

# *Buscando la Libertad: Latino Youths in Search of Freedom in School*

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from a two-year ethnographic study of Latino high school students engaged in youth participatory action research (YPAR), this article describes students' quest for freedom in schools, locating their struggle within a larger effort to realize the democratic ideals of public schooling. Using Latino/a Critical Race Theory as a theoretical lens, the author demonstrates how popular discourse around the "achievement gap" often obscures the oppressive policies and practices implemented by educators that limit freedoms necessary for educational and personal development and profoundly influence the identities and life trajectories of Latino youth. The article concludes with an exploration of YPAR as a practice of educational freedom with the potential to transform the educational experiences and outcomes for Latino youth and other communities that have been traditionally underserved by schools.

**T**HE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT of Latino youths has received increasing attention over the past decade, as national and state policies have called for an elimination of the "achievement gap," persistent discrepancies in test scores, high school graduation, and post-secondary enrollment and completion, between students of color and White students, students from lower socioeconomic strata and wealthier students, and students who are native speakers of standard English and those who may be learning English as a second (or third, fourth, etc.) language. Educational statistics regarding the education of Latinos in the United States are disconcerting. It is estimated that 41% of Latinos above the age of twenty do not have a high school diploma, a rate almost double that of African Americans and more than three times that of Whites (Fry, 2010). While Latino high school graduates are attending college at higher rates than in years past, they are still generally underrepresented in higher education and their postsecondary completion rates lag behind those of most other ethnic groups (Fry, 2005; Gándara & Contreras, 2008).

The increased focus on gaps in achievement, particularly as they apply to K–12 schools, has revolved around test scores and other quantifiable indices of achievement but has given insufficient attention to identifying and dismantling the policies and practices within schools that serve to reify and widen these gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2010; Nieto, 2006). Also underexamined is how continuing to compare the educational outcomes of youths of color with those of White students without a concurrent analysis of learning opportunities available to them within their respective

educational settings normalizes and reinscribes Whiteness (Kirkland, 2010). The voices of those most directly impacted by the differences in academic preparation and outcomes—those with the most to gain from meaningful changes in policy and practice, namely youths themselves—are typically rendered silent in discussions and policy debates regarding the achievement gap. With the goal of inserting the perspectives of Latino youths into the dialogue regarding the education of Latinos and how to improve it, this article addresses the following broad research question: How are Latino youths experiencing and responding to school policies and practices that arise as educators respond to significant increases in the population of Latino students? To this end, I document how racialized oppression, justified through achievement-gap discourses, has been manifested in the educational experiences of Latino youths, thus hindering their educational achievement and stifling their postsecondary ambitions. I also explore youth participatory action research (YPAR) as democratic education and a vehicle for promoting freedom within schools, and conclude by sharing a vision of schools, informed by Latino youths

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and rooted in a collective quest for freedom, that supports the intellectual and personal growth of all students.

### Latinization and the Achievement Gap

The racial/ethnic and linguistic texture of the United States is changing rapidly, fueled significantly by increases in the population of Latinos in the country. Now representing approximately 16% of the population and numbering almost forty-nine million, Latinos are the second largest racial/ethnic group in the country. The “Latinization” of the United States is most visible in schools. One in every five children currently attending school is Latino, and substantial increases in Latino school enrollment are expected to continue for decades to come. Demographic projections suggest that by 2050 the Latino school-aged population will have grown by more than 150% and Latino youths will then constitute the largest group of students in US schools (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008). Latinos already constitute more than half of all young people in California schools and are the plurality of students in 22 states (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008).

Latinos have a long-standing history in the United States, including a noteworthy legacy of activism in the struggle for educational equity (MacDonald, 2005; Murillo et al., 2010). Despite Latinos’ continuous struggle to secure quality educational opportunities for their children, the educational outcomes for many in this community are cause for alarm. School-level data reveal a consistent pattern of underperformance by Latinos on standardized measures of achievement, particularly in contrast to White students. For example, White students have outperformed Latino students in all areas of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) since 1992 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

Commonly referred to in popular discourse as the achievement gap, this persistent discrepancy in test scores is largely reflective of gaps in opportunity. The research literature suggests that teacher quality is correlated with gains in academic achievement and performance on standardized tests (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Loeb, 2000; Hanusheck, 1992), and schools serving large populations of students from lower socioeconomic strata and students of color tend to have the least effective and most novice teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Discourses addressing racialized gaps in achievement often fail to consider the myriad factors—many resulting from larger policy initiatives outside of the control of students and families—that can serve to suppress performance.

Concurrent with increased attention given to gaps in achievement, a surge in policies aim at curbing the educational opportunities offered to Latino students. Beginning in 1998, around the same time when Latinos were officially dubbed the oxymoronic *majority-minority*, several states, including California, Arizona, and Massachusetts, eliminated bilingual education in their public schools. This relegated Emergent Bilingual students (commonly referred to as English Language Learners, ELLs), the overwhelming majority of whom were and still are Latino, to one-year sheltered immersion programs despite the fact that it takes, on average, five to seven years to gain academic proficiency in a new

language (Crawford, 2003; Cummins, 2000, 2003). As opposed to the more commonly used ELL, Emergent Bilingual considers students’ home language(s) in addition to the language they are learning (mostly English in the United States), thus retaining the possibility and desirability of supporting multilingualism (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008).

The grand narratives surrounding the achievement gap, rooted largely in deficit perspectives of Latino youths and their families, have also profoundly shaped the type of instruction offered to students. Many districts force teachers of Latino youths to adhere to scripted curricula under the assumption that narrowing the curricular focus and spending “more time on task” will improve the performance of Latino youths on standardized measures of achievement (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). These “test-prep pedagogies” (Rodríguez, 2011) often ignore or suppress the cultural identities and frames of reference of Latino students and are incongruent with the goals of democratic education. Hence, the schooling experiences for many Latino youths can be described as “subtractive” (Valenzuela, 1999), suppressing important aspects of students’ cultures and forcing students to shed part of their identities for a chance at school success.

### Methods

#### SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

Genuinely concerned by the lack of academic success experienced by so many Latino youth and in an effort to remain connected to urban schools and communities, especially those serving Latino students, I returned to the secondary-school classroom and offered a course on action research at Rana High School (RHS), a pseudonym, between 2008 and 2010, above my course load at the university. The class was embedded in a larger multigenerational research collaborative called Project FUERTE (Future Urban Educators conducting Research to transform Teacher Education). High school student researchers worked with a small cadre of graduate students and me to critically examine the educational experiences of and outcomes for Latino youths and to develop empirically based recommendations for the preparation of teachers, both preservice and inservice, to work with Latino youths (see also Irizarry, 2011). It was our belief that inserting new, heretofore silenced voices into the debates regarding the achievement gap would challenge these problematic discourses and inform the personal and professional development of educators and could result in changes in policy and pedagogy that might lead to improved learning opportunities for Latino students and other groups who have been historically underserved by schools. During the two-year period in which Project FUERTE included students from RHS (the previous year the project was located at a different urban high school), I simultaneously conducted a multiyear ethnographic study of the Project FUERTE participants. The data shared in this article stem from the ethnography.

The cohort of participants consisted of seven students from RHS, a comprehensive high school located in the northeastern United States and serving approximately 1,000 students. As did about half of all RHS students, the participants identified themselves as Latino, with five self-identifying as Puerto Rican and two

as Mexican American. Six of the seven students were juniors at RHS at the outset of the project, and one was a senior. They varied in age from 15 to 18 at the inception of the study. Three of the students had (im)migrated<sup>1</sup> to the mainland United States, two coming with their families from Mexico as young children and one moving from Puerto Rico as a 14-year-old. The remaining participants had completed all of their formal education up to that point in Rana City schools. All of the students articulated a desire to attend college, but only two were enrolled in college-prep courses, such as Algebra 1 and 2, that are prerequisites for admission into four-year institutions of higher education. None of the students had a grade point average above 2.3.

Reflective of the demographic shifts occurring in many communities across the United States, RHS was experiencing a surge in their Latino population, and the majority of teachers, administrators, and professional staff were unprepared to meet the needs of these students. As part of one of the lowest performing and most economically depressed districts in the state, the school was under increased pressure to improve student performance and graduation rates while also under significant economic constraints. The official annual dropout rate of the school for the year the study began was 4.1%, but a more nuanced look at the data reveals that less than half of all Latino students who entered the school as ninth graders were enrolled in the twelfth grade four years later.

#### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Throughout my two years of data collection and analysis, I sought to understand how Latino youth experienced school within the contexts of Latinization and increased pressures on schools to meet accountability standards. Comments offered through formal interviews, class discussions, written assignments, and research presentations addressed an array of issues impacting the educational experiences and outcomes for Latino youth (see Irizarry, 2011).

I met with the students twice a week for two consecutive academic years, looping with them from eleventh grade through high school graduation as part of the formal structure of the course. These class meetings represent only a small fraction of the time we spent together. Students often stayed after school and met with me during free periods and regularly used school vacations to contribute to the work of Project FUERTE. Over the two-year period, I spent more than 400 hours with the participants, working collaboratively with them, serving as their teacher, and observing them across an array of contexts in and out of school. Beyond the confines of our classroom, we took several overnight trips as a group to present our work at research conferences, which also provided opportunities for me to get to know the students and their aspirations, dreams, and struggles in school in more depth. I constructed field notes after most class periods and out-of-school meetings. Student presentations were recorded on video and analyzed to provide another layer of data that directly speaks to how the participants made meaning of their experiences in school and the recommendations they forwarded for improving them. In addition, each student was formally interviewed six times over the two-year period, using a standard format for phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006). Each interview was transcribed and,

along with field notes, presentations, and student work products, serve as the primary data for this study.

Ethnographic methods (Carspecken, 1995) allowed me to critically examine the ways that the sociopolitical context in which the youths were embedded shaped the opportunity structure available to them and their daily experiences navigating school and the meaning they assigned to them, and extensively portrayed to me the education offered to a cadre of Latino youth under the seemingly benign guise of school and state efforts to close gaps in achievement between Latino and White students. These research methods also allowed me to witness firsthand how Latino students leveraged their participation in the YPAR project to assert agency, challenge hegemonic practices within their school, and create liberating spaces for themselves within an otherwise oppressive context. Culling themes that emerged from the data collected during the course of the ethnography, I used a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

Being a Puerto Rican man born and raised in an urban community and with the ability to speak Spanish and “code switch” (Gumperz, 1976; Gumperz & Hernandez-Chavez, 1972; Poplack, 1980) in ways that were consistent with these students’ preferred modes of communication assisted in developing relationships with students and parents and served as methodological capital (Gallagher, 2000). However, equally important, if not more so, was my commitment to the personal and professional development of the youths. Spending two years with them, transcending the traditional parameters of the student-teacher relationship, I developed a rich data set that speaks to the students’ journeys in pursuit of an education that provides them with postsecondary options and a chance for the American Dream.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The stories documented here are not completely unique to this particular school or community but rather are reflective of the context in which millions of Latinos are educated (see Fernández, 2002; Murillo et al., 2010; Pedraza & Rivera, 2005). Schools do not exist in a vacuum. The education of Latino youths is influenced by larger societal forces, including institutional racism and other forms of oppression. I locate the experiences of the students within the context of Latinization, which I define as efforts to assert and preserve Latino identities in the face of pressures to assimilate, shed one’s identity, and adopt Anglo cultural norms. The responses to Latinization are evidenced not only through the students’ experiences with culturally insensitive educators, documented in what follows, but also clearly demonstrated in national discourses and public policy regarding immigration, bilingual education, and ethnic studies, all the target of recent legislation aimed at curbing opportunity for Latino communities. The general climate of RHS, as described by the participants, was “all about the White kids” and antagonistic toward Latino students, with the allocation of learning opportunities often correlated with the race/ethnicity of the students. In a school that at the time of the study had a fairly equal distribution of Latino and White students, Latinos were grossly overrepresented in the least rigorous academic tracks of the school while White students were overrepresented in college-prep and

advanced-placement courses. The racialized dynamics of the school were evident in many of the policies and practices within the school, such as academic tracking and the disproportionate application of school discipline polices, and race loomed large in the lives of these youths.

To better understand role of race/ethnicity in the lives of Latino youths as they tried to successfully navigate school within the context of efforts to curtail or contain Latinization, I employed Latino/a Critical Race Theory (CRT generally, and LatCrit specifically) as an analytical tool. (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

The use of LatCrit as a theoretical lens is especially appropriate given the centrality of race and racism in the students' experiences. The theory centralizes race in analyses but also focuses on the intersection of race with other variables and identity characteristics, including language, (im)migration status, ethnicity, and culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), that were manifested throughout the study. Consistent with the tenets of LatCrit, the subaltern voices of Latino youth in this article provide a counternarrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to the well-entrenched myth of Latinos as uncaring and apathetic about education, highlighting their struggles for educational equity and documenting their quest for freedom in school.

### **“It’s Like You Can’t Breathe Here”: Buscando la Libertad in Schools**

School can be a difficult terrain to navigate for all students but is especially so for those from ethnically/racially and linguistically minoritized communities who attend schools that have not historically served these populations well. I use the term *minoritized* to reflect the substandard or less prestigious status often ascribed to languages other than English within the United States. It represents deliberate attempt to reject the positioning of Spanish speakers, who number more than 300 million worldwide and more than 45 million in the United States, as *language minorities* and to honor the linguistic communities that speak and/or identify with this world language. The participants articulated, and I personally observed, innumerable instances when the words and actions of many of the adults entrusted with the responsibility to educate them in reality marginalized, silenced, and alienated them from school. Discrimination against Latinos was accepted as commonplace or an essential characteristic of schooling for these students. “Mister, that’s just the way it is here” was a universal response offered to explain how students understood the policies, both formal and informal, that disproportionately had an adverse impact on Latino students and the almost daily incidents when Latino students felt disrespected by teachers and administrators. The collective sentiment of the group was expressed cogently by Taína, a bilingual Puerto Rican female who was born and raised in Rana City, during an interview at the inception of her senior year at RHS.

*Taína: How would I describe this school? You mean this place? Wow. It’s like you can’t breathe here. If you are Latino, man, they are always on you, bothering you, trying to make you like the White kids, the blancos. Teachers don’t give a [damn] about you if you are Latino.*

*There is, like, nothing here for us. What’s here? We can’t talk Spanish . . . We don’t learn anything . . . What is here for us? Nada.*

The other participants consistently echoed Taína’s scathing indictment of the culture and climate of the school.

A consistent theme unifying these concerns for Latino students was the restriction of freedoms within school, and the acts of suppression the participants experienced are organized into two, interrelated categories. The first, freedom of expression, speaks to the ways in which voices and perspectives were rendered silent through language policies created and implemented by many of the educators at RHS. It also addresses other forms of cultural expression identified as salient by Latino students that were stifled within this context. The second, freedom from oppression, addresses the nexus between students’ acceptance of the harsh realities of “Latinophobia,” the dislike of and discrimination against Latinos, and their aspirations for a more hopeful future, one where Latino students are valued, cared for, and educated in their own best interests. In other words, this section addresses the tensions between accepting “that’s the way it is here” and developing a vision for “the way things should be” and the discourses of critique, possibility, and freedom articulated by the students.

#### FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Pressures to assimilate and conform to perceived Anglo cultural norms were omnipresent in the lives of the participants and consistently came up in class sessions, students’ writing, and informal conversations. Many of the students internalized this racial hierarchy and culture of conformity, oftentimes deliberately defining themselves in contrast to White students and exalting “White culture” above their own. They would say things like, “We are not smart like the White kids” or “We don’t speak right, you know . . . like the *blancos*,” reifying the racialized school caste system that valued and praised the cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Yosso, 2005) possessed by White students and viewed the cultural repertoires of Latinos as inferior and in contrast to the knowledge and values that are congruent with “doing school.” Each day, the students struggled to find ways to affirm their sense of *latinidad*, or being Latino, within the confines of the school through language use—whether it be Spanish, Spanglish (see Martínez, 2010), or African American Language (see Paris, 2009)—and other forms of cultural expression reflective of their identities as Latino students strongly connected to urban youth culture. Frequently, asserting their cultural identities, the students were met with ire from school personnel, chastised verbally, dismissed from class, or sanctioned in other ways as a result. The stifling of students’ freedom to express themselves using the variety of linguistic and cultural resources at their disposal (Torres-Guzman, 2010) is evident in the following exchange between Carmen, a 17-year old Puerto Rican, and Natasha, a Mexican American immigrant, also 17, during a class discussion on bilingualism.

*Carmen: When we are speaking in Spanish we automatically have to be in trouble for it. We have to go to [the principal’s] office or whatever because the teacher automatically thinks that we are talking about*

*them in a bad way . . . when the White people do it [talk about teachers] all the time in English, and they don't send them to the office.*

*Natasha: You can't speak Spanish here. Most teachers . . . they don't let you speak it. Unless you are in Spanish class, you can't speak Spanish. I try to talk to my friends in the hallways, and teachers be yelling at me and stuff to be quiet. "English here!" [raising her voice], they say, yelling.*

*Carmen: Yup. They always be yelling at us.*

This brief excerpt from the conversation provides a glimpse into the silencing (Fine, 1991; Irizarry, 2011; Quiroz, 2001) of students' voices, the subordination of the Spanish language, and the treatment of Spanish speakers as "outsiders" unwelcome in the school. These stories, which may seem shocking to some, were not uncommon. In describing their school and interactions with teachers and administrators, the students painted a picture of an environment that was unfriendly and unreceptive to students who asserted Latino identities through language and other cultural practices. The United States of America is the second-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, based on the number of speakers of the language residing here. The school itself had a significant population of bilingual students. Nevertheless many adults were clearly opposed to the use and development of Spanish within the school walls. The message was clear: Spanish, the students were told, is the language of the home, and English is the language of school.

Denying students the right to communicate with peers in the language(s) with which they were most comfortable resulted in alienating Latino youth from that school and more generally from education, as this was considered the domain of White students and teachers. Simply walking the halls between classes could mark a Latino youth as a target for teachers and administrators. The students asserted that they were often harassed and asked to show a hallway pass while White students roamed without restriction. The racialized dynamics that permeated the surveillance of Latino students and resulted in the limiting of their freedoms in school are made visible in an example offered by Tamara, a biracial student of Puerto Rican and Irish descent. Because of phenotypical features, including her light skin and straight hair, and her participation in interscholastic sports and other school activities, which students "raced" as White and as conferring the benefits of Whiteness, she was able to veil her *latinidad* and pass for White.

*Tamara: Like I said before, how I get treated depends on who I am with [at the time]. If I am in the hallway with Latinos, teachers treat me one way, asking me for a pass, wondering where I am going, and questioning us. [This happens] even when we are, like, working on a project and stuff, like, real class stuff. If I am with my White friends, even if we are doing something bad like cutting class, they don't say anything. They just assume we are following the rules. I'm like a chameleon racially. I see both sides, and I can tell you—Latino students get treated bad, even when they aren't doing anything wrong.*

Tamara's unique perspective and experiences on both sides of the proverbial racial line provide a window into the disparate treatment of Latino students and their White peers. Perhaps, as one of the students was told when she pressed for an explanation for this discriminatory treatment, the teachers and administrators patrolling the hallways of the school were unaware of their actions, subconsciously targeting Latino students and assuming that they were creating strict controls, as she noted, "to help Latino students." The logic underlying this dominant narrative, reflective of deficit perspectives that imply that Latino students lack the characteristics that lead to academic success (see Flores-González, 2002; Nieto, 1999), suggests that without constant monitoring, Latino students would run amuck and neglect their studies, causing damage to themselves and the entire school community. Conversely, White students are inherently equipped with the ability to self-regulate and have a proclivity for success in school, so they do not require the same level of surveillance, monitoring, and structure. The intentions of teachers and administrators patrolling the hallways of the building, as reported by the students, were certainly open to interpretation. There was no doubt among the student participants, however, that the underlying motives were sinister and that the surveillance of Latino students was intended to curb their freedom, restrict their movement around the building, and exert penal control over them.

Unlike Tamara, the majority of the participants were unable to assert an ambiguous or amorphous racial identity, blend in among the White students at RHS, and reap the benefits of racial privilege in this setting. Their physical characteristics, styles of dress, mannerisms, names, and language practices were a source of pride, difficult if not impossible (and unquestionably undesirable) to completely erase. These cultural markers—identity characteristics that students inherited (i.e., physical features such as skin color and hair texture), adopted (e.g., style of dress), or acquired (e.g., accents, cultural values)—made them more easily identifiable as Latinos to other students, teachers, and administrators. The participants believed teachers' surveillance had multiple origins, including a general sense of animosity toward Latino youths and pressure coming from the local district and the state to, as Ramón powerfully put it, "fix the Latino problem in this school."

Limiting the cultural expressions that Latino youths equate with community and affinity-group membership can certainly have an adverse impact on students' willingness to identify with school and exert the effort necessary to overcome the obstacles impeding their progress and achieve school success.

*Alberto: It is hard to be Latino here. I mean, I'm always Latino, but teachers want you to behave like White kids. [mimicking a teacher] "Why can't you be more like Bob?" We can get loud and excited about things, you know, in a good way, and they get scared and stuff [as he lets out a short burst of laughter]. We show more respect to each other. We do dap [a handshake] and hugs and stuff with friends, like a kiss on the cheek to girls. That's not about anything bad. That's about respect, love for your people, you know what I'm sayin'? And [teachers and administrators] say that you are doing something wrong, that we shouldn't do that. When they are on me like that, I don't even want to be here.*

The experiences of the participants speak to a backlash against Latino youth, rooted in deficit perspectives and enacted under the pretext of efforts to improve the academic performance of Latino students, and shed light on the daily struggles students endure in pursuit of an education in a context that they believe is largely unwelcoming and unsupportive of Latinos. The practices restricting the freedom of Latino students are undergirded by a larger racialized narrative about who Latino youths are and what they might become without the intervention of White adults to closely monitor their behavior. Despite the significant obstacles created by the constant suppression of Latino students' multiple forms of cultural expression, the students came to school regularly and persevered through graduation. Their commitment to education and their resolve to overcome barriers imposed by policies and practices within their schools stem from their desire for something more, a brighter future outside of the walls of RHS. The intersections between the harsh realities of their school and the collective hope are explored in the next section.

#### FREEDOM FROM OPPRESSION

At the outset of the YPAR project, students had little faith that oppressive conditions could be challenged and dismantled and even less confidence that they might play a role in the transformation process. During one of our first class sessions, I spoke about the transformative potential of YPAR and conveyed a sense of great anticipation and optimism for the work that we were going to do together to address the education of Latino students. My enthusiasm was matched by the students' pessimism, which was developed over years of educational neglect, and their lack of any knowledge of youth participation in historical or present-day struggles for social justice and educational equity. In my field notes developed immediately after one of my first classes, I recorded the following abridged transcript of an exchange with the class.

*Taína: What? So you think we can change something here? What? ¿Estás loco? [Are you are crazy?]*

*Irizarry: Sure. If that's lo que quieren hacer, seguro [what you want to do, sure].*

*Jasmine: Mister, we're just kids. We—*

*Taína: [cutting off Jasmine] We can't do [anything]; we can't change [anything]. Things are the way they are and that's it.*

*Irizarry: Look at the Young Lords and the Brown Berets. Latinos have a history of social activism . . . of changing things in this country. [I stared out at a sea of blank faces. Finally, a voice breaks the short pause in the conversation.]*

*Ramiro: Who are they?*

Because of the denial of freedom within schools, described above, as well as the absence of knowledge regarding the contributions of youths and Latino youths, more specifically, to the civil rights movement and other social gains in the United States, students did not feel empowered, nor did they have a frame of reference to believe in the possibility for transforming institutions, although they readily acknowledged the need for change in the ways Latino students are educated.

The students entered the class as skilled social critics, armed with sharp words about their schooling experiences and many of the teachers and administrators with whom they had interacted over the course of their schooling experiences. However, they usually stopped there, identifying the problems but not feeling it necessary or appropriate, given their age and status within the school, to ask for a response to their concerns or to develop solutions to address the issues they identified. The first few months were at times disheartening and frustrating, as we frequently arrived at an impasse during the development various stages of the YPAR project with students questioning, "Nothing is going to happen, so what are we doing this for?" and "You know the blancos run this place, right?"

As time went on, and as the project took shape, students began to extend their critiques and question why the system operated in a fashion that marginalized Latino students and families. They began to search for freedom, as defined by the esteemed educational philosopher Maxine Greene as "the capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise" (1988, p. 3). There were a plethora of instances over the two years when students pursued freedom, identifying a problem and developing a vision for how things should be. One of the most vivid examples of the students' quest for freedom can be found in the following dialogue, recorded in my field notes after a particularly intense class the day students learned that the only Latino teacher in a core subject area at their school was being forced to resign after multiple disagreements with the administration. When reporting this story to me in class, they were as animated as I have ever seen them. They hustled into the room and before anyone could sit down, Alberto began speaking.

*Alberto: Dr. I, did you hear? They are going to fire [the teacher].*

*Several Students: That messed up. Nah. ¿De verdad? [For real?]*

*Alberto: Yeah. For real. Can you believe that [stuff]? That's foul, yo!*

*What are we gonna do?*

*Jasmine: What do you mean, gonna do?*

*Alberto: We gotta do something. It's so foul, yo.*

*Irizarry: What do you want to do?*

*Alberto: Imagine if we walked out like in that movie<sup>2</sup>. What if we got all the Latino students to bounce from school at the same time? Oh, that would be crazy!*

*Jasmine: [speaking over Alberto] We could get in mad trouble.*

*Taína: That's what's up. Let's do it.*

*Natasha: Yeah.*

*Several Students: Yeah. All right. Yeah.*

Alberto, with strong feelings about a teacher with whom he identified, cogently and passionately articulated his concerns to the class and motivated himself and his colleagues to action. As you can see in Jasmine's reluctance and fear of retribution from the administration, there wasn't an initial consensus among the participants as to whether or not students had the right or the power to react to the perceived offense.

There was an ebb and flow to students' assertions of freedom. At times, the participants appeared willing to accept the harsh conditions that they rightfully bemoaned in class discussions and other

assignments, figuring change wasn't possible, so they shouldn't invest any extra time or energy into this endeavor. At other points, they seemed ready to start a revolution, filled with exhilaration and eager to organize their peers and speak truth to power. Most often, the quest for freedom from oppression gained momentum when multiple students agreed on the egregiousness of the offense under discussion. The focus on individualism, consistent with schooling practices across the country, and the conditioning of Latino students to conform to school rules and practices that often marginalized them, at times curtailed the students' ambition to challenge the administration on contentious issues. Outside of Project FUERTE, the students often felt isolated from each other. Within the research collaborative, there was power in numbers; support from colleagues bolstered confidence and fueled the belief that change was necessary and possible. Much of the two years was spent living in the tensions created by the frequently oppressive daily realities of being a Latino student at RHS and the imagined possibilities for a future where students were free to develop, preserve, and assert their cultural identities while obtaining a quality education. Freedom emerged through a process of resistance, one where students exerted agency over their lives, identified oppressive structures, and engaged in collective action to disrupt and dismantle them.

### **“I Am, Like, More Awake”: YPAR and Freedom in School**

At the culmination of one of our many presentations, audience members had an opportunity to ask the participants questions about their research. I always eagerly anticipated the question-and-answer portion of our presentations; it gave students the chance to shine, demonstrating their brilliance above and beyond their well-rehearsed presentation. I was always fascinated to hear how the participants would respond to the wide array of questions posed by community members, teachers, researchers, and policy-makers. There were times when audience members seemed angry, challenging the validity of the students' research and trying to convince them of the value of skill-and-drill teaching and the need for increased surveillance in “dangerous urban schools.” Most often, supportive individuals who were inspired by the youths and genuinely interested in their perspectives on schooling and school reform offered questions. At the conclusion of a presentation we delivered at a regional conference on educational research at the end of the first year of the project, a professor in the audience asked, “What has changed for you now? What is different as a result of doing this?” Carmen's response clearly articulated the impact of a coming together as a collective in search of freedom.

*Carmen: I'm, like, more awake . . . It's made me want to speak my voice more, to say what's on my mind. It's made me think more clearly about the situations that are going on in my school. Because before I was in this class, I didn't think nothing of the fact that I was getting taught less than the other students. I mean, I knew it was there, but I wasn't really thinking . . . I never thought . . . Oh, I can do something to change this, you know? And now that we're in this class . . . it dawns on me every single time that we've already started change because people are talking.”*

Carmen's response suggested that her participation in a YPAR project that identified and challenged oppressive structures within schools serving Latino youths led to an increased sense of awareness, a heightened level of consciousness regarding the institutions she needed to navigate to achieve her personal and professional goals. Because of the social reproductive function of schools (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976), she had not been encouraged to think critically about the quality of education she was being offered or to examine the education of Latino students in urban schools from an institutional perspective. Despite claims to the contrary, most schools are not spaces that are conducive to raising *critical consciousness*, in the Freireian sense of the term, meaning to develop a profound understanding of the world and take action to eliminate oppression in all of its forms (Freire, 1970).

Schools often serve as a vehicle to reproduce existing societal inequalities based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, and other variables (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; MacLeod, 2008; Noguera, 2000). The resulting gaps in academic achievement among groups of students within and across schools are a logical byproduct of an inequitable opportunity structure. The oppressive structures that foster and foment gaps in achievement are highly racialized, disproportionately depressing the performance of students of color. Similarly, the dominant narratives and majoritarian discourses surrounding the achievement gap only give surface attention to race, naming students of color as the problem to be fixed without critically examining of the sociohistorical and sociocultural contexts in which Latinos and other students of color have been and are educated. In this narrative, race is named but often racism remains obscure. Focusing on race without paying sufficient attention to the ways racism is manifested in the education of Latino youth, specifically through the stifling of freedoms, does little to close gaps in achievement and even less to create a more critically conscious citizenry who can actively participate in an increasingly diverse democratic society. Narrow approaches to education that fail to examine issues of power can dim sensibilities and metaphorically lull students and their teachers to sleep. In contrast, students' participation in the YPAR project, which shifted the gaze of critique from Latino students' behavior and performance on tests to the institutions in which they are educated, created the conditions through which students could assert agency, intentionally pursue freedom, and become increasingly conscious about their schools, their communities, and the world around them. In other words, they entered a state of “wide-awakeness” (Greene, 1978), moving from feeling powerless to finding power through their search for freedom.

The students' search for freedom in school was not a simple journey with a clear destination at which they arrived during our time together. The process was far more complex. Immersed in a hostile context, there were times when the students felt overwhelmed and paralyzed and others when they felt empowered and ready to change the world. When feelings of powerlessness arose, they were confronted head-on and “overcome . . . through conscious effort on the part of individuals to keep themselves awake, to think about their condition in the world, to inquire into the forces that appear to dominate, to interpret the experiences they are having day to day” (Greene, 1978, pp. 43–44). In their pursuit of

freedom, they engaged in a critique of the very institution in which they were embedded, developing empirically based recommendations for improving the educational experiences and outcomes for Latino youth. The students' willingness to engage in praxis, reflection and action upon the world in order to change it (Freire, 1970), was inspiring and offers a model of perseverance and courage for all of us committed to democracy and education.

## Conclusion

As I write this article, approximately two and a half years after our first meeting, the participants have all completed high school, six graduating from RHS and one receiving her General Education Diploma. One student is enrolled at a community college, taking a course load consisting of several remedial courses, another enlisted in the military, and the remaining five are working low-wage jobs in the service industry. The paths they have taken since high school are largely reflective of the opportunities they were offered as students. The curtailing of their freedoms as students resulted in a depressed opportunity structure as young adults.

Consistent with the goals of CRT and LatCrit frameworks, this article amplifies the subjugated voices of Latino students and documents the ways in which they experience education as teachers respond to the Latinization of US schools. The students' perspectives included throughout the article suggest that increased attention needs to be given to exploring the intersections between demographic shifts—and specifically population growth among Latinos—and changes in policy and practice that focus on curbing students' freedoms, necessary preconditions for a democratic education. Moreover, the findings suggest that the role of race and racism, obscured through achievement-gap discourses that focus solely on students' performance on tests and ignore their experiences in schools, should be made visible and explicitly addressed by educators and students alike.

President Barack Obama has set having the world's highest concentration of adults with postsecondary degrees by 2020 as a goal for the United States. Improving the educational experiences and outcomes for Latinos and dismantling the achievement gap are central to reaching this goal (Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010). As educators, researchers, and policymakers search for solutions to the achievement gap, the voices and perspectives of Latino youth remain silenced and the potential to learn from the lived experiences of these students is overlooked in favor of information garnered through large data sets and the one-size-fits-all remedies they inspire. And Latino students' search for freedom continues.

## Notes

1. I employ the parentheses in (*im*)migration to signal the often overlooked diverse experiences among individuals and communities who journey to the United States, specifically underscoring potential differences in citizenship status. For example, Puerto Ricans born on the island of Puerto Rico, a colonial possession of the United States for over a century, are US citizens by birth. Subsequently, their move from the island to the mainland can be viewed as *migration* rather than *immigration*. However, Spanish is the dominant language on the island and when Puerto Ricans

migrate to the United States, their experiences share many similarities with those of immigrants from Latin America, especially in their encounters with xenophobia, racism, and linguisticism.

2. As part of the class, students viewed excerpts from the film *Walkout* (2006), which documented a peaceful protest organized by Mexican American students in California. Students at five high schools staged a walkout to bring attention to and speak back against poor educational conditions and discrimination.

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Table 1. Participants in Project FUERTE

<b>Alberto</b>	Alberto moved to the United States from Mexico at age seven. Recently graduated from high school, Alberto cannot afford to pursue college because his state does not have the Dream Act. He is working to save money for college.
<b>Taína</b>	Taína is Puerto Rican and plans to become a nurse. She works in the service industry and plans to enroll in community college in the fall. She is passionate about being a good role model for her young daughter.
<b>Carmen</b>	Carmen is a published poet and has an affinity for NuyoRican poetry. Much of her poetry speaks of her experiences as a Puerto Rican youth navigating the difficult terrain of school. She cites the lack of Latino teachers as her primary motivation for pursuing a career as an English teacher.
<b>Ramiro</b>	Ramiro (im)migrated to the United States from Puerto Rico at 14. Although a citizen, he struggled to adjust to schools that operate primarily in English, given that Spanish was his primary language. Frequent encounters with school security, who he believed targeted him because of his ethnicity, and lack of support in English-only classes impeded his academic progress.
<b>Natasha</b>	As a young child, Natasha immigrated from Mexico. She attended schools in Rana City for 10 years, graduating in 2010. Although a balanced bilingual student—equally proficient in English and Spanish—she found that this ability did not translate to success in school; she struggled to pass classes. She is unemployed but aspires to become a translator.
<b>Tamara</b>	Tamara identifies as Puerto Rican and White and asserts that her biracial/multiethnic identity offers her a unique perspective on discrimination against Latinos and privilege conferred on Whites at Rana High School. After graduating, she enlisted in the military. She plans to attend college after a tour of duty.
<b>Jasmine</b>	Jasmine is Puerto Rican and was born and raised on the mainland United States. She enjoys working with young children and is enrolled in community college with the goal of becoming an early childhood educator. She plans to complete her associate's degree before transferring to a four-year school to complete her undergraduate degree and teacher licensure.