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Ramon Vasquez

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## **"They Can't Expect to be Treated Like Normal Americans So Soon": Reconceptualizing Latinx Immigrants in Social Studies Education**

Ramon Vasquez\*  
*Western Michigan University*

*This autoethnography examines the experiences of an assistant professor of elementary social studies methods at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Drawing on the Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) methodology of testimonio, the assistant professor in this study, who self-identifies as Chicano, intentionally situates Latinx immigration counter-narratives as oppositional stories to the master narrative of “who belongs.” Using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework for analysis, this paper argues that counter-narratives serve as necessary correctives for reconceptualizing racist, essentialist, and nativist master narratives. This paper shows how social studies education courses in teacher preparation programs (TEPs) can serve as sites for counter-hegemonic resistance to the master narratives that racialize and criminalize recent Latinx immigrants.*

**Keywords:** TEP | Social Studies | Master Narratives | Counter-Narratives | Latinx | Latina/o Students | Immigrants | Critical Race Theory | Whiteness as Property | LatCrit | Preservice Teachers

Latinx children, the majority of them U.S.-born, comprise 1 in 4 of all students in U.S. public schools (Anaya, 2017; Gándara & Mordechay, 2017). According to estimates, however, approximately five million Latinx children classified as *unauthorized* also attend U.S. schools (Goodwin, 2016; Suárez-Orozco, 2017; Sulkowski, 2017). For children labeled as unauthorized, especially those unaccompanied by adults, immigrating to the U.S. remains the only option for escaping political instability, economic hardship, and violence (Abrego, 2017; Catalano, 2017; Danner, 1994; Sklar, 1988). To a large extent, these conditions stem from the long history of covert and illegal U.S. intervention in Latin America (Chomsky, 2015; Galeano, 1997; Schlesinger, Kinzer, Coatsworth & Nuccio, 2005). The history and continuing legacy of U.S. intervention on Latinx people, including vulnerable children, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized communities, rarely surfaces during public discussions of immigration (Galeano, 1997; Pérez Huber, 2017; Urbina, Vela, & Sanchez, 2014).

### **Immigration Master Narratives**

Instead, for discussions about immigration, most Americans draw on master narratives. These narratives consist of simplified “official stories” and ahistorical myths that

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\* Correspondence can be directed to Ramon Vasquez, Western Michigan University, vasquera@gmail.com.

function as scripts for everyday discourses of “who belongs” (Apple, 2015; Giroux & Robbins, 2015; Molina, 2014). By obscuring the legacy of U.S. intervention in Latin America, master narratives, which are never neutral or disinterested, establish and enforce the boundaries of immigration “common sense” (Apple, 2004; Camacho, 2008; Carretero & Van Alphen, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2000; López, 2015; Swartz, 1992). For example, stories of “who belongs” inform demands for constructing a (big, beautiful) border wall. Moreover, master narratives provide the rationale for anti-Latinx policies, such as blocking passage of the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) program, as well as ending both the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program for refugees from Central Americans (Garifa, 2017; Nock, 2017). In short, master narratives create stories that serve the hegemonic political, economic, and cultural interests of the dominant group (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 2013; Harper, 2009). Although ideological, most Americans accept master narratives as objective universal truths (Giroux & Robbins, 2015).

### **Need for Study**

When master narratives remain unquestioned by teachers they legitimize national myths about race, culture, and assimilation (Chomsky, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Pérez, 2015). Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the role that elementary teachers play in reproducing racialized and essentialist stories that conceptualize Latinx children as “others” (Bondy & Braunstein, 2017; Brownlee, 2012; Wagner, Holtz, & Kashima, 2009). For instance, little is known about teachers’ understanding of immigration history or the legacy of U.S. covert intervention in Latin America (Graff, 2011; King & Chandler, 2016). Despite increased anti-immigrant rhetoric, the way elementary teachers make sense of the current racialization and criminalization of immigrants from Mexico and Central America also remains understudied (Douglas, Sáenz & Murga, 2015; Brownlee, 2012; Huber, 2011).

### **Future Teachers: White Preservice Teachers**

Interestingly, even less is known about the way White *preservice* teachers make sense of the experiences and histories of recent Latinx immigrants (Bondy & Braunstein, 2017; Fitchett & Salas, 2010; Picower & Kohli, 2017). White women currently comprise approximately 93% of all elementary school teachers (Howard, 2016). Correspondingly, they remain the largest group of college students enrolled in teacher education programs (TEPs). Group membership, according to Goldberg, strongly influences how people respond to narratives (2014). Generally, as with most people, teachers tend to accept master narratives as natural, factual, and common sense (Rapoport, 2010; Silverman, 2010; VanSledright, 2008). For this reason, the process of reconceptualizing Latinx immigrants in schools first requires interrogating the way preservice teachers understand, deploy, and reproduce master narratives.

## Goal of Study

In light of recent national events, including renewed anti-Latinx policies, it has become increasingly difficult to ignore the role that educators play in reproducing master narratives. As Ladson-Billings (2003) states, “I am sad to report that at the college and university level, social studies education remains as frozen in its old paradigms as it was in the late 1960s” (p. 5). A search of the scholarly literature on immigration master narratives of “who belongs” in social studies methods courses revealed a paucity of studies (Picower & Kohli, 2017; Swartz, 1992). Since children first encounter master narratives of immigration in elementary school, this lack of research constitutes an obstacle to reconceptualizing Latinx students (Apple, 2004; Au, 2009; Banks, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2003).

In this paper, I examine how a group of pre-service teachers in a TEP course used counter-narratives to interrogate current mainstream conceptualizations of Latinx immigrants (De Genova, 2005). While theoretical frameworks for counter-narratives vary, most approaches situate these narratives within a tradition of critical and oppositional stories that challenge the cultural, political, and economic “official” stories (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 2013). Unlike master narratives, counter-narratives reject reductionist stories that essentialize and stereotype people from historically oppressed groups (Viego, 2007). Scholars interested in interrogating racial hierarchies draw on counter-narratives, including *testimonios*, to contest hegemonic ideologies embedded in master narratives (Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

## Organization of Paper

This paper consists of three sections. First, I provide a context for understanding current immigration master narratives. In the second section, I highlight the narrative of Latinx immigrants and Brown-collar labor that I shared with TEP students. Finally, I provide my personal *testimonio*. The last section also includes an analysis of the findings and discussion of the implications of using counter-narratives for reconceptualizing Latinx immigrants.

## Literature on Counter-Narratives

Research on master narratives and counter-narratives in TEPs remains scarce. However, previous research on the use of controversial political discussions in secondary school classes, particularly in civics education, has highlighted successful practices in helping students rethink assumptions and biases (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). By deliberating on political differences, secondary students in one study were able to engage with new ideas and different perspectives (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). According to Hess and McAvoy (2014), discussing controversial subjects, such as immigration, can create opportunities to challenge dominant paradigms. A potential limit of these discussions, however, is that they often fail to draw on *testimonios* to examine racial injustice from a critical perspective (Goldberg, Porat, & Schwarz, 2006; Vasquez, Brown, & Brown, 2012). In short, controversial discussions in the classroom may not challenge students enough to interrogate master narratives effectively (Barton & McCully, 2012; Goldberg, 2014; Salinas, Blevins, & Sullivan, 2012).

A critique of power relations and systemic racism in immigration narratives requires drawing on *testimonios*. Findings from related studies show that relying only on mainstream paradigms reduces engagement and empathy for other perspectives (Goldberg, 2017). For instance, in studies of students in Northern Ireland and Israel, researchers found that students have difficulty interrogating master narratives effectively even when presented with alternative historical explanations and perspectives (Barton & McCully, 2012; Goldberg, 2014). In order to disrupt master narratives effectively, students must have access to the counter-narratives found in the *testimonios* of people from historically oppressed groups (Salinas & Castro, 2010).

Overall, research shows that students can engage in discussions about narratives (Fitchett & Salas, 2010). For example, in a study of how U.S. history is taught in secondary schools, Epstein found that African-American students resisted what they called “White history” by challenging the content of the mainstream curriculum (2010). A small number of related studies highlight the need for more research on immigration discourses in elementary social studies classes (Gallo & Link, 2016). For example, Jefferies and Dabach (2015), show how discussions of immigration and legal status in social studies classes produce tension and apprehension, even for experienced teachers. In another study, Dabach also discusses the unspoken boundaries that exist between students labeled unauthorized and their teachers, which contribute to silences in the classroom (2015).

### **Master Narratives in Teacher Education Programs**

Avoiding serious discussions of immigration is one way that preservice teachers in TEPs reproduce master narratives. For example, Salinas, Fránquiz, & Rodríguez (2016) found that Latina preservice bilingual teachers often have their voices and counter-narratives of immigration silenced by their White TEP classmates. These personal narratives have the potential to interrupt master narratives, which could explain why Latina preservice teachers were silenced. In another study Salinas and Castro show how two preservice teachers used their personal biographies to challenge the master narrative at one school site (2010). Studies such as these provide useful information about the lack of immigration discourses in TEPs (Haddix, 2010). These studies, however, leave much unexamined and undertheorized, especially about racially homogeneous TEPs such as the one examined in this autoethnography (Bonilla-Silva, 2017).

Interestingly, most research on preservice teachers and how they negotiate immigration master narratives comes from other countries (Hickling-Hudson, 2005; Patrick, 2010). In one study of White students in a TEP in Australia, Hickling-Hudson examines how preservice teachers construct their personal beliefs, assumptions, and biases about immigration (2005). In this work, Hickling-Hudson investigates the way White preservice teachers make sense of the master narrative they learned in public school. The TEP students in this study used alternative perspectives to examine and interrogate the ways they have been socialized to privilege White migrant cultures over Indigenous cultures in Australia.

### **Immigration Master Narratives in K-12 Schools**

Master narratives of immigration explicitly teach students that Europeans immigrated legally and peacefully to the “New World” in pursuit of religious freedom (Glenn, 2015;

Jacobson, 1999; Loewen, 2008; Roediger, 2006; Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 2016). Children also learn that many Indigenous peoples ceded their land to White settlers in a spirit of compromise and cooperation (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). This narrative obscures or minimizes Manifest Destiny, settler colonialism, Western expansion, and the eventual appropriation of the Southwest by the U.S. (Calderon, 2014; Shear, Knowles, Soden, & Castro, 2015). Topics such as the mass deportation of legal residents of Mexican descent after the Mexican War remain invisible, as does the genocide of Indigenous peoples by settler colonists (Guardino, 2017; Gutierrez, 2013). For the most part, master narratives situate immigration after Ellis Island as a problem (Foner, 2000). Teaching students to identify the story of Europeans as the normative experience for all immigrants is one way that master narratives reproduce the national myth of “who belongs.”

### **Portrayal of Latinx Immigrants**

Comparing recent immigrants to “traditional” immigrants positions Latinx immigrants as fundamentally deficient or as criminal aliens who threaten American values and civilization (Catalano, 2017; Cobas, Duany, & Feagin, 2015; Vázquez, 2015). Conceptualizations of Latinx people as inferior because of legal status, country of origin, home language, and race draw on stereotypes embedded in master narratives (Camarota & Aguilera, 2014). Stories of Latinx immigrants as foreigners who pose an economic burden and security threat to the nation also draw on stereotypes from master narratives (Armenta, 2017; Bousalis, 2016; Chomsky, 2014; Gallo & Link, 2016; Olneck, 2009; Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017). For example, an analysis by Cruz (2002) shows that textbooks, which TEP students study, generally portray Latinx immigrants as “violent, passive, lazy and unwilling to assimilate into mainstream U.S. society” (p. 323). By labeling Latinx children as “someone else’s babies” or as uneducable freeloaders who refuse to obey American laws, master narratives reproduce ideologies that dehumanize *all* Latinx people (Catalano, 2013; Stewart, 2013; Velasquez, 2017).

Paradoxically, the stereotype of Latinx immigrants as lazy criminals is often juxtaposed with the positive stereotype of Latinx people as “model workers” who willingly take the jobs “normal” Americans do not want (Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard, 2009). Despite this label of model workers, and unlike the “traditional” Ellis Island immigrants, Latinx immigrant children remain distinctly racialized in schools as late-comers and second-class “others” who do not belong in schools (Lee, 2004; Romero, 2008; Sanchez & Romero, 2010).

## **Methodology**

### **Critical Race Theory**

Using a critical race theory (CRT) approach, in this paper I examine the way a group of preservice teachers responded to my teaching of immigration counter-narratives in a social studies methods course (Chandler, 2010). Throughout this paper, which employs a critical race autoethnography approach, I use a CRT framework to discuss and analyze preservice teachers’ assumptions about Latinx children and immigration (Villenas, 2012). As an analytic framework, CRT provides a method for examining how and why master narratives

obscure racism and nativism. A core principle of the CRT approach includes the idea that racism remains entrenched in U.S. society (Bell, 1992).

CRT was developed by critical legal scholars as tool for explaining and challenging the way institutional structures actively maintain racial oppression (Delgado & Stefanic, 2005). Bell in particular saw CRT as a necessary tool for interrogating critical issues of race pertaining to complex legal questions, as well as for explaining the role of endemic racism in perpetuating racial hierarchies (1992). Education scholars, such as Ladson-Billings, have used CRT as a method for examining the underlying pervasiveness of racism in schools that remains unexamined and undertheorized by mainstream paradigms (1998).

## **Analysis**

One way master narratives operate is by excluding the voices and perspectives of historically oppressed peoples. The right to exclude perspectives that challenge the political and economic interests of the dominant culture is one of the main components of the CRT principle of Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). According to Harris, the right to exclude is an essential attribute and function associated with property rights (1993). When White students deploy this right in education settings, such as TEPs, it hinders opportunities to question and challenge master narratives (Gillborn, 2008; Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). Using this CRT principle, I analyze the way preservice teachers often choose to avoid questioning the master narrative in order protect the advantages accrued by Whiteness (Gillborn, 2008; Lipsitz, 2006).

## **Research Questions**

This paper is guided by the following questions:

1. What assumptions and biases do preservice teachers in elementary social studies methods courses have about recent Latinx immigrants from Mexico and Central America?
2. How can teacher educators, including Latinx educators, help preservice teachers use counter-narratives to challenge and interrupt racist nativist discourses and master narratives of “who belongs” in schools?

## ***Testimonio* as Product and Process**

In this critical race autoethnography, I draw on the Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) methodology of *testimonio* (Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Yosso, 2005; DeNicolo & González, 2015) as well as the Critical Race Theory (CRT) approach of storytelling as a form of resistance (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Sánchez & Sáenz, 2017). I use my voice as a person from a historically oppressed group to challenge and counteract the stories of the immigration master narrative (Huber, 2009; Kholi, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2000). For my personal narrative, *testimonio*, I draw on my teaching experiences and reflections as a faculty member of color at a PWI. As part of the critical autoethnography and *testimonio* process, I also reflect on the way my Chicano identity, especially my visible *Brownness* (Muñoz, 2007), affected student interactions with me.

This qualitative method, *testimonio*, derives from the work of Latina feminist scholars who reconceptualized storytelling and life history as a way to link individual narratives to a larger story of oppression (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013; Yosso, 2005). In this case, I use my story to draw attention to the implicit racism embedded in the master narrative of immigration (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). Moreover, I draw attention to the assumptions and biases that students in my course learned in elementary school social studies, both from teachers and through the curriculum. By using CRT to analyze the way preservice teachers in my course engaged with immigration narratives and counter-narratives, I interrogate the pervasiveness and taken for granted aspect of the master narrative.

This qualitative methodology, critical autoethnography, highlights the importance of the stories and experiences of people of color, including faculty of color in education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). As a Chicano man teaching at a predominantly white institution (PWI), my experiences provide a unique perspective and context for understanding and challenging master narratives (Yosso, 2006). While the self is always implicated in ethnographic research, the author need not be the subject (Denzin, 2016). According to Denzin, however, qualitative inquiry must engage and provide a voice to the silenced and marginalized (2016). The storytelling principle of CRT recognizes people of color as holders and creators of knowledge, not merely as subjects (Delgado Bernal, 2002; DeNicolo, González, Morales, & Román, 2015). Although ethnographic in methodology, this study is analytic (Atkinson, 2006)

### **My *Testimonio***

I am a former bilingual education teacher from inner-city Los Angeles (Pico-Union), which is also where I was born and attended K-12 public schools. I self-identify as Chicano and have lived among Mexican and Central American immigrants my entire life. When I taught elementary school, my students included recent immigrants from Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Much of what I describe in my narrative about Brown-collar work I learned from the *testimonios* of my students, their families, and my neighbors. After many years of elementary teaching in the community, I decided to pursue advanced graduate study in education. Leaving elementary teaching was a difficult decision, but my long-term goal was to continue my social justice work as a teacher educator.

After completing my doctorate in multicultural education at the University of Wisconsin, I began teaching introductory courses in critical multicultural education (CME). I secured my first academic appointment at a regional public university in New England. The majority of the students in my courses were White women from the surrounding rural community. All teacher candidates in this program must complete one CME course before starting their field-based student teaching experience. For most, the field placement would be the first time they would have any interactions with Latinx students. The majority of the workers in the local agricultural and dairy farms are Mexican and Guatemalan migrants. Many Latinx workers have U.S.-born children who attend local public schools.

My first semester at this university, I taught three sections of CME with twenty students in each class, almost all the students were White women. I anticipated difficult

conversations about race, especially since I intended to address topics such as structural racism, color-blind racism, and White supremacy. I also planned on introducing students to critical theories and pedagogies. As I had anticipated, we engaged in many difficult conversations, especially around race and structural racism. Teaching this CME class, however, prepared me to work with preservice teachers in the elementary social studies methods course.

The social studies methods course I volunteered to teach my second year fulfills a requirement for upper elementary preservice teachers. Given my experiences in CME, I anticipated that students would come into this class knowing little about the Latinx Diaspora, which is affecting this region of New England (Foxen & Rodman, 2012). This Diaspora means that an increasing number of Latinx immigrants have moved to regions of the U.S. previously unaccustomed to having Latinx people, either temporarily or permanently, living and working in the area (Foxen & Rodman, 2012; Lukose, 2007).

Before completing my syllabus for the course, I met with the professor who had taught the course previously. She was retiring at the end of the year after teaching for over twenty years. When she asked me if I had any concerns about the course, I explained to her what I was planning. Her reply was, “Oh my god! Are you illegal?” She immediately corrected herself by saying, “Of course not. You have Ph.D.” This same faculty member also gave me her teaching materials, including multiple units on the Pony Express and teaching with postage stamps, as well as posters about the American melting pot. In another conversation about Indigenous peoples I asked her if she had any material by or about Sherman Alexie. Her reply was, “Who’s that? I’ve never heard of him.”

I volunteered to teach this course in order to serve as a mentor and guide for students as they learned to interrogate their own unexamined assumptions and beliefs. As a darker-skinned Brown person with Indigenous features, I thought my presence would serve to challenge some of their assumptions and biases. Since I physically resemble many of the migrant workers in the area, I was especially eager to have students rethink some taken-for-granted notions about belonging and Whiteness. Research shows that Whites perceive lighter-skinned Latinx people as more intelligent than darker-skinned ones (Hannon, 2015). More importantly, I wanted students to question the notion that the master narrative represents objective knowledge or truth (Oboler, 2006).

### **Pilgrims and Puritans: The “Right” Immigrants**

The majority of the students enrolled in this social studies course attended K-12 public schools in New England. Students told me that they considered themselves very knowledgeable about immigration, especially about pilgrims. In fact, many had visited Plymouth Rock on school field trips. Students described the study of pilgrims as the foundation for any social studies lessons on immigration because they “created this nation.” The Ellis Island story comprised another important aspect of the immigration narrative, since they “came here legally.” During the first three weeks of class, most students referred to Latinx immigrant children as “Spanish kids,” “illegals,” or “ELL’s” (English Language Learners). Students claimed never to have heard the terms undocumented or unauthorized immigrants.

Most, however, were familiar with the term “anchor baby” and used it in class. Moreover, students demonstrated a lack of basic knowledge about the Mexican War and

its consequences for immigration. This paucity of knowledge extended to having little understanding of how the U.S. acquired a significant portion of land in the Southwest, including California. Many were unaware that they might have to teach this topic in upper elementary classes. Students reported never having heard the terms Chicano or Latinx. When I asked students what they thought about my identity, and whether or not I fit the conception of an American, the ones who responded said they “didn't really see my color.” Ironically, “colored kids” is a common term used by preservice teachers at this university to describe African American children. The following is brief description of the first two days of class.

### **First Day of Class**

On the first day of class, after introductions, I asked students to write down the first eight things they think about when they hear the words Latinx immigration. Students wrote their responses on index cards, which I collected at the end of class. Several students appeared reluctant to participate in this activity. I reassured them that I would not judge them by their answers. This idea of being judged constituted a major concern for students throughout the previous semesters. For that reason, I asked them not to write their names on the cards.

The most common answers to this prompt included words such as “sad, illegal, poor, criminals, drug dealers, and lawbreakers.” Some students included phrases such as “not our problem” or “why don't they fix their own country.” In general, the main theme to emerge during small group discussions of the prompt was that “they have to follow the rules” instead of “sneaking in across the border.” One student wrote that her parents had emigrated legally from Estonia so “why can't they.”

### **Second Day**

On the second day of class, I wrote September 11 on the whiteboard. I asked students to take ten minutes to write ten things that they know about that date. After about ten minutes I asked for students to voluntarily share some of the things they had written. Again as before, most students were reluctant. After a few minutes of silence, some students volunteered and eventually more chimed in with responses. I wrote their comments on the board. Not surprisingly, all their comments referenced September 11, 2001.

After a brief conversation and debriefing I wrote September 11, 1973 on the board. I asked the class if that date was significant for any reason. No one commented. From this starting point we engaged in a conversation about stories, narratives, and master narratives. I also explained the significance of that date. It was the first time any student had ever heard of U.S. intervention in Latin America in general or about the U.S. backed coup in Chile in particular. From this point we moved on to a discussion of Mexico, Central America, immigration, and counter-narratives as correctives for misinformation about historic injustices.

Over the course of the semester I assigned works by Howard Zinn, Ronald Takaki, and Henry Giroux. In this course, I intentionally situated counter-narratives as frameworks for reconceptualizing and challenging immigration master narratives and racist nativist discourses. I explained nativist discourses as intense anti-immigrant rhetoric that seeks to

protect America from immigrants and other “non-natives” (Galindo & Vigil, 2006; Perea, 1997).

The following is an excerpt of a counter-narrative I presented to the class. I composed this narrative as both a product and a process in order to interrupt the notion that immigrants take jobs away from native or “normal” Americans. I shared this counter-narrative with the class over the course of the entire semester. I also provided background information on the root causes for the Latinx Diaspora, including personal accounts from some of my former elementary students from Los Angeles.

### **Counter-narrative: Brown-Collar People**

Surviving in the United States has never been easy for racialized immigrants from Latin America. Despite the myth that Latinx immigrants take jobs away from real Americans, this is not the case. Most Latinx people work in low-paying Brown-collar jobs in segregated workplaces (Thompson, 2011). Thousands of immigrants from Mexico and Central America toil in dangerous agricultural and factory jobs under conditions that “regular” Americans would never tolerate (Catanzarite, 2000; Thompson, 2011). To survive, immigrants accept indignities and abuses that most Americans would consider human rights abuses, including physical and mental mistreatment and even assaults (Catanzarite, 2002). Many of these incidents go unreported or underreported by immigrants for fear of deportation. Children live in constant fear that their parents will be deported (Cobas, Duany, & Feagin, 2015; Saucedo, 2006).

For the most part, Brown-collar jobs exist in a parallel world unknown and invisible to average Americans, including most teachers. This world consists of construction sites, meat processing plants, and agricultural and dairy farms far from urban centers (Catanzarite, 2002). Despite providing essential labor at minimal cost, Latinx immigrants, including children labeled as out-of-school-youth (OSY), remain invisible to the rest of America. The master narrative reproduced in elementary school social studies classes about “who belongs” erases the experiences of Latinx immigrants while rendering their voices mute (Cruz, 2012; Yosso, 2005).

### **Hope for *Educación***

Barring some drastic changes in the existing racial hierarchy, Latinx immigrants in Brown-collar jobs will likely continue working in the same positions for years. The majority of Latinx immigrant parents working in Brown-collar jobs have little hope of improving their own lives. They accept their suffering as both inevitable and permanent (Catanzarite, 2000). Why do they do it? Sustaining immigrant parents is their belief and hope in a better future for their children (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995). Parents hope and dream that someday their children might receive an adequate education in a public school (Camarota, 2004). In short, an education or *educación* that might provide their children with an opportunity to escape the hardships and dangers of Brown-collar work.

While this belief has sustained previous immigrants for generations, something has fundamentally changed in recent years (Giroux, 2015). Under our current economic and social order, including the increasingly rigid racial hierarchy, the chances that a child of racialized Latinx immigrants could receive an adequate education have dwindled

significantly (Armenta, 2017). In fact, many Latinx children live in constant fear of arrest and deportation, even in school (Gonzales, 2015). For those Latinx immigrants who do complete secondary school successfully, many have discovered that they have no options to continue learning. For example, many states deny in-state tuition to non-U.S. residents who qualify for admission to public colleges and universities (Gonzales, 2015). This makes pursuing higher education a problematic option for students. Moreover, Latinx children--immigrant and U.S.-born-- alike, usually must attend segregated K-12 schools lacking basic resources (Cammarota, 2014). One of the resources lacking in their schools is access to qualified and experienced teachers (Yosso, 2006).

## Findings

### Not Our Fault (NOF) Group

Overall, student responses to this counter-narrative fell into two distinct categories. The largest category, which I describe first in this section, included students who admitted having negative ideas and feelings about Latinx immigrants. This group, which I designate as the *Not Our Fault* (NOF) group, accounted for approximately 70% of all students. Publicly admitting to having negative views of Latinx people, according to these students was difficult. More than one student confessed to feeling ashamed about these feelings, especially after having had me as a professor in a previous class. As one middle-class White female student said to me, “At the start of the class [last semester] I didn't think there was anything you could teach me.” I asked students to self-reflect on where those ideas might have originated. I also asked them to reflect on which groups of people in society benefit from the continued dissemination of those ideas. This led to an introductory discussion of master narratives.

Students in the NOF group acknowledged that they had learned only “one side” of history in school. Interestingly, they emphasized repeatedly, however, that it was “not our fault.” They attributed their negative perceptions of Latinx people to a lack of awareness, but emphasized that it was not because of a systemic failure of the school system, or hegemony, which is a concept we discussed repeatedly throughout the semester. Instead, they suggested that they had suffered from having individual “bad” or “old” teachers in elementary school.

One of the main principles of CRT is that racism in U.S. society is normal rather than an aberration (Bell, 1992). The students in the NOF group argued the opposite. According to them, any racism attributed to the master narrative was simply a mistake or oversight made by one person, usually a “bad” teacher. One student suggested that I was only focusing on the negative, perhaps because of my personal background had “victimized” me. Instead, she suggested, I should look at all the positive things children learn in school. Other students also shifted the conversation to all the “great things” in the U.S. and in schools. One student, one of the few male White students, argued that my background made me susceptible to “nefarious and divisive ideas.” This student’s nonverbal behaviors, eye rolling and posture, alternated between confrontational and condescending.

Other students in the NOF group also suggested that all stories have two sides. This idea was followed by the strong conviction that sometimes it is easier to teach only one side, especially when teachers have “too much material to cover.” I asked students how

they would choose what to cover in the future when they become teachers. In other words, what side they would teach and why. Most students struggled to respond to my question about making choices. Most eventually conceded that they would teach the “normal” curriculum. According to them, children could learn the “other stuff” at home. Related to this, students also voiced the idea that even though it is unfortunate, much like the details of slavery, the reality is that “you can't teach everything” or “everyone's history in a regular class.” In other words, “all of that stuff can become divisive” if you focus too much on negatives or on one race.

### **White Feelings**

The majority of students in the NOF group, mostly of White women, focused on how they felt as a result of their ignorance (Matias, 2016). One major theme that emerged was that they felt it was unfair of me or anyone else to judge them based on their ignorance of history. They also argued that I was making them feel uncomfortable. A few students also suggested I was cherry picking examples rather than looking at the “overall good of America.” After hearing various iterations of the same statement, I asked “What about the Latinx people who have to live with the negative stereotypes?” The answer was, “well, they have to put in their time,” In other words, “they can't expect to be treated like normal Americans so soon.” Shifting the conversation away from racism in master narratives to individual feelings is an example of the CRT principle of Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). Matias refers to the practice of excluding the perspectives of people of color based on feelings as an emotional strategy deployed by White people to deflect attention away from issues of systemic racism (2016).

### **We Were Lied To (WWLT) Group**

The other group of students in the class was more responsive to counter-narratives. Overall, this group, which I categorize as the *we were lied to* (WWLT) group said that they had been misled in elementary school by narratives and stories. They also felt “let down by the teachers” they had trusted. As one student said, “I feel like I have been lied to all my life” by teachers. The students in this group mentioned several examples of lies. Most of them recalled watching old videos produced in the 1970s in school about the melting pot. These videos only portrayed White immigrants or “White immigrants with a slight tan.” The *SchoolHouse Rock!* video “The Great American Melting Pot” (2002) was a video most students mentioned seeing. Interestingly, several students reported observing current teachers in their field placement schools using the same video; this video is over forty years old.

This group of students, WWLT, described learning about counter-narratives in this course as “like having a whole new understanding of this country.” During small group discussion, several students talked about learning the “truth about Columbus” only in college, never in elementary school. When I showed segments of the documentary *Harvest of Empire* (2012) in class, students in this group were surprised to learn about U.S. intervention in Guatemala and El Salvador. Understanding this intervention helped put the Latinx Diaspora in context for students.

As part of the discussion, WWLT students brainstormed ways to introduce some of this content into their future classrooms. Part of this activity involved discussing how knowledge always reflects the values and interests of groups (Banks, 1993). One of the most significant learning moments in class occurred when one student in this group stated that narratives are never neutral. These students were especially eager to create ways to challenge stereotypes perpetuated by the master narrative, including the idea that Latinx immigrants only immigrate to steal jobs or sell drugs (Daniels, 2011; Sáenz & Manges, 2015).

During these conversations, I shared some of the life experiences of my former elementary school students and their families. I also shared stories from my own family. I let students know that my family roots lie in south Texas along the Mexican border. This elicited many questions about borders which led the class to realize that borders shift over time according to power rather than remain fixed. This group was also more responsive to videos and articles by Howard Zinn in which he urges future teachers to question the master narrative. After several weeks of class, most students in the class could articulate cogent responses to questions about master narratives. For instance, students understood and could explain that current teachers tend to “fall back on their own lens” to explain Latinx immigration.

### **Discussion**

Despite having different perspectives and motivations, both groups of students developed proficiency with counter-narratives. One of the last assignments in class was group presentations in which students conducted research on a hidden aspect of Latinx people or history. Students in the *Not Our Fault* group, grudgingly admitted that the master narrative was inherently unfair and un-American because it “presents only one side of the story.” For this group, using counter-narratives became an issue of amending an oversight by showing what they believe is the fundamental fairness, and non-racism, of the U.S. school system.

The other group of students, *We Were Lied To*, viewed counter-narratives as necessary correctives for what they called the “propaganda” of master narratives. In both cases, students completed group projects on diverse topics. These topics included the East Los Angeles Blowouts of the 1960s as well as the covert war in Nicaragua. One group did a presentation on the forced sterilization of Guatemalan men in the 1940s by U.S. government researchers. Although students in the two groups approached the assignment from fundamentally different perspectives, fairness versus correctives, the result was that students interrogated their own elementary school experiences throughout the process.

### **Aim of Study**

An aim of this paper was to show how a group of future elementary school teachers, consisting mostly of middle-class White women, learned how to use counter-narratives successfully (Ohito & Oyler, 2017). In this racially homogenous TEP class, preservice teachers used counter-narratives to self-reflect critically and interrogate some their own K-12 learning experiences, assumptions, and biases. Even though the preservice teachers in

this study were motivated by different factors, fairness versus correctives, they understood, to varying degrees, that teachers play a role in reproducing hegemonic assumptions about Latinx immigrants, which is the first step to reconceptualizing Latinx students. This study shows that cultivating and supporting productive conversations about race and immigration in TEP courses requires that faculty members draw on counter-narratives. In short, teacher educators must develop a deep knowledge of the histories and experiences of Latinx immigrants before they can help TEP students do the same. My background influenced my pedagogical choices, but most TEP faculty can learn to use counter-narratives effectively, if they are motivated to do so.

In this personal narrative, I highlight some of the assumptions preservice teachers brought to classroom discussions. As evidenced by student comments, body language, and interactions with me, my presence as visible Brown person in class created a unique social dynamic. Interrogating this dynamic requires a storytelling approach because other methods would likely not have elicited such rich data, that is, students' spontaneous and unfiltered responses to class discussions. Moreover, a storytelling approach allowed me to put student comments into context. Using autoethnography enabled me to connect student comments and interactions to larger issues of schooling, ideology, and socialization. For instance, I show the complex and sometimes contradictory ways that students responded to me, including times when students argued that my background shaded my perspectives. By disrupting master narratives of immigration and interrogating assumptions and misconceptions about Latinx people, including Chicanos, I helped students rethink their own schooling. In this way, they learned how their backgrounds also influence their responses to narratives, an important lesson for future teachers.

### **Recommendations for the Future**

The marginalization of Latinx students in schools is neither surprising nor unexpected. Schools continue to use the master narrative to justify acts of symbolic violence against Latinx immigrant children (Andrews, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Bourdieu, 1989; Flores-Gonzalez, 2017). For example, Valenzuela describes "deMexicanization," as a process that teaches children that succeeding in the U.S. requires assimilating and conforming to mythical and unattainable norms of "real" Americanness (2005). Even after Latinx immigrant children learn English, it makes little difference in the way they experience oppression in school (Cammarota, Moll, Gonzalez, & Cannella, 2013; Yosso, 2006). For instance, Latinx students still endure oppression based on their perceived racial inferiority, cultural practices, and home languages (Shannon, 1995). For all of these reasons, we must learn more about the role that teachers and TEP faculty may play in reproducing master narratives.

The knowledge gleaned about preservice teachers and social studies education from this study could inform K-12 classroom and TEP approaches to questioning and disrupting master narratives. On another level, this study could also serve as a way of correcting misinformation and myths about Latinx people. This is especially important during a time of hyperbolic nationalistic rhetoric that criminalizes Latinx immigrants while simultaneously positioning them as subservient workers. To challenge racist rhetoric, social studies educators must find effective ways to incorporate postcolonial and ethnic studies approaches into their work. These approaches should vary according to local

contexts. In my case, I was working in a school in which no student had ever had any sustained contact with a person of Mexican descent. I used the discomfort that students experienced working with me--a Brown man with a Ph.D.--to encourage them to question themselves, their assumptions, and their experiences.

### ***Testimonios in the Classroom***

Embedded in master narratives is the notion that only the “right” people belong and have a right to speak about immigration (Chavez, 2013; Santa Ana, 2002). By rendering invisible the perspectives and experiences of people from historically oppressed groups, such as Latinx children, master narratives silence voices of resistance and suppress efforts to interrogate the hypocrisy and contradictions in immigration policy (Caminero-Santangelo, 2016; González & Loza, 2016). More research is needed in this area of social studies education to understand how students might interrogate their assumptions independently, especially when faculty or mentors are unavailable, unable, or unwilling to assist them with this critical self-reflective process (Navarro & Howard, 2017). Although this study involved White women, students of color also need to engage in self-reflection. Colorism, a form of within-group racial oppression, remains prevalent in U.S. communities of color, most likely because no one is immune to master narratives (Adames, Chavez-Dueñas, & Organista, 2016; Brown & Au, 2012).

Finally, most future teachers will work in public schools with shifting student demographics. This means there will be more Latinx students in future classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). For these new teachers, teaching about “who belongs” in the U.S. will likely emerge as a topic of even greater significance in the near future. To prepare future teachers for this project in our pluralistic society, a reevaluation of how master narratives are taught and reproduced in K-12 schools is imperative. Continued efforts by TEP faculty are needed to make counter-narratives more accessible to future teachers. This includes making ethnic studies content more accessible to all students (Urrieta & Machado-Casas, 2013).

In a few communities, Latinx parents have asked schools and teachers for increased awareness and sensitivity to Latinx perspectives and voices in the social studies curriculum, but little has changed at the national level (Vasquez & Altshuler, 2017). This matters for many reasons. By obscuring the underlying reasons for the Latinx Diaspora, the master narrative accomplishes two goals. First, it obscures the long history of illegal U.S. intervention in Latin America and attempts to absolve the U.S. of any moral responsibility for human rights (Gutierrez, 2013). Second, the narrative criminalizes Latinx immigrant children. This criminalization is then used to justify mass deportations, even when it puts children at risk for injury or death (Abrego, 2017; De Genova, 2002; Linton, Griffin, & Shapiro, 2017; Martinez, 2016). For this reason, TEP faculty must include material from contemporary Latinx studies in their courses.

### **Final Thoughts**

I use *Not our Fault* (NOF) and *We Were Lied To* (WWLT) to categorize students because these two labels capture the most prominent recurring themes in the findings. These groupings, however, are not mutually exclusive or meant to suggest that students fit neatly

into one of these categories for all discussions. Students did change their perspectives throughout the semester. Another important point concerns the category labels. My choice of labels does not indicate that I agree with students as to the origins of their lack of awareness of the histories and perspectives of Latinx immigrants. For example, in the case of the WWLT group, I do not intend to suggest that students were intentionally lied to by their elementary school teachers. What I do suggest is that a majority of teachers participate in the cycle that reproduces master narratives.

As far as the NOF group, I also do not intend to suggest that they are at fault for not having familiarity with counter-narratives. It is my hope, however, that with increased knowledge of counter-narratives, students in both of these groups will commit to interrupting the cycle that reproduces master narratives in schools. To support preservice teachers develop the theoretical foundations and practical skills necessary to interrupt master narrative, TEPs must change the way they prepare future teachers. TEP faculty must find ways to challenge the current paradigms that focus on preparing K-12 students for college and careers readiness. Given the current debates around “who belongs,” TEP faculty must prepare students to engage ethically, intellectually, and critically with counter-narratives. What is at stake is more than meeting state or federal standards on a test. What is at stake is human lives.

### **Author Notes**

***Ramon L. Vasquez*** is currently teaching graduate courses in curriculum theory at Western Michigan University. His areas of specialization include Critical Race Theory, Latinx Studies, Decolonizing Pedagogies, and Ethnic Studies. Prior to working in higher education, he was an elementary teacher in Los Angeles. Dr. Vasquez received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Curriculum and Instruction with a minor in Educational Policy Studies. He can be reached at [vasquera@gmail.com](mailto:vasquera@gmail.com)

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