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Frances R. Aparicio

Christina Jose-Kampfner

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## Language, Culture, and Violence in the Education Crisis of U.S. Latino/as: Two Courses for Intervention

Frances R. Aparicio  
University of Michigan

NSLC  
c/o ETR Associates  
4 Carbonero Way  
Scotts Valley, CA 95066

Christina José-Kampfner  
Eastern Michigan University

*This article discusses the educational crisis of U.S. Latino/as and argues for the recognition and understanding of the extent to which institutional racism and violence are exercised by schools against this cultural sector. It then describes, as forms of intervention, a course which trains future Spanish teachers in developing Latino cultural competence, and a community service learning course which offers tutoring and emotional support to at-risk middle school students.*

### Background

One of Luis Valdez's pioneering actos for El Teatro Campesino is entitled "No saco nada de la escuela" (I get nothing out of school), an apt title indeed for a play that, in 1969, attempted to textualize and bring to the foreground the dire conditions faced by Mexican-Americans in schools throughout the Southwest and California. Issues of linguistic and cultural erasure for Chicanos/as, low levels of motivation based on fear and alienation, placement policies that hinder student progress such as tracking and placement in special education programs and in inferior academic and vocational tracks (Meier & Stewart, 1991), and bodily and psychological punishments for speaking Spanish have all led to high drop out rates among Spanish-speaking and Latino students. This problem has, in fact, characterized Chicano/a education in the United States for centuries and it is even more egregious today. Discriminatory practices toward newly colonized Mexican-Americans were institutionalized along with the annexation of Texas and the entire western seaboard. In their book, *The Politics of Hispanic Education: Un paso p'alante y dos p'atrás*, Meier and Stewart argue that "policies of denying equal access of Mexican Americans to educational opportunities were consistent with the overall relationship between Mexican Americans and the U.S. government. Given the Anglo efforts to dominate Mexican Americans politically and economically, we should not be sur-

prised that education was used for similar purposes" (1991, p. 60).

In the 1970s, despite legislation for bilingual education, rates of high school completion among U.S. Latino/as were, to say the least, already problematic. More than twenty years later, in a period characterized by educational reforms such as multicultural pedagogy, drop out rates among the increasing U.S. Latino/a population are even more tragic. According to the 1990 American Council on Education's Ninth Annual Status Report on Minorities in Higher Education, 1972 high school completion rates among Latino students was 51.9%. In 1989, 17 years later, it had only increased to 55.9%. Furthermore, this increase has not been steady. Between 1985 and 1989, the Latino high school completion rate actually declined. The concluding remarks of the National Council of La Raza's (NCLR) "Hispanic Education: a Statistical Portrait 1990" identify this as a crisis:

Hispanic undereducation has reached crisis proportions. By any standard, Hispanics are the least educated major population in the United States: Hispanic students are more likely to be enrolled below grade level, more likely to drop out, less likely to be enrolled in college, and less likely to receive a college degree than any other major group. (1990, p. 95)

About one in twelve Americans and one in ten public school students is Latino/a. While this sector of the U.S. population is growing five times

as fast as the non-Latino/a, more than two in five Latino/as drop out of school before they earn their high school diplomas. Based on the U.S. 1990 Census data, Jorge Chapa and Ricardo Valencia observe that "the number of Hispanic children is growing faster than any other population group in the U.S. From 1985 to 2000 there will be 2.4 million more Hispanic children living in the United States" (1993, p. 169). This number surpasses the projected increase in the population of children of any other racial or ethnic group in the country. Yet the educational gap between Latino/as and non-Latino/as continues to widen.

Closer to the University of Michigan, within the Latino/a community of Southwest Detroit, current drop out rates among students are as high as 80%. This pervasive problem continues to haunt even the small number of Latinos/as who get to college:

In 1987 only 2.7% of all Bachelor's degrees were earned by Hispanics, who comprised 5.3% of the undergraduate population in 1986. Hispanic students comprised about 3.2% of graduate school enrollment in 1986, yet they earned only 2.4% of all Master's and only 1.9% of Doctoral degrees awarded in 1987. Between 1976 and 1987, the percentage of Hispanics who earned Bachelor's degrees did not change significantly. (NCLR, 1990, p. 83)

These statistics reveal that claims of equal educational conditions and access to meaningful, enabling education must be unmasked. A study carried out by the National Council of La Raza (1993) demonstrated that unequal educational access was the primary factor leading to poverty among Puerto Rican men. For Puerto Ricans this problem reaches incredible proportions. Of all the Latino subgroups, Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are most likely to be poor. According to the 1990 Census more than half (56.75%) live under the poverty line. Limited education, lack of job opportunities, and poor access to education are the most important factors contributing to poverty and underemployment, particularly at a time when high paying factory jobs are dwindling and high school degrees are now required for many jobs. Education has failed Latino children, in general, more than any other group and the economic repercussions of this have had tragic consequences on our communities.

As with the African-American sector, public discourse has associated the undereducation and the high drop out rate of Latinos/as with social

problems—gangs, urban violence, drugs, and teenage pregnancy—thus locating the genesis of the social crisis in the communities themselves. By associating chaos and violence with urban communities of color, social scientists, educators, and the media continue to displace national attention away from social institutions, thus blaming people of color for social realities provoked by larger inequities of economy and race. Here we argue that by centering on urban violence as a factor only extraneous to the school culture, educators ignore the systematic violence in schools that is exerted on cultures, languages, and peoples who are marked as "different" from the hegemonic norm imposed by education. While we acknowledge the tragic proportions of violence among our youth, and address this complex reality in our courses, we call for an expansion of our understanding of violence to also include the cultural violence inherent in the school's curriculum and the negative repercussions of this form of institutional racism on Latino and Latina youth. The high level of drop out rates attest to the success of public schools in ousting students who resist being homogenized into prevailing monocultural dictates. Pushed out of the educational process, Latino youth from poor working families rarely finish high school or make it to college.

Those of us who work on areas related to language, culture, education and psychology in Latino/a Studies cannot remain aloof to these alarming figures and realities. While for other mainstream scholars it is a given that there will always be students at the university, for Latina/o scholars and teachers such as ourselves these statistics reveal a dwindling future for and of Latino/a students, a very bleak one indeed given the current legal decisions regarding affirmative action programs. These statistics powerfully reveal the undeniable gap between enrollment of mostly middle-class Latino/a students at the university and the prevalent K-12 attrition rate among students from working poor families. How can we address this reality within the university while also intervening in the public schools?

Multiple interventions are needed, for we can no longer afford to solely engage in research and teaching about Latino/as without having an impact on the K-12 school system. The failure of the schools to meet adequately the needs of its multicultural, multiracial and multilingual student population can wait no longer for the trickle-down effect of our teaching and research. We must create alternative spaces and programs by

which Latino/a K-12 students at risk may have direct access to the knowledge base that scholars and graduate students have developed within the framework of multicultural pedagogy and scholarship. In this paper we will discuss two complementary courses: one, taught by Frances R. Aparicio, presents future teachers with the larger issues of the politics of language and cultural identity among U.S. Latino/as; the second, taught and organized by Christina José-Kampfner, is a community service learning course which intervenes directly in the public school system through a tutorial program for Latino/a middle-school students at risk. Ideally students concurrently enroll in these two courses.

### **The Politics of Language and Cultural Identity**

Language as culture is the collective memory bank of people's experience in history. (Thiongo, 1986, p. 15)

"Latino/a Literatures: The Politics of Language and Cultural Identity" is an upper-division course offered jointly by the Spanish and American Culture programs at the University of Michigan. It is designed to introduce students to issues of linguistic colonialism in the United States, specifically to the position that the Spanish language is subordinated to the dictates of a homogeneous national identity in the United States called "American." Students have the opportunity to engage in sociolinguistic analysis of bilingual forms of speech and written language which characterize the communicative styles of U.S. Latino/as, as well as to read literary pieces and personal narratives that document linguistic and school experiences. The primary objective of the course is to develop students' awareness of how language is not a neutral cultural zone, but rather intimately intertwined with constructs of national identity, race, and with class conflicts within the United States. Furthermore, one of the main tenets of the course is that linguistic racism and colonial alienation have been and continue to be part and parcel of Latino/a students' negative experiences in their schooling, and that these structural factors impede their academic progress and success *ab initio*.

Because of the interdisciplinary focus on the social, cultural, class and race dimensions of language, students from various disciplines enroll in the course. However, Spanish majors

interested in teaching, Latino/a students, and graduate students with interests in education and literacy typically enroll in the class. According to a number of Spanish majors, this class is unique in that it prepares them to develop knowledge in Latino/a cultures and languages within the United States. As one student candidly commented, his parents had been investing thousands of dollars in his university education, and yet he still was unable to communicate with Chicanos in his native Los Angeles; their hybrid forms of language had always been unintelligible to him, a Spanish major whose courses had focused on Peninsular and Latin American literary classics. This example brings home an important point: that particular departments and disciplines are responsible for preparing undergraduate students to interact in a society that is no longer local nor homogeneous but global and intercultural, even within domestic boundaries.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr. proposed in 1988 a cultural literacy for every "American:"

...namely, the network of information that all competent readers possess. It is the background information, stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read. (p. 2)

This cultural literacy should be turned upside down into a multicultural literacy paradigm which will allow students located mostly within dominant or monocultural backgrounds to recognize, understand and communicate with cultural others. By advocating for a "high universal literacy" (p. 2) which presupposes a politicized and ideologically-driven selection—a canonizing—Hirsch implicitly disacknowledges the neutralizing of other sets of knowledge brought about by the homogenizing and centripetal effects of such an enterprise. Advocating for this centralized literacy in opposition to multicultural education and to what he perceives as a "fragmented" curriculum or "cafeteria-style education" (p. 20), Hirsch attempts to de-racialize and objectify not only educational curricula but also the role of language in education and in the maintenance of cultural traditions. When he states that "getting one's membership card [to full citizenship] is not tied to class or race" but to "literate culture" (p. 22), Hirsch is strategically erasing the economic and racial inequities underlying education and

access to information. He also engages in a colonizing gesture far too common among educators in this country who believe that there is one particular body of knowledge that is key to social acceptance.

Thus, the interdisciplinary approach in this course to the "politics of language" allows students who will be teaching in the future to develop insights into the diversity of linguistic experiences among U.S. Latinos/as, particularly as they relate to experiences within the educational system. In other words, the problem may not be exclusively how to make U.S. Latino/a students "literate," but how to develop an alternative, multicultural literacy among future and present teachers and administrators.

Essential to this literacy is a knowledge of how linguistic colonialism functions within a society that considers itself democratic and not colonialist. In his discussion of colonial alienation in Africa, Thiongo argues that colonizing strategies can only be successful when control, "through culture, of how people perceive[d] themselves and their relationship to the world" is also achieved (1986, p. 16). When the language of the colonized child, the books he/she reads, and the language of his/her self-conceptualization is foreign, this results in the "disassociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment," what Thiongo in fact calls "colonial alienation" (p. 17), a cultural sort of "disconnection" comparable to that experienced in traumatic disorders (Herman, 1992, pp. 51-73).

In the context of U.S. Latino/as, discussion around whether the Chicano experience in the Southwest is truly colonial or not has been engaged by numerous critics in sociology and history (Sánchez, 1983). Diverse educational and linguistic experiences rooted in particular socio-economic locations, diverse histories of migration and even racial markers make it difficult to propose theories regarding all Latino groups in the context of schooling, linguistic maintenance and attitudes, and cultural identity. Yet there are a number of identifiable phenomena systematically deployed in the educational, legal, and even governmental arena that continue to colonize and traumatize mostly working poor U.S. Latino/as: 1) what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) has deemed "linguistic terrorism" in the schools; 2) the attacks on bilingual education; and 3) the legal gestures toward officializing English. These three racist and colonizing strategies deserve further discussion, for they are clearly correlated to the

failure of U.S. schools to address the pedagogical, linguistic and cultural needs of Latino/a students.

To be or not to be bilingual? It may be surprising to many who value acquiring a second language that being bilingual in this country is often not perceived as an asset. Indeed, bilingualism may, in fact, be considered a deficiency more than a commodity. What defines the value of a second language is the particular language and the social position of the speaker. For instance, if pronunciation provokes linguistic exclusion and discrimination generally, it would follow that accents would become a marker of difference. Yet it is not the same in this country to speak English with a French or German accent as it is to speak English with a Spanish accent. Unlike the former, Spanish has been constructed historically in the United States as the language of the "third world" and of poor Mexican immigrants, and it has thus been associated with a lack of education, with poverty, and with cultural difference (read, deficit). Personal observations and experiences reveal that Spanish is, in many cases, a criminalized language, as it is associated with the poor, and therefore, with the potentially criminal. Much current scholarship attributes the speaking of Spanish at home as a major determinant of dropping out of school. Thus, according to the logic of statistical approaches, Spanish is seen as one of the direct factors that lead to the bleak conditions of poverty and underemployment, a result, in turn, of undereducation (Rong & Preisser, 1990; Steinberg, 1984).

Speaking with a Spanish accent has meant being considered a "Spic," a lower-class Mexican or Latino, and thus a student with limited possibilities for intellectual, cultural and social achievement. Thus bilingualism becomes "alingualism" for thousands of Latino and Latina students who enter their first grade classrooms. General educational policy, for many years now, has attempted to erase the Spanish from Latino/a students, whether they be recent immigrants or native-born. This erasure has taken its toll in terms of traumatic experiences for thousands and thousands of children who grew up victimized by fear of humiliation in school, by alienation from their own culture and that of their parents, and by the tangible consequences of said exclusionary practices. Most flagrant are standardized or institutional forms of racism such as insisting that Spanish-only students take intelligence and standardized tests in English and placing students in lower

grade levels because of linguistic difference. Testimonies about specific painful experiences include the following: fining students for every Spanish word used; washing students' mouths with soap; hitting students with rulers on their knuckles (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 53); asking students to pronounce "sc/ch" words in front of the class until they cried and broke down; telling students in grade school that the lines on old Mexican faces were due to the fact that these people didn't open their mouths and enunciate properly when they talked (Burciaga, 1993, p. 37); singling out Mexican and Puerto Rican children for allegedly carrying lice and sending them to the school nurse; and not being able to ask to go to the bathroom because teachers didn't understand Spanish (Piojo Narratives, 1994).

While practices of physical punishment may not be considered appropriate in the 1990s—particularly after bilingual education legislation denounced them—there are still more "civilized" and subtle forms of repressing Spanish that continue to be employed in the national interest of preparing students to be full citizens of the United States. Sabotaging bilingual education is one of these ways, but before moving to this topic, let us conclude with a brief discussion of some of the consequences of this first form of linguistic racism in our educational system.

Given the history of "linguistic terrorism" and the prevalent negative attitudes toward bilingual and Spanish-speaking Latino/a children in U.S. schools, a most tragic consequence is the fact that many younger Latinos and Latinas do not continue to speak Spanish at home or with their friends; these "vestigial bilinguals" (Sánchez, 1983, p. 44, 46) understand the language and can speak it in limited contexts and with a discretely bound lexicon, but prefer not to use it. More recently, Guadalupe Valdés (1988) has identified what she calls "secret bilinguals," Latinos and Latinas who do not make public their knowledge of and fluency in Spanish. These two subsets of bilinguals are further evidence that the erasure of Spanish takes its toll on the Latino/a population and no more further evidence is needed than to take a look at the growing demand for college-level courses on Spanish for Native Speakers.

As Guadalupe Valdés (1988) has observed, when we look at the funding that has been channeled by the Defense Department and the government toward teaching foreign languages, a tension and an ironic displacement are quite evident. Spanish is valued positively as a second

language for many Anglo students, and foreign language education continues to enjoy substantial governmental subsidies, it is simultaneously considered a deficit among U.S. Latino/as, as federal mandates on transitional bilingual education programs reveal. Speaking Spanish can even be, for some Latinos, a matter of life and death, as history has also evinced (Colón, 1982).

These differential and asymmetrical perceptions of speaking Spanish, imbuing Anglos with Spanish as a commodity and Latinos/as with Spanish as a hindrance to assimilation, inclusion and economic betterment were clearly reflected throughout the semester in our class discussions. For example, in a specific exercise called "Linguistic Autobiographies," students analyzed the values of both English and Spanish—and of other languages—in their lives. Clearly a pattern emerged whereby most of the Anglo students, who recounted their experience "discovering" Spanish either in high school or traveling abroad, perceived it as an asset that would allow them to enter specific professional arenas such as teaching, international business, or law, whereas for most of the Latino/a students, experiences and feelings of pain and shame surfaced as they told the stories of their parents' own experiences with linguistic difference, of the diversity of linguistic identity within their own nuclear family, of the gaps created between the languages of home and of school (including theory as an academic discourse for graduate students), and of the general sense of dispossession that some were only then beginning to articulate in a more systematic way. As the students realized after discussions of their experiences, to be or not to be bilingual is not necessarily a personal choice, but the result of larger institutional and racist efforts that take away the linguistic difference of the subordinate sector while overprivileging the already privileged with access to other languages.

This argument denouncing the systematic erasure and dispossession of Spanish for Latinos in school would seem, at first glance, to ignore the whole history of bilingual education in this country. Without delving into an area that is complex, extremely voluminous and out of our scholarly boundaries, it is essential to address it from a limited perspective given the focus and scope of this essay. Although bilingual education has had immensely positive repercussions for Spanish monolingual children—and for those of other immigrant groups—a number of factors related to its objectives, to its implementation, and to its

institutionalization have virtually sabotaged this pedagogical practice from impacting on the maintenance of Spanish among school-age children. This basically has to do with the program's objective to mainstream the child into an all-English curriculum as soon as s/he is minimally functioning in English, thus co-opting the rich opportunities for true bilingual and bicultural educational experiences. In addition, placement policies which do not differentiate between native-born and foreign-born Latino/a children and ignore their diverse linguistic competencies have resulted in holding back many students' academic development. Lily Wong Fillmore (1992) has identified a number of activities that have resulted in obstructing the success of these programs: "doing as little as possible," "staffing the program with the wrong people," "hobbling teachers so they can't function bilingually or otherwise," "testing students in English to make teachers look as bad as possible," and "accentuating the negative to eliminate the positive" (pp. 370-374). These strategies, according to Wong Fillmore, are informed not by an inherent flaw of bilingual education policy-making nor by students' potential or lack thereof, but rather by the "fundamental American prejudices" (p. 375) underlying the institutionalization of any educational program that reaffirms linguistic and cultural diversity. She concludes that public perception of bilingual education is based on the assumption that these programs free the students "from the obligation of immediate and absolute assimilation" (p. 376).

The Reagan-Bush era, under the leadership of then Secretary of Education William Bennett, reaffirmed and consolidated this negative public perception of bilingualism throughout the country. It is not a coincidence that it was during the 1980s when the English Only Movement gained national visibility and controversy. The simultaneous attack on linguistic diversity and bilingual education has been, more profoundly, an attack on immigration which has now reached an apex with the implementation of Proposition 187 in California and its ensuing national policy. The constructed binary of native/foreign has been strategically deployed to exclude and marginalize substantial sectors of the U.S. population from health, education and social services at a time of economic recession. Arguments about the fragmentation of a society, about the vulnerability of English and about needs for additional resources have laid the foundation for what truly has been an anti-immigration movement and an expres-

sion of "the displaced anxieties of Anglo-Americans" (Fishman, 1992, p. 165). This institutional gesture against the presence and articulation of Spanish throughout the country has had a tremendous impact on the development and outward expression of linguistic racism among the public, and it will continue to inform the already dwindling support for bilingual education and multilingual/multicultural pedagogy.

Given the dramatic demographic growth of Latinos/as in the United States, past and projected, it is undoubtedly true that a majority of, if not all, future teachers in the public schools will interact with Latino/a youth—and with students from other "minority" groups—during their professional lives. To enter a classroom and to face a group of students without being aware of the history of exclusion and racism that frames these students' behaviors, attitudes, reactions and motivation is to be blind-sided. Christina José-Kampfner's course, "Youth Helping Youth," exposes future teachers to the particular cultural and educational needs of Latino/a students, in part by offering a service-learning component with youth in Detroit that aims to achieve retention through academic improvement, psychological counseling, and support around issues of cultural identity raised heretofore.

### **Youth Helping Youth**

For the past two years, "Youth Helping Youth" has brought together students from Eastern Michigan University (EMU) and the University of Michigan (UM) with middle school students in Southwest Detroit. The program employs post-secondary students as volunteer tutors, mentors, and group leaders with the goal of positively impacting the lives of young people in a predominantly Latino middle school.

Southwest Detroit is a multi-racial, multi-cultural community. Latinos/as, including Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other South Americans, as well as African-Americans, Arab-Americans, and Caucasians all live in the community. The majority of Latinos/as in Detroit live in this neighborhood. Up until 1986, many factories and businesses connected to automobile production were located here. Then, when most of the local auto factories closed, the economic base of the neighborhood was disrupted, leaving the Latino/a community in Southwest Detroit economically devastated.

Prior to the plant closings, Southwest Detroit

boasted the largest percentage of owner-occupied homes in the city. Now rental homes are the norm, and many areas are peppered with homes and stores abandoned by foreclosures and general economic decline. As a result of this dramatic economic downturn, young people in the neighborhood live with a sense of despair. They watch their parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents and other significant adults in their lives search for employment without success. Few see opportunities for their own future employment.

Unfortunately, school presents another dismal picture for these young people. Though the high school drop-out rate for the city of Detroit is 50%, for the Southwest Detroit community, the drop-out or, more appropriately, the "push-out" rate is approaching 86%, according to informal data collected by Latino Family Services. In fact, many of the youth in this community are not even completing middle school. Though Southwest Detroit has 15 schools that have a high concentration of Latino/a students, very few specific services are available to this significant minority. There are only a few Latino/a teachers, and even fewer Latino/a administrators. Instead of a place for learning and education, schools are viewed with dissatisfaction and derision by young people. They see no reason to continue on with their education since it is not taking them anywhere and it is not providing relevant support for their life situations. The schools do not address their everyday reality, continuing to ignore their biculturalism, the violence, the poverty, and the lack of opportunities for the future. As a result, most drop out of school before they receive their high school diplomas.

Within this context, a group of 15 university students travel to Earhart Middle School two days a week for a three hour tutoring and mentoring session. For the first hour and a half, each college student meets with two Latino/a students. During the second half of the program, Dr. José-Kampfner facilitates an informal support group designed to address the emotional needs of the Earhart students. Thus, this tutoring program offers a unique pedagogical environment which addresses, as an ensemble, the academic, emotional, and cultural needs of the children.

The intent of the program is two-fold. First, through tutoring it addresses the academic needs of students. Second, through the support group and focused individual attention, it addresses their emotional and cultural needs. Academic and emotional support have been integrated be-

cause either alone is insufficient.

Historically, most of these students have been marked as underachievers and have not considered themselves worthy of attention. They have not had the help they needed to excel in a school environment. The individual attention received in their tutoring session is unusual in their school day, and it gives them a profound sense of importance. Thus, while this one and a half hours of tutoring helps the young people with their school work, it necessarily provides new self-confidence to students who do not believe in their own potential. In addition, tutors offer students culturally-relevant materials to read in order to increase their motivation to learn.

During the hour and a half support group, the Earhart students frequently discuss domestic and gang violence, biculturalism (a topic which interests them very much), and strategies to enhance self-esteem through understanding of and taking pride in their ethnicity and cultural identity. The youth share issues about their families and personal lives. They are encouraged by adults who are prepared to listen to and respect them.

In the support groups the Latino/a students also talk about having to choose between their communities and their education. Unfortunately, they perceive schools not only as a way to escape the economic hardships of the "barrio" but also of the Latino culture. If these are the choices that educators are implicitly offering our young people, how can we expect any of them to succeed? The youth who in fact make it through represent an astounding accomplishment that requires a difficult and painful negotiation.

The kind of attention to students' thoughts, feelings, and insights provided by the support session is rare in a traditional academic environment. Teachers have been usually trained to look at students in terms of their academic achievement without reference to their personal lives. Thus, they do not know how to support children's non-academic needs. Moreover, many teachers and administrators hold negative assumptions about Spanish-dominant Latino/a students, thus creating very low expectations for them. Instead of integrating the culture and personal lives of the students into the learning process, schools and teachers control students, and so the reinforcement of behavioral norms becomes more important than the encouragement of young people's learning and emotional development. Instead of incorporating culturally-relevant readings and materials, and a diversity of ideas and experi-



ences, traditional educational norms dictate that the educational process must be homogenized. This contributes to Latino student disconnectedness from school and learning.

Of course, ethnicity cannot be understood as something which stands in the way of education; in fact it must be understood as a resource. If educators encouraged Latino children to see their culture as a positive resource, the youth would not feel torn about choosing between their communities and their education. Instead, they would receive an education that was consistent with their community experience.

Throughout the semester tutors read a number of essays about bilingual education and discuss the merits and problems of various pedagogical approaches to teaching bilingual children. They also read novels and books authored by U.S. Latinos/as—e.g., Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing*—who describe their experiences growing up in the United States. Many of the college students with little previous contact with Latinos enter the course believing that English-only education is the most beneficial approach to teaching bilingual children. However, they come to understand that denying school children's primary language and precluding its mastery in turn precludes mastering a second language. Most Anglo-American tutors who have some knowledge of Spanish, along with the Latino/a tutors, reaffirm the importance of bilingualism for the middle-school students.

The college students in this course learn about Latino culture not only by tutoring Latino/as but also by walking through the barrio, eating Mexican food, visiting the homes of the children, and experiencing the warmth of the parents. Cultural familiarity is learned through all five senses, and these college students experience an immersion which educates them in ways that are unavailable on a university campus. After each session, the tutors and the instructor discuss their experiences. As one college student said,

As has been mentioned in class, we tutors can often feel estranged from the world in which the kids live. The closer we feel to the kids, the better we are going to relate and communicate with them, and the tighter this bond, the more we are going to be able to help them.

Because the participants in this program receive academic credit for their work, the time that they devote to community service is also time

devoted to their studies. Thus, for these students, their college campus is metaphorically extended into the Latino urban community of Detroit. Their academic environment thereby becomes larger and more diverse. This is significant because most of the college students are white and from rural or suburban backgrounds, and so for many, this is their first opportunity to interact with an urban community of color. The college students who participate have been very devoted, evincing their commitment to the program by rarely missing, even though we leave campus at 8:00 a.m.

This program has been an extremely rewarding experience for the Latino youth too. Four young people whose prospects of passing sixth grade were slim are moving on into seventh grade next year because of their participation in this program. One young person explained that he learned from the project "to work hard to do what I want." The teachers at Earhart and the parents have commended our accomplishments and expressed gratitude for our commitment. One of the parents exclaimed, "This is the best program that the school has had."

According to the pre- and post-tests that we have administered, every middle school student who participated in our program improved their marks from F to C or C- in English and Math during a period of one year. We also witnessed increased motivational levels; as an example, a fourteen year old who, prior to entering the program, refused to look at books now is never seen without them. One of the most endearing proofs of our accomplishments is the eagerness with which the young people greet us when we come. More than once they have scolded us for arriving five minutes late, and have said that they would have been very disappointed if we had not shown up. Attendance by the middle school children has been consistently excellent. Although they have been earmarked as future drop-outs, few miss our classes. The children's improvement in academic performance has also been enormously rewarding for the college students.

Another important component of the program is a support group run for parents. These groups meet every other week. All of the mothers whose children were in our program were invited to participate, and one of them was paid to organize the group. College students were encouraged to attend, although it was not mandatory. This group met at the community-based Latino Family Services and at a local restaurant. Its main focus was to discuss with the parents what we talked

about with the children. By doing this, the mothers could learn from the materials that we presented, give us feedback, and learn about the educational experiences of their children. The mothers wanted to discuss domestic violence and teenage sexuality most frequently, as well as biculturalism—understanding American culture as they kept their Latino identity. We also helped mothers in meetings with school administrators. One parent said, “I love to come to the group. I feel that since I’ve been coming to the group I understand my child more.”

### Conclusion

We have proposed in this essay that cultural and linguistic colonialism, as exercised by school policies, educational canons, and linguistic homogeneity, also constitute forms of violence against the healthy development of the cultural self. Educators are not seriously considering how institutional violence affects the academic performance of students. Instead, they are attempting to create safe fortresses to keep street violence out of the schools. But although violence of the streets may be locked out of the school through disciplinary policies, the effects of cultural violence cannot be locked out of the students’ consciousness.

During the Youth Helping Youth Program, we found that teachers and administrators are primary agents of institutional violence. Often teachers in inner-city schools are afraid of their students, and in response attempt to impose stricter controls in the classroom. Their fear cultivates inflexibility. Moreover, we also found that the farther apart teachers are from the culture and the language of the students they serve, the more pervasive is their fear. This phenomenon is clearly illustrated in Martín Espada’s 1990 short poem “The New Bathroom Policy in English High School.”

*The boys chatter Spanish  
in the bathroom  
while the principal  
listens from his stall  
The only words he recognizes  
is his own name  
and this constipates him.  
So he decides  
to ban Spanish  
in the bathrooms.  
Now he can relax.*

Like most of us in this country, many teachers perceive members of communities with low socioeconomic status, gang violence, and cultural difference as inferior. But given the growing demographics of Latinos/as in the United States, universities need to train teachers in culturally competent ways and to offer new pedagogical approaches to learning about the diverse communities which they will serve. This means that cultural competence in Latino issues should be a major component of teacher training programs across the country.

The most important outcome of this project is that it intervened at two levels: it represented a culturally-centered educational opportunity for Latino children in poor urban settings, at the same time that it provided knowledge about U.S. Latino/a languages and cultures, and about their educational conditions, to future teachers. As young Latino and Latina students continue to feel disenfranchised from the educational system, traditional methods do not work. The Youth Helping Youth Program integrates emotional support as well as culturally-relevant materials and approaches to academic tutoring. In addition, this project attempts to rethink the role of violence on academic performance and the negative effects of institutional racism on students. An integrative approach on the part of both institutions—the public schools and the universities—is essential if we are to foster the development of culturally diverse young minds and keep young bodies in school.

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### Authors

FRANCIS R. APARICIO is Arthur F. Thumau Professor and Associate Professor of Spanish and American Culture at the University of Michigan, where she also directs the Latino/a Studies Program. She has published extensively in the areas of U.S. Latino and Latina literatures, the teaching of Spanish to native speakers, popular culture, and Latin American literature.

CHRISTINA JOSÉ-KAMPFNER is Associate Professor in Education and Psychology at Eastern Michigan University. She co-founded the Children's Visitation Program for women prisoners in Michigan and also initiated the tutorial program "Youth Helping Youth" in Southwest Detroit. She has presented papers and published in the areas of post-traumatic stress among Latino urban youth and women in prison. She has received the Michigan Campus Compact Community Service Learning Award as well as President Clinton's National Volunteer Award.