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Finding Place in Displacement: Latinx Youth and Schooling Along the Borderlands

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Global trends of international displacement are rising to historical levels, and in the United States, the Trump Administration has proactively initiated legislation to restrict immigration by displaced peoples and build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. This is a reality for Latinx youth living along the U.S./Mexican border in the current political climate, where not only do they battle inequitable educational opportunities, but also a heightened sense of racial discrimination and profiling. This paper argues that it is crucial for teachers along the U.S./Mexican borderland to implement a culturally relevant curriculum to help Latinx youth fight for social justice in these concerning times.

Keywords: Multicultural | Culturally Relevant Curriculum | Pedagogy | Latinx | Social Justice | Borderland

In 2015, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2015) reported that worldwide, approximately 12.4 million people were involuntarily forced out of their homes due to civil war, political conflict, violence, and religious persecution, with Somalia, Syria, and Afghanistan having the highest rates of displacement in the world (Hassan et al., 2015). The 12.4 million displaced pushed the global number of displaced peoples to 65.3 million, a historic high, with roughly half being under the age of 18 (Davies & Batchelor, 2017). For the sake of clarification, the category of “refugee” designates a people who are forced outside of their homelands and cross international borders seeking refuge from persecution of “race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (Goldenzel, 2016, p. 582), whereas displaced people are forced from their homes and stay within international borders but do not legally qualify for refugee status.

It has been found that those categorized as being refugees flee their home countries due to the need for protection from persecution, violence, and/or economic necessity (Goldenzel, 2016). Of the total 65.3 million displaced peoples in 2015, the United States accepted roughly 66,500 out of a maximum of 80,000 immigrants, including refugees and displaced peoples (UNHCR, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education (2014) recently projected that by 2023, Latinx youth will become the number one minority in the U.S. and

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comprise 30% of public school enrollment. However, the number of Latinx¹ refugees and internationally displaced peoples entering the U.S. are being targeted by the current presidential administration due to an unfounded fear of rapists, murderers, and terrorists flooding across the border with Mexico. It is important to note that we have chosen to designate “internationally displaced person” to refer to those Latinx youth who live in Mexico near the U.S. border and were forced to cross into the U.S. to escape violence or for economic necessity.

Introduction

Almost every day in the United States’ media there is a headline about xenophobic fears, the threat of terrorist attacks, and who should be blamed for the specter of violence looming overhead. Hidden beneath those headlines are the faceless millions moving around the world, either voluntary or involuntary, looking for a better life. These displaced and refugee children eventually find their way into the primary and secondary classrooms in the U.S. Public school teachers have the ability to welcome displaced youth and help generate critical thought and global responsibility (Author, 2012, 2016). For the welfare of each child, it is essential to address and explore important issues these Latinx students face, such as anxiety, linguistic and cultural differences, and psychosocial distress. These topics must be brought to the forefront in U.S. schools (Hassan et al., 2015).

[Executive Order No. 13780 \(2017\)](#)² immigrants and non-immigrants seeking refuge from countries that have been deemed potential threats to U.S. security have a 90-day entrance ban. The presidential administration’s stance toward illegal immigrants greatly affect those entering from Mexico. Mexico and Latin American countries are not known to harbor terrorists, yet the U.S.’s neighbors to the south have been treated as the highest of security threats. This is despite recent findings that assert that it is quite possible that entry through Canada poses a much larger threat to the U.S. than Mexico (Nixon, 2016; Swain, 2017). Be that as it may, the new reality is that many displaced Latinx youth living in the borderlands fear that their parents will be captured by law enforcement and quickly deported (White, 2016). While the Obama administration was no stranger to deportation of illegal immigrants, the current administration has created a great fear amongst Latinx families (Seelye, Bidgood, & Robbins, 2017; Westwood, 2017). After the reelection of President Obama in 2012, the administration archived 81,000 immigration cases, which removed the threat of immediate deportation (Rosenberg & Levinson, 2017). This decision was overturned five days after the new administration came into power in January 2017, and, “In the first two months under President Trump, arrests of removable foreigners away from the border were 21,400, including 5,400 who did not have criminal records in the U.S.” (Martin, 2017, p. 321). In addition to the threat of deportation, with the current administration’s proposition of building a wall along its southern border with Mexico, any progressive notion of global cooperation and communication has been lost under a blanket of fear that insulates the United States’ anti-immigrant political stance.

Latinx youth in the borderlands may have experienced physical displacement by coming to the U.S., but in this period of great political and social unrest, there is also

¹ Hereby defined as people with Latin American ancestry (i.e., from Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America)

sociocultural displacement. Much of the Latinx community no longer feels that their culture, values, and skills are welcome in the U.S. (Espitia, 2016). In public school classrooms today, Latinx youth are often marginalized and excluded from the curriculum (Weis, 2016); this is especially true along the borderlands (Rubin, 2017). Latinx children also experience limited and inequitable educational opportunities, such as a narrowed and culturally biased curriculum (Bécares & Priest, 2015). It is the authors' contention that it is the responsibility of all educators in the U.S. to provide displaced youth with a culturally relevant curriculum, one in which students will be given the opportunity to academically and emotionally thrive in a welcoming and non-threatening environment. It will be argued in this article that a culturally relevant curriculum (or a culturally relevant pedagogy) is necessary in the fight for social justice for culturally diverse Latinx youth and their success in the United States. This will be accomplished through an analysis of the current sociopolitical issues facing displaced Latinx youth. In addition, the authors will explain why culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is necessary for both the academic and personal growth of displaced Latinx youth. This article will explicate how teaching a culturally relevant curriculum with a focus on social justice issues has the potential to facilitate critical thought in social, economic, and political arenas of power for displaced Latinx youth.

Multicultural Education Theoretical Framework

Throughout U.S. history, many cultures, particularly those of the Native American, Black, Mexican, and Chinese peoples, have been subjugated or destroyed by imperialistic Western culture (Said, 1994, 2001). However, in the late 20th century, with the rise of intra-racial tensions and civil rights initiatives in the U.S., educational scholars and activists began a multicultural education movement to deconstruct the hegemony of White privilege and Western culture in the curriculum of public schools (Au, 2012, 2014). No longer would curriculum be seen as "colorblind" or neutral, but realize that school curriculum is reflective of the dominant White culture and has subjugated a diversity of experiences, voices, and cultural meanings (Nieto & Bode, 2012; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Multicultural education scholars challenge White privilege in school curriculum so that youth of color may have equitable educational opportunities, ultimately engaging the question whether education can reach a point of social justice (Apple, 2015).

In multicultural education, the fight for social justice for people of color also means learning how to connect with others - broadening one's notion of citizenship to a global perspective (Banks, 2014; Banks & Nguyen, 2008). The multicultural framework helps educators realize that their roles are equally as important in shaping the cultural boundaries of the classroom in regard to which knowledge can be included, valued, and understood (hooks, 1994). Multicultural education seeks to help U.S. educators, who are predominantly White and female, to confront their bias and privilege as a means to incorporate a diversity of experiences and perspectives from students' cultures (Giroux, 2013). Utilizing culture to affirm identity, experience, and history is the basis of multicultural education, while preparing students to develop the critical skills necessary to dismantle social and cultural power structures.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) was developed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) as a way "to improve teacher education in order to produce new generations of teachers

who would bring an appreciation of their students' assets to their work in urban classrooms populated with African American students" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 74). This can be accomplished by focusing on students' academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014). CRP can be thought of as a branch of multicultural education; it not only affirms a child's cultural identity, experiences, and understandings (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011), but it uses these elements as curricular resources to base a teacher's pedagogy (Hammond, 2014). As multicultural education seeks to create a community of diverse learners, CRP bases curricular lessons in the students' many levels of culture, opening a dialogue amongst them to create cultural sharing and community. This community can then begin to critically assess and reflect upon social justice issues pertinent to their lives (e.g., socio-economic inequality, prejudice, and racism) in a way that empowers the students to enact social change.

For teachers to implement a successful multicultural education, it is important to develop culturally relevant curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). A culturally relevant pedagogy utilizes the students' cultural background or heritage, language, skills, values, and experiences as a method to facilitate academic and personal achievement in the classroom. It is essential to focus on social justice issues in class and question the various practices and policies that impact students' daily lives (Ladson-Billings, 2016). Various studies since the inception of the multicultural education movement have proven the effectiveness of being culturally relevant in many areas of education (Gordon, Kervin, Jones, & Howard, 2017; Pas, Larson, Reinke, Herman, & Bradshaw, 2016; Qianqian, 2017). This article was written within this framework.

Issues Facing Displaced Latinx Youth

In recent years, even though the border has seen major changes in enforcement and policy of immigrant entry (Martin, 2017), the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students being taught in U.S. schools are growing at a significant rate (Prater & Devereaux, 2009). For example, the majority of entrants through the U.S./Mexico border are displaced persons and refugees from Latin American countries, resulting from drug cartel violence (UNHCR, 2009). This is especially true in the city of Juárez, Mexico, where over 10,000 people were killed between 2008 and 2012 (Alvarado, 2012). Juárez, a city bordering El Paso, Texas, is a major entry point into the U.S. This binational area has roughly 2.5 million citizens, with thousands crossing the border every day (Eastaugh, 2017). Although between 2012 and 2016, many Latinx people moved back to their homelands, the damage from the drug wars left many physically and/or psychologically estranged (Kazanjian & Choi, 2013). For displaced Latinx youth living along the border, crossing every day to attend school, has become increasingly more intimidating (Velasco Ortiz & Contreras, 2014). In Trump's America, Latinx youth have found themselves threatened in several ways. This is due to the presidential administration's desire to build a wall between Mexico and the U.S. (Bier, 2017), the risk of removing federal funds from sanctuary cities for displaced Latinx immigrants (Barrogán, 2017), immigration raids by federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers, and the subsequent deportations of Mexican immigrants who entered the U.S. illegally and have no criminal records (Martin, 2017; Parvini, & Rubin, 2017; Santana, 2017).

For Latinx inhabitants of the borderlands, attacks on who they are (or perceived to be) influence their perception of reality and worldview (Miller, 2011). For many Latinx youth, this perception of reality becomes the norm. In other words, they internalize their fears about their personal safety as well as those of their family members (Perreira & Ornelas, 2011). Called the “Trump Effect,” Trump’s election campaign had “a profoundly negative effect on [Latinx] children and classrooms. [It produced] an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color and [inflamed] racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom” (Costello, 2016, p. 4).

In addition to the Trump Effect, there are other inhibitors to Latinx immigrant students succeeding in the U.S. classroom. For example, most states in the U.S. have adopted a standardized framework (i.e., Common Core State Standards), and this continuation of a standardized, high-stakes testing environment continues to negatively affect students in the borderlands (Bayliss, 2014; Gewertz, 2013; Hess, & McShane, 2013; Spring, 2016). Ultimately, teaching in this standardized system of learning reduces teacher autonomy as schools are mandated to implement standardized curriculum and exams (Kazanjian & Choi, 2016; Martin & Dagostino-Kalniz, 2015; Ross, 2001; Rubin & Kazanjian, 2011). The standardization movement has also limited teachers from engaging the cultural and linguistic diversity in their border classrooms (Rubin & Kazanjian, 2011). Therefore, many Latinx youth are culturally disconnected from the curriculum, limited to content focused solely on a particular demographic of the U.S. population (i.e., white-washed) (Rubin, 2014). For displaced Latinx youth, “culturally relevant teaching argues that in order for students to be successful in school, they must be given the opportunity to relate to the things that are familiar to them” (Journell & Castro, 2011, p. 10). For example, using culturally relevant literature engages and connects with culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Lopez, 2011). For Latinx youth from Mexico, reading *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros or *Under the Mesquite* by Guadalupe Garcia McCall can provide students the opportunity to reflect upon their own culture and their struggle living in two different, often conflicting, worlds. It is essential that the curriculum taught in the Latinx refugee classroom reflect the language, cultures, and dynamics of the displaced youth.

Latinx immigrant youth bring to the classroom a depth of human experience, cultural histories, and personal beliefs that make the classroom a unique global learning space (Anzaldúa, 1987; Giroux, 2005; Author, 2012; Lea & Sims, 2008), yet Latinx youth are being presented with a curriculum that does not correspond with their reality; it is different in value, worldview, and cultural meaning (Rauland & Adams, 2015; Salas, 2014). As a result, they often feel marginalized in school and that they just don’t “fit in” (Gándara, 2015). Curriculum is meant to guide a child toward learning and development, but when it is not based in her/his cultural reality, it may be meaningless, or worse, can destroy their cultural values and experiences (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Pinar, 2012). The question remains, how do public school teachers of displaced Latinx youth connect with their diverse students in a way that is engaging, supportive, and challenging?

Culturally Relevant Curriculum for Latinx Youth

Many educators along the borderland with Mexico are working to provide Latinx youth a culturally relevant curriculum; however, the fact remains that many educators still

implement culturally relevant pedagogy incorrectly (Ladson-Billings, 2014). As a result, Latinx students are still invisible in modern classroom curriculum (Medina, 2006; Nieto & Bode, 2012). Latinx students are also much more likely to be taught by White teachers who are uncomfortable with them in their classrooms, doubt their academic ability, and simply do not know how to teach them (Sleeter, 2008). According to Lopez (2011), “Engaging in culturally relevant teaching practices does not happen by chance and requires teachers to be critically aware and agentive in their classrooms, drawing on relevant socio-cultural theories and creating their own purposeful praxis” (p. 76). Since the “lives of [Latinx] students outside the school gates are largely marginalized and ignored in their daily school experiences ...[they] are desperate for an education that reflects their lives [as well as inspires them]” (Acosta & Mir, 2012, p. 17). Teachers along the border have the potential to reach their students by acknowledging their students’ varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds and addressing them in the classroom . Rubin (2014) asserts that by engaging Latinx students in a culturally relevant curriculum that directly relates to them, their educational outcomes will be much more positive.

To support educational outcomes, such as critical thinking, K12 teachers must orient the classroom experiences to focus on the student’s language, culture, and lived reality. In other words, “their learning must be relevant to their lives and experiences” (Lopez, 2011, p. 78). As an example, for a secondary U.S. history lesson that focuses on current sociopolitical events in modern U.S. society, the teacher can bring in resources that address the Latinx culture. Helping students explore topics such as the Bracero Program, the United Farmworkers Union, and the writings of César Chavez may inspire Latinx students to question the lived experiences of Mexican Americans in the U.S. The teacher focuses her/his attention on history from the Mexican/Latinx perspective and how the issues of immigration and farm labor are still important today (politically, economically, and socially). Therefore, by using CRP, the teacher facilitates critical thought that both engages the students and values their cultural contributions to the United States.

Unpacking a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Creating a culturally relevant curriculum is of the utmost importance for students of color in the U.S. Prater and Devereaux (2009) assert that a culturally competent teacher can “infuse cultural knowledge and adapt their curricula and pedagogy to the dynamics of differences in the classroom” (p. 20). For Latinx students to be successful in school, it is essential that they are represented in their classroom content. They must be portrayed fairly and honestly in classroom materials along with their daily struggles and successes; the curriculum must allow for displaced Latinx youth to see themselves as valued, not only in the classroom, but in U.S. society as well.

It has been found that, “Culturally relevant teachers conceive of all students as capable of academic success, contribute to the community, and draw out knowledge from their students. They develop a collaborative community of learners in their classrooms, connecting with students and maintaining fluid relationships” (Dee & Penner, 2017, p. 131). The positive, welcoming energy in the classroom can be an effective method of engagement for Latinx students. Cooper (2012) found that Latinas felt comfortable in classes where the teachers supported their identities and made them feel safe, competent, and cared for. In order to ensure displaced Latinx students’ academic success, it is essential

that teachers create a rapport between herself and her students' families as well as create a learning community that is culturally relevant (Sleeter, 2016).

A comprehensive study by Dee and Penner (2017) concluded that “a culturally relevant curriculum implemented in a strongly supportive context can be highly effective at improving outcomes among a diverse group of academically at-risk students” (p. 130). For displaced Latinx youth, a culturally relevant curriculum can be a strong predictor of academic success in school. Renowned scholar, Paulo Freire (2005), posited that, “our relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them” (p. 102). By teachers learning about their students and the worlds from which they come, educators along the borderlands can connect with their displaced students and families in a positive and productive manner.

Importance of Being Culturally Relevant

Culturally and linguistically diverse youth, particularly native Spanish-speaking Latinx students, have a special opportunity to become both bicultural and biliterate (Reza-López, Huerta, & Reyes, 2014). In this way, Latinx students' native language(s) “may be brandished as a weapon of resistance to the dominance of the [English] language” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 154). Students become empowered as they realize that they too are producers of culture in many ways. Racism, gender inequality, and exploitation are curricular spheres that help students to become critical thinkers, speakers, and writers, with the necessary skills to effect social change as it is relevant to their existence (Au, 2012).

Students of other cultural backgrounds also benefit from culturally relevant and relevant curriculum because a diverse classroom reflects a diverse society, in which students need to learn to communicate, value, and accept culturally diverse others (Knotts & Keeseey, 2016; Savage, Hindle, Meyer, Hynds, Penetito, & Sleeter, 2011). According to hooks (1994) this collective dialogue allows for, “Hearing each other's voices, individual thoughts, and sometimes associating these voices with personal experience makes us more acutely aware of each other” (p. 186). In other words, by learning in a classroom that uses a culturally relevant curriculum, students learn more about themselves as well as others.

Applying a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy for Latinx Youth

Culturally relevant curriculum is about understanding subjects in context and utilizing deep cultural meanings of a student to facilitate learning and development (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Savage, et al., 2011). In this way, displaced Latinx youth can be better understood in the context of the borderlands and the greater cultural system they inhabit. Furthermore, when the curriculum is based on students' lives, it includes multiple perspectives, valuing and affirms identities, which seek to include the cultural histories, knowledge, and voices of that culture (Au, 2014; Pinar 2012). Unfortunately, with increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom, it can be challenging for an educator to meet the state/national requirements of a standardized curriculum while providing an education that helps empower immigrant Latinx students to become agents for social change.

The Fight for Social Justice

It is essential that displaced Latinx youth be taught to think in a way that focuses on social justice issues (Rubin, 2017). To be blunt, U.S. society is not equal; in reality, it is a highly tiered and hierarchical society (Hill, 2006). White people, males in particular, control the top layers while Latinx, Blacks, and other people of color make up the lower (and predominantly) bottom strata in U.S. society (Rubin, 2018). Culturally relevant pedagogy is housed within a multicultural framework, which means it will focus on social justice issues in the classroom, where displaced Latinx students are taught to analyze the world in which they live as well as become prepared to fight against discriminatory elements in U.S. society. According to Hursh (2008), school is the perfect place to “raise questions about complicated issues (such as global warming, war, economics, and language), engage in debates, and come to tentative conclusions... Schools can and should contribute to creating a more equal, inclusive, and socially just world” (p. 3). For example, economics classes may begin to analyze how NAFTA affected border cities with the maquiladora. Elements affected such as culture, crime, employment, or border migration may become topics of conversation and analysis. Analyzing poverty and inequality on a global scale puts economic power and privilege in the scope of the curriculum. In the classroom, culturally relevant pedagogy helps to tear down classroom cultural borders so that teachers work with students to challenge the inequalities of schooling and how Latinx youth are treated in society. This is a social justice education in that students become critically aware of the injustices and inequalities in school and community and how the two spheres are interrelated (Gorski & Chen, 2015).

Alsup and Miller (2014) explain that, social justice is a “paradigm for thinking about injustices in school, and how people arrive at and work for more equitable schooling practices as a moral, embodied, and social realization to provide youth powerful opportunities for real-time critical engagement with curriculum in schools” (p. 212). The fight for social justice is essential for a critical thinking democracy in the United States. As a discriminated minority group in the U.S., it is important for Latinx youth to be able to see social justice issues (e.g., illegal immigration) from all sides and come to independent conclusions (Rubin, 2017). Ultimately, Latinx youth will be able to deconstruct prepackaged understandings of “reality” and “democracy” that have been given to schools by political and economic influences (Apple, 2009).

A desired outcome of using culturally relevant pedagogy is facilitating a critical awareness for displaced Latinx students (Journell & Castro, 2011). By providing Latinx youth with a focus on social justice issues, teachers “increase students’ abilities to articulate their experiences, critique their world, and address those identified issues with subsequent action” (Chapman, Hobbel, & Alvarado, 2011, pp. 539-540). Awareness for Latinx youth in the border classroom, for example, may be in the form of elaborating on racial tensions they experience in their community. In addition, with critical thought students may become more aware of the increasing surveillance and police presence in lower-income schools and what that communicates to them as people - a lack of trust and criminalization of Latinx youth (Giroux, 2009). A focus on social justice in the classroom questions how the learning environment and classroom curriculum compare to more privileged ones (i.e., White), which may reveal elements of how social and educational institutions are interrelated (e.g. school and criminal justice systems) (Nance, 2017).

Teachers have the ability to be social justice activists and employ a culturally relevant curriculum that fosters a critical literacy in social, political, and economic spheres of power (Freire, 2005). It is essential that teachers along the borderlands embrace the responsibility of the fight for social justice in order to teach displaced Latinx youth how to combat injustices that they face on a daily basis. Ladson-Billings (2014) asserted that students must be, “pushed...to consider critical perspectives on policies and practices that may have direct impact on their lives and communities” (p. 78). Teachers who employ a culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms have the potential to do just that.

Conclusion

There has been a great increase in the amount of displaced and refugee Latinx youth along the U.S. borderland with Mexico the past few years (UNHCR, 2015). These children are fleeing their homelands due to drug wars, economic necessity, and government instability; they are simply looking for a safe haven. In order to help displaced Latinx youth be successful, not only in school, but as positive and productive members of U.S. society, teachers would benefit immensely from introducing a culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. Culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogies utilize the cultural and linguistic heritage of students to engage borderland injustices to find democratic possibilities and achieve social justice for Latinx people.

It is essential that Latinx youth see themselves in their classroom content in order to affirm their identities and communities. They need to be shown that they are welcome and cared for – not by ignoring their existence, but rather, addressing the issues that brought them to the U.S. and the difficulties they have to deal with every day. By teaching students to think critically about their lives and communities, they can better fight injustices they will encounter in their lives (e.g., racism, prejudice). If students are not engaged into the classroom content, this will not occur (Au, 2014; Rubin, 2014; Hammond, 2014).

Author Notes

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