

9-2020

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Jorge F. Rodriguez

Chapman University, jorodriguez@chapman.edu

Carah Reed

Karen Garcia

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Recommended Citation

Rodriguez, J. F., Reed, C., & Garcia, K. (2020). “It was time for us to take a stand”: An ethnic studies classroom and the power of student voice. In: L. Hogg, K. Stockbridge, C. Achieng-Evensen, & S. SooHoo (Eds.), *Pedagogies of With-ness Students, Teachers, Voice and Agency* (pp. 175-185). Gorham: Myers Education Press.

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“It Was Time for Us to Take a Stand”: An Ethnic Studies Classroom and the Power of Student Voice

Jorge F. Rodriguez, Carah Reed, and Karen Garcia

I told myself enough is enough and it's time to do something about these issues. I gathered up people that felt the same way as me. We all agreed and made sure that we left our High School on a much better note. It was time for us to take a stand. (Janet, student activist)

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE INVITE you to join us—a high school graduate, an Ethnic Studies teacher, and a university ally—as we reflect on a story of student mobilization for change. Some of us will share firsthand narratives while others, such as the university ally, will contribute an interpretive analysis. We all grew up in the region where our story takes place. This affords us a personal understanding of the cultural and political dynamics described in our story. To protect identities, we use pseudonyms for students and teachers.

This is a story about ways that students named and directly addressed issues in their school to create change. Student activist, Janet, reflects on some injustices that stirred students into action:

I've always been passionate about making a difference. Education, to me, is very important. I believe we, as students, deserve to be treated with respect. There are students from other high schools that don't need to deal with half of the issues we face with on a daily basis. For example, our school locks the restrooms during lunch! This is an issue that shows that the way we are treated in this high school is just not fair.

This movement for change formed in the context of an Ethnic Studies classroom in a California high school. The school began offering Ethnic Studies in 2015, providing students with a more holistic understanding of racial histories within the United States. The Ethnic Studies movement gained

recognition during the Civil Rights era, challenging mainstream education to include an intersectional social-historical understanding of identity within a U.S. context (Banks, 2012). This is an interdisciplinary approach to education, drawing from Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, Critical Studies, Cultural Studies, and others as its foundation.

Seeing the Larger Context

To begin, we contextualize the political, cultural, racial, and educational realities of our community. The high school in reference is one of the largest in our city, with a population of 2,800 students. Almost 98% of students are Hispanic or Latinx of any race, and 92.7% are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). For most students who attend this high school, making ends meet is a struggle for their families. Often, families co-share housing due to unaffordable rents and high housing costs (González, 2017).

The economic and racial demographic struggles of the school mirror those of its city. Compared to the quality of life and education of youth within the rest of the county, students' learning and development experiences are drastically inequitable. Some adults like Mrs. Becky, the Ethnic Studies teacher, recognize the injustices of student educational experiences. Her reflections below describe what she sees:

Being an educator at [this] High School for 19 years, I feel that sometimes students are not factored into the decisions that are made on campus. The classes are busting out at 40 students each. Students are given little consideration in how the schedule is built.

Oftentimes students are not allowed to advocate for their needs. They must just take what they are given. The lunch area is packed, and students are anxious to get in line for lunch because it takes almost all lunch time to get lunch while waiting in line. Bathrooms are often locked.

Rarely are students taught to think for themselves. Mostly students are given packets or worksheets to finish instead of the teacher taking time to explain and excite engagement in the classroom. Students are bored.

And they are criminalized. Just this year, administration stopped students who were late to first period. They confiscated their phones. One young man was asked if he was on drugs. The place becomes more about order and domination than free expression and learning to lead.

Mrs. Becky's observations critique the deficit thinking and low expectations pedagogically implemented within her high school (Lacayo, 2016). She demonstrates how her school seeks to control youth. In her statement, she references the importance of student-initiated advocacy. She emphasizes the importance of providing a space for dialogue. Mrs. Becky understands the importance of "free expression" and "learning to lead." From her pedagogical perspective, this means turning over power to students. Her beliefs and her practice emphasize the importance of allowing students to fully embrace their education. It means that instead of being criminalized, youth must be perceived as smart, thoughtful, and capable.

Mrs. Becky reflected on her own educational experience, elaborating on differences between education at the high school and that within more privileged, affluent school districts:

I know that, as a teacher, I am always thinking about how students are taught in other districts, districts with students who have more access, more privilege. I am a product of a system like that: small class sizes, trust for students, few gates, no police-officers, curriculum that inspires one to be a leader. These districts have teachers who look at the whole child and gifts they bring to the classroom. They see their students as smart and not deficient.

I am always striving to put students at the center of their experience in class. I try to create meaning. I try to make stuff applicable. I see students as leaders, as smart and having capacity. I know they can become anything that they want. I want them to enjoy learning and see themselves as active participants in the process. I want them to understand their power within this system. I want them to see that they have agency.

Unfortunately, not all teachers, administrators, schools, or city officials see education and students as Mrs. Becky does. Stigma and deficit thinking about youth are prevalent throughout the region.

Students from low-income and marginalized environments understand that the school lacks resources and that their education is less than they deserve as learners. Their families also understand and feel the disparity. The high school's city is predominately Latinx, immigrant, and low income. According to Arellano (2008), "illegal immigration" has become political code justifying discrimination, demeaning attitudes, and segregation from Hispanic, Latinx, and immigrant communities. Prevailing perceptions and assumptions about the surrounding city are deficit-based, attributing negative characteristics and stereotypes to those who reside in and affiliate with the community (Lacayo, 2016). This affects education as well.

Enough Is Enough! Student Self-Determination

Our story begins as youth in the school identify and address issues they encountered daily. Mrs. Becky's class provided a space where students discussed problems they experienced, and she provided historical examples of how other students advocated and fought for their education. The reflective process that students engaged in motivated them toward action. Janet describes their process and experience:

The journey of this project began when we watched the movie *Walkout*. The movie was based off of Chicanas/os fighting for equality in their school in Los Angeles in the 1960s. In my Ethnic Studies class, all the students decided to make some changes in our school. We were very motivated to make change.

We got into groups. Each group wrote problems they saw at school down on paper. A lot of the problems listed were about the restroom situation. We had the same situation as the kids in Los Angeles walkouts did. The administration or security would lock the restrooms during lunch, and they would leave them locked for the rest of the day, leaving about 2,800 students in our school unable to go to the restroom. The administration believed that we would get in fights or maybe even do drugs if we went to the restrooms.

We are discriminated against a lot in our community just because of the color of our skin. In our school, you would see around four security guards constantly looking to get someone in trouble. The list included more than the restrooms: we had issues with lunch lines, teachers, administration, and gates.

We felt solutions to our issues should not be too much to ask for. We wanted to feel welcome and feel like we matter.

Janet voicing out her needs, given the environment she navigated at her school, was impressive and powerful. Her narrative demonstrates her passion and commitment toward addressing long lines during lunch, access to restrooms, security guard policing, and teacher/administrator perceptions. One phrase that should be noted in Janet's statement was "We wanted to feel welcome and feel like we matter." In her book *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*, Dr. Angela Valenzuela discusses evidence that caring in education is vital and necessary for a more equitable learning experience for Mexican and Latinx youth (Valenzuela, 1999).

Students identified direct parallels between conditions in East Los Angeles that led to walkouts and conditions they experienced. They demonstrated their willingness to contribute and advocate for the improvement of their high school. Janet articulated the process her class embarked on and how they mobilized for action:

We wrote on sticky notes any issue regarding counseling, bathrooms, lunch line, administration, etc. We accumulated all the responses and many of us had similar experiences and inconveniences. Then, Mrs. Becky introduced us to Youth Participation Action Research projects. It was new to most of us, however, all of us were open to learning.

Our teacher shared ideas about what our education might look like if issues were addressed. Then, my team started to think about how we could bring our ideas and concerns to the administration. I personally wanted to work on this because it was very important for me to try to confront the people who have the most power in this school.

We started our project by creating a survey to gather the concerns of other students in our school. Each person in the team typed up questions for our survey. We then analyzed each other's questions and voted on the ones we would use.

We went around campus at lunch and even during our class to give people these surveys. The responses we got were very powerful. Students gave us their honest

opinions about administration, teachers, counselors, and just about everything in the school.

We took all the data from the surveys and wrote down the solutions students wanted and the problems that came up the most. This was all great data because now we had over 200 students that felt the same way about these issues, making our voice all the more powerful.

After collecting survey responses, Mrs. Becky's class processed the information and began to address issues reported on campus. They began to question their school culture and policy. They pushed back on normalized expectations such as locked restrooms and lunch line injustice (such as athletes cutting in line, making the lines even longer and impossible to acquire lunch). As students began addressing these issues, they witnessed changes on campus. Excitement set in. The changes affirmed the power students hold when owning, committing, and engaging with their education in critical ways. Mrs. Becky described the students' energy during this time:

As the students began to collect responses some became excited, others overwhelmed. Two days into the data collection, athletes were no longer able to cut in the lunch lines. Victory at the gate is always inspiring. This created a spark for the rest of the class. Some students struggled to ask/give surveys, some were hustling in the early morning to get students to fill out surveys before school. Also, some groups incorporated checking locked restrooms, taking pictures of restrooms without mirrors, and such. It provided guidance to all groups.

Some became overwhelmed and some loved the challenge . . . We were pushing against many pillars of the system with this project. No wonder it was so hard and will continue to be in further facilitation of this lesson. Changing perspectives, putting power into the hands of students, making the learning completely connected to what they create. It is dynamic to say the least.

Seeing change, students continued to collect information from their peers. They wanted to invite the administration to meet with the class to present their findings. They used their survey findings to develop a 10-point plan summarizing issues faced by the student body. They hoped that the administration would engage in dialogue with the class and begin to implement some attainable solutions. The plan outlined the need for the following:

- [We want] A 15-minute break between second and third period.
- We want our administration to trust us.
- We want better food that even the principal would be willing to eat.
- [We want you to] Give students privileges on dress code.
- [We want] Teachers who actually want to help us succeed in life.
- [We want you to] Let students make their own decisions.
- We deserve open/clean and fully supplied restrooms.
- We want more respect from teachers, strengthening the balance for teachers and students.
- We demand more late starts and early releases.
- We demand filtered water fountains.

Janet reflected on the power and significance of the meeting with the administration:

On April 20, the national student walkout day, we asked the president of the school board, our principal, and all administrators to come to our 5th period class. The school board president was the only one that responded to our email. So, we thought she would be the only one coming into our classroom but everyone [school administrators] else ended up coming. I was in shock because we had everyone that we wanted to confront in our classroom.

I'll certainly never forget that day. I let out everything I kept inside and confronted them with how I felt about everything in this school to the point where tears were coming down my face from the anger I felt. It was a great feeling to tell them how I felt in front of their boss. You don't really get an opportunity like that so I wanted to take advantage of it. They heard our voice that day and we let them know that we wanted change in our school. Things had to change around the campus because it was time for change.

After that day we started to notice a shift between the administration and us. We noticed that they were now more open to hearing our concerns. We really appreciated that. We felt like our voice was finally being heard.

Mrs. Becky's reflection regarding that meeting further explained what occurred:

On the National Day of Protest, we only heard word from the president of the board. No administrators had confirmed. We have one principal and four assistant principals on site. We had not practiced what they [the students] were going to say. I figured they knew their issues. Again, free expression and experience are what I lead with. I had faith in the students and what they were doing. They had their own opinions and had their surveys and areas of concern. Holistically they were ready to meet power with power. We all have to start somewhere.

The students spoke. Gradually the administrators walked in. They [the students] addressed their issues to the president of the board and the administrators. Some students got emotional. "You do not listen to us." Bathrooms, and gates were discussed. One student indicated that they had results from surveys. It was apparent that the leadership was not ready for this formulation. It was a strong learning lesson. Many students were scared to speak, but the students who did speak made an impact. Real learning, real power, real protest.

The effect of this meeting continues to this day, beyond graduation of some of the youth leaders. One outcome of the work was the formation of a student council, specifically designed to enhance communication between administration and students. This council is following through on the demands of the 10-point plan proposed by the Ethnic Studies class. It is exciting to see student voice activated and students embracing their agency and self-determination. A number of student concerns are now being addressed: student lunch lines are shorter, athletes are not given priority, and students have more access to restrooms. But what is most important is that students have acquired skills and strategies such as organizing, advocacy, data collection, and the formulation of solution-based proposals, which they will use for years to come.

The youth showed determination against all odds. Their actions were particularly important given racialized perceptions of students in their community (Lacayo, 2016). The need for students to advocate for their education sheds light on limitations that afflict schools like this one that serve low income communities of color (Acosta & Mir, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999).

Deficit limitations placed upon youth of color and marginalized identities are still the norm in our educational systems and society (Apple, 1979/2004). Because these students were in this Ethnic Studies class, they were able

to work in partnership with a teacher who fostered critical and insightful curricula. These students were able to see their identities acknowledged in the classroom. The pedagogical tools used by Mrs. Becky, such as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR; Cammarota & Fine, 2010), ignited students' desire to ask questions and critically examine their educational environments. YPAR allowed students to interpret their realities and contextualize them within social and academic frames. It enabled them to ask important questions and address social inequalities within their own school environment. The students spoke truth to power and called out injustices in ways that were sincere, direct, and unapologetic.

Learning From Youth Voice

As we authors met throughout the summer months preparing to tell this story, we discussed, planned, and questioned the message we wanted to relay. We reflected on the audience that would read these accounts. We wanted to be transparent and intentional. We hoped sharing this story would motivate educators and students to addressing injustice and oppressive power within their schools.

In our reflection, we came up with three key lessons of this chapter. First, classrooms can be sites where student reflection and self-motivation can be fostered. We saw this when students in our high school reflected upon their learning environments to pinpoint issues limiting their learning. Second, classrooms can be safe, youth-led spaces. The mobilization of these students was possible because they felt safe to question and act without fear of being reprimanded or controlled. Finally, classrooms can be spaces to critically examine/question expectations normalized within students' environments. Students in this Ethnic Studies course questioned everything, even mundane struggles that had become normalized in their schooling experiences.

We end with a reflection by Mrs. Becky:

I have always thought that students should be in a classroom where they have voice. They need to be the center. Their narratives, ideas, and opinions should be the starting point of leaning.

The Ethnic Studies curriculum is liberating and lends itself to a fuller education. The curriculum acknowledges identity and power. It returns students to themselves in every capacity.

Student voices must be shared. Their hearts must be nurtured. They must find creative agency and freedom in what they decide to pursue.

May we strive endlessly to create spaces for our communities that spark creativity, critical analysis, and reflective perspectives of the world we navigate.

Reflection Questions

What practices could you use to monitor your thinking and professional practice for bias and deficit thinking?

What can educators do to provide youth spaces where they can exercise self-determination and have a positive sense of self?

How can educators include students in determining what knowledge is important and appropriate for their learning and/or unlearning?

Recommended Resources

Movies

Bruce, L. (Producer), & Olmos, E. J. (Director). (2006). *Walkout* [Motion picture]. USA: HBO.
McGinnis, E. I. (Producer), & Palos, A. L. (Director). (2011). *Precious knowledge* [Motion picture]. USA: Dos Vatos Productions.

Websites

Xicanx Institute for Teaching and Organizing (XITO): <https://www.xicanoinstitute.org>
Rethinking Schools: <https://www.rethinkingschools.org>

Books

Cauuhtin, R. T., Zavala, M., Sleeter, C. E., & Au, W. (Eds.). (2019). *Rethinking ethnic studies*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools Ltd.

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