protesting many of the same educational practices and perspectives as their predecessors. By speaking against privatization efforts and greed, they evidence an awareness of structural racism and the industrialization of oppression. We believe that if educators and policymakers better understood how students’ actions relate to larger historic,
social and political movements, it might stimulate mobilization efforts
towards a more relevant, inclusive and just education for all students.

Lastly, in his empowerment model of education, which he argues for an
additive rather than subtractive approach to education, Cummins (1986)
identifies the need for community involvement and for the utilization of an
interactive and engaging pedagogy. Student protesters in Latino Detroit
repeatedly requested to have ‘community involvement’ and an ‘engaging
pedagogy.’ They wanted a voice in the decisions being made about the
schools in their community:

The thing is, despite what any emergency manager thinks, we are not stupid.
We know that the solution to problems in our school is not to close them. We
need to improve our system. And we have ideas. We experience the problems
firsthand and we want a seat at the table to fix them. (SWD Freedom School
2012)

These wise voices are part of a sacred collective of voices seeking
educational justice for their communities. They signal a need to move
beyond a ‘deficit analytical lens’ that ‘places value judgments on communi-
ties’ (Yosso 2005, 82) towards a more structural re-shaping of not just
schools but rather the entire educational system (Yosso 2005), as evidenced
by the statement, ‘we need to improve our system.’ (SWD Freedom School
2012). Taking the lead from these students in Latino Detroit, the authors
conclude that a healthy educational system should include a student and
family voice. It should reconcile historical injustices by holding itself
accountable to the people it strives to serve. Such a system should be used,
not as top down legitimization or de-legitimization of a people or existing
approaches, but rather as an equalizing opportunity where people on the
ground re-imagine curricular objectives and content delivery; analyze
results; drive policy and have the opportunity to transform schools in their
own community. Until the ‘system’ can rise to this level, and put love
ahead of profit, these ‘reform’ initiatives will continue to reflect the colonial
educational legacy in American schools.

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