



Exploring Educational Injustice in Iowa Through Latina Youth Poetic Praxis

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Abstract: With the growing population of Latinx students in Iowa public schools has come increased attention to the educational context these students encounter. Using frameworks of LatCrit theory and Agencies of Transformational Resistance, this critical ethnography study explores the educational experiences of two Iowa Latina youth through their expression of written poetry. Poems were created in a grassroots community youth-based after-school program. They shed light on Latina youth experiences of white supremacy and institutional racism embedded in the pedagogy, curricula, and social practices of their public high school. The study also draws attention to the power of poetry to unveil Latina youth agency. This research can be used to inform both researchers and educators about the social injustice the growing Iowa Latinx student populations encounter in school, to both understand their experiences and move towards authentic allyship to engage in collective resistance to dismantle white supremacy and institutional racism in education.

Keywords: poetry, education, Latinx youth, racism, critical youth studies

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Exploring Educational Injustice in Iowa Through Latina Youth Poetic Praxis

I am Mexican, woman, a Dreamer, activist, smart, educated, and intelligent.
I wonder why in history they only show one side of the story.
I hear my classmates complain how the teachers don't do a good job teaching.
I see teachers who don't look like me.
I feel anger and helpless, lost, and disappointed
I worry that people of color won't have the best education for themselves.
I cry that the education system has not improved.
I understand why people hate high school.
I try to unite people, stand up for my community, and make my voice heard.
I hope the education system changes their history books and that after many years of trying there will be a change.
I Am An Activist!

The above poem includes excerpts from *I Am Poems*, created by 18 first-generation U.S. Mexican-American and immigrant high school students in Denver Meadows, Iowa, an urban city in the Midwest. The poem conveys the educational context that the growing student population of Midwest Latinx,¹ often referred to as an invisible social group (Gastón et al., 2013), encounters in Iowa. At the time the youth wrote their poems, socio-political unrest was ignited with President Trump's anti-immigrant politics and his pressure for the education system to teach students American exceptionalism (Ngo, 2017). Scholars have documented how President Trump's politics disrupted Latinx youth educational experiences and ruptured their future outlook (Wray-Lake et al., 2018), in addition to the general U.S. history of racial exclusion, discrimination, and segregation of Latinx youth in the public education system (Valencia, 2000). In the above poem, Iowa Latinx youth share their experiences with educational injustice, validating such research, and hope for social transformation to the oppressive education system.

This study presents and discusses examples of *I Am Poems* written by two Latina high school students in the context of *Movimiento La Libertad (MLL)*, a grassroots Latinx community youth-based organization in an urban city in Iowa. The two Latina youth poems were selected for this study because they are a representation of participants in the larger critical ethnographic study, and their poems focus specifically on their schooling experiences. Through the lens of *LatCrit* theory in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) and agencies of transformational resistance (ATR) (Casanova, 2024; Covarrubias & Revilla, 2003), the study focused on these poems to understand the ways in which youth can use poetry as a tool of liberation and to critically reflect on social oppression they encounter in public school. The study centers the two poems to amplify the voices of Latina youth and offer educational activists, researchers, and public-school staff a brief look into the racism (Solórzano, 1997; Pérez Huber, 2009) and white supremacy two Midwestern Latina youth encounter in one high school in Denver Meadows, Iowa.

This article begins with a description of the theoretical framework, followed by a review of critical literacy. We then describe the critical ethnographic methods with a detailed description of the research context in which the poems were collected. In the discussion, we make meaning

¹ We use the term Latinx to be gender inclusive when referring to peoples of Latin American descent. We use the gender forms, Latina and Latino, when referring to specific individuals (Monzó, 2016).

of the data guided by our theoretical framework and prior research on Latinx youth, poetry, and education. In addition, we show how poetry nurtures Latina youth liberation and hope. We conclude by offering implications for educators, in and beyond school walls.

Theoretical Framework

The study utilizes LatCrit theory and agencies of transformational resistance as a theoretical lens to examine the schooling conditions of Latina youth through poetry they created in a weekly sharing circle at MLL.

LatCrit Theory

Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit Theory) is grounded in the efforts of critical race theory (CRT) in educational research (Valdes, 1997). In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate published *Towards a Critical Race Theory in Education*, the first article in the field of education to use a CRT perspective. Ladson-Billings and Tate encourage scholars to theorize about race and to use race as an analytical tool for understanding school injustice. While LatCrit theory and CRT derive from the same foundation, LatCrit theory addresses issues many times ignored by CRT theorists. LatCrit scholars theorize about issues such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality (Espinoza, 1990; Garcia, 1995; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Johnson, 1997; Martinez, 1994; Montoya, 1994). LatCrit is a theory that centers Latinas/Latinos multidimensional identities and can address the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). LatCrit theory aims to uncover ways in which educational structures, processes, and discourses support and promote racial subordination (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). This study is guided by tenets of LatCrit theory (Solórzano and Yosso, 2001). The first tenet is the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, emphasizing that race and racism are endemic and permanent. Thus, race is at the center of our analysis as we explore race and racism in education and how race and racism intersect with other forms of social identity, such as social class and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). The second tenet we apply is the challenge of dominant ideology. This tenet offers a lens to challenge the traditional claims that the education system and its institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. The third tenet is, commitment to social justice, which means Latinx youth struggle towards the abolition of racism and racial subordination in the public education system. Tenet four is the centrality of experiential knowledge. In this tenet, the experiential knowledge of Latinx students is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, practicing, and teaching about racial subordination in education. We use this tenet to draw knowledge directly from Latina youth through poetry. The last tenet is interdisciplinary perspective, which challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analysis and analyses race and racism in a historical and contemporary context using interdisciplinary methods. Previous research situated in after-school programs have used LatCrit tenets to explore how the arts can support Latinx youth construction of counter-stories that resist racist discourse (Casanova & Cammarota, 2019; Dominguez & Casanova, 2023; Torres & Tayne, 2017).

Agencies of Transformational Resistance

The ATR framework is grounded in critical race theory and Latina/Latino critical race theory, pilot studies, and Covarrubias and Revilla's (2003) own personal and professional experiences within organizations. The ATR framework is guided by four tenets:

- 1) raising a multi-dimensional and critical consciousness—supported through formalized training sessions and opportunities to engage in dialogue and praxis,
- 2) nurturing a commitment to social justice—seeks to dismantle all relations of power that create inequality that impacts one's own life and beyond,
- 3) cultivating skills and expanding resources—including an asset-based approach to community and youth development and meeting the personal needs of youth, and
- 4) creating an evolving network of resistance—including relevant opportunities for personal development and opportunities to gain political and personal support to transform various forms of social injustice.

We used LatCrit theory and ATR as theoretical frameworks because they afford tools and concepts specific to understanding and analyzing Latinx youth experiences of educational injustice in a community-based youth program. First, these theoretical frameworks move us beyond the Black and White binary to provide nuances about how racism impacts Latinx youth and education (Espinoza, 1990; Garcia, 1995; Martinez, 1994; Montoya, 1994). Second, we used these frameworks to recognize the experiential knowledge of Latinx youth as critical to understanding and analyzing the field of education (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano and Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005). Similar to other branches of CRT, LatCrit theory and ATR aim to uncover ways in which educational structures, processes, and discourses support and promote an oppressive educational system perpetuated by structural racism. (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). Several patterns of disproportionality for Latinx youth in public schools exemplify the social problems of structural racism (Crutchfield et al., 2020). These include being under-screened and under-selected for gifted programs and referrals to lower and remedial academic tracks, such as special education, or put on track for an alternative to a high school diploma, such as a certificate (McFarland et al., 2018; Office for Civil Rights, n.d.; Scialabba, 2017). Finally, LatCrit and ATR enabled us to use Latinx youth experiences as a means to nurture youth development and their commitment to social justice and hope.

Table 1

Theoretical Tenets: LatCrit Theory and Agencies of Transformational Resistance

LatCrit Theory

1. *Centrality and intersectionality* of race and racism, emphasizing that race and racism are endemic and permanent. Thus, race is at the center of our analysis as we explore race and racism in education and how race and racism intersect with other forms of social identity, such as social class and gender.
2. *Challenge of dominant ideology*. This tenet offers a lens to challenge the traditional claims that the education system and its institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity.

3. *Commitment to social justice*, which means Latinx youth struggle towards the abolition of racism and racial subordination in the public education system.
4. *Experiential knowledge* of Latinx students is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, practicing, and teaching about racial subordination in education.
5. *Interdisciplinary perspective*, challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analysis and analyses race and racism in a historical and contemporary context using interdisciplinary methods.

Agencies of Transformational Resistance

1. *Raising a multi-dimensional and critical consciousness*, which is supported through formalized training sessions and opportunities to engage in dialogue and praxis.
 2. *Nurturing a commitment to social justice*, which seeks to dismantle all relations of power that create inequality that impacts one's own life and beyond.
 3. *Cultivating skills and expanding resources*, including an asset-based approach to community and youth development and meeting the personal needs of youth.
 4. *Creating an evolving network of resistance*, including relevant opportunities for personal development and opportunities to gain political and personal support to transform various forms of social injustice.
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Literature Review

Community-Based Youth Organizations

There is a history of community-based youth organizations that create spaces for youth of color, specifically Latinx youth, to focus on ethnic nationalism, educational justice, access to quality healthcare, and community safety, all of which nurture collective voice and activism (Garcia & Castro, 2011; Montejano, 2010; Muñoz, 1989). These organizations include, but are not limited to, the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), Brown Berets, Young Lords, and the Crusade for Justice (Alaniz & Cornish, 2008; Correa, 2011; Garcia & Castro, 2011; Montejano, 2010; Muñoz, 2007). Contemporary youth organizations in the Midwest, the context of this study, have followed in the footsteps of historical youth organizations. For example, Ventura's (2017) study in Wisconsin focused on Latin@Youth, a grassroots collective of youth of color activists that use creative art expressions and storytelling as a tool for social change and social justice. Unified Youth (UY) offers programs for Latinx youth from immigrant (primarily Mexican origin) families in a rural, predominantly White community in a Midwestern county (McGovern et al., 2020). UY cultivated a safe space for Latinx youth to develop cultural awareness, and support leadership and planning skills. Todos Juntos and Youth Action are two youth organizations in the Midwest that nurture Latinx youth wellbeing through programs that engage youth in action to promote social change and advocate for immigrant rights. These ATRs in the Midwest provide Latinx youth and families with a space where they feel a sense of belonging, develop meaningful relationships, and advocate for liberation and joy.

Critical Literacy

Brazilian education activist Paulo Freire (1970) extensively developed the classical scholarship on critical literacy. Freire put forth a framework that recognized critical literacy as a process of *reading the word* and *reading the world*. Since Freirean pedagogy ignited the dialogue of critical literacy, education researchers, educators, and activists have introduced core principles or tenets (Morrell, 2004), and they have argued for critical literacy as a teaching and learning approach to explore how and why inequities exist (Lanckshear & McClaren, 1993).

Critical literacy as an instructional approach leads to higher levels of critical consciousness around social injustices (Kohli et al., 2019). A *counter-text* is a student created text that requires students to critically reflect and examine their reality, experiences, and perspectives (Behrman, 2006; Siefert et al., 2017). Student autobiographical stories and poems are counter-texts and foundational in critical literacy (Alber, 2016). By producing a counter-text, students begin to examine how their cultures and identities are represented or mis-represented, and their voices are amplified as they offer transformative ways to create a more socially just world (López, 2011). Thus, critical literacy can be used as an emancipatory process for Latinx youth who are marginalized, silenced, ignored, and denied access to high quality education.

Written poetry is a form of critical literacy that has been used as a tool to raise marginalized student's awareness of social injustice and provides them with a way to challenge oppression (Norton, 2011). Several studies have demonstrated that written poetry can disrupt practices of silencing in educational contexts and change how people see and understand their reality (Mayorga & Rosales, 2019; Norton, 2011). Likewise, written poetry has been used by students to challenge official school practices and offer strategies for action (Norton, 2011), which educators can use to improve teaching and learning for all students (Jocson, 2006; Marciano & Watson, 2021), but marginalized students in particular.

One specific type of written poetry is the I Am Poem (Romero et al., 2009). The research finds that this type of poetry offers teachers and students the opportunity for self-reflection, self-discovery, and engagement with critical praxis (reflection and action) (Freire, 1970; Romero et al., 2009). Similarly, I Am Poems offer students opportunities to make meaning of their experience and realities and to reflect on their futures (Abril-González, 2020).

Despite these studies and others, there are still “gaping silences on the power of poetry to enable young children to name oppression and make injustice visible” (Norton, 2011, p. 434). In addition, there is a need for an examination of the connection between Latinx youth and written poetry (Arenas, 2018), specifically in spaces that are explicitly created outside of formal educational contexts that center social justice in the pedagogy and curriculum (Fields et al., 2014). This study addresses these gaps in the current literature and increases our understanding of the schooling conditions and experiences of Iowa Latina youth in the current socio-historical moment of anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx politics and ideologies.

Methodology

This study employed a critical ethnography because of the researcher's (first author) ethical commitment to work closely with a group of Latinx youth for an extended amount of time, cultivate an authentic relationship with Latinx youth, and foster Latinx youth critical consciousness through critical reflection and action toward oppressive schooling practices. Critical ethnography challenges positivist fallacy that researchers enter a space as objective,

detached, and neutral observers with the aim to obtain knowledge for knowledge's sake (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Villenas, 1996). Rather, this three-year critical ethnography fostered authentic relationships with participants through extended time in the field engaging in participatory research and ongoing reflection, dialogue, and action with participants about their lived experiences, community, family, and injustice they experienced in school (Villenas, 1996). Through these ethnographic methods, the researcher and participants critiqued oppressive school practices, policies, and culture, and cultivated individual, societal, and institutional change (Palmer & Caldas, 2015). This critical ethnography involved a process that cultivated spaces for the researcher and participants to co-construct knowledge and co-create power (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002).

Positionality

The first author embodies the cultural identities of many participants in the larger study (e.g., Latino raised in the Midwest in a low-income working-class community). These cultural connections supported the process of developing an authentic and vulnerable relationship, which fostered his long-term commitment to not only learn from participants, but to develop a deep sense of care for participants as well as their family and community. Yet, his experiences are also distinct from those of the participants. Many of the intersecting forms of oppression faced by the participants, particularly gender and documentation status, are not manifested in the same ways as for him. The first author is a first-generation college graduate who self identifies as a heterosexual cisgender male, and fourth generation Tejano. While there are similarities in cultural identities and experiences, the lived experiences between him and the Latina youth in this study are distinct.

Born in Southeast Phoenix and raised in South Los Angeles in a family of public educators, the second author (graduate research assistant) is a white, pansexual transdisciplinary researcher trained in Critical Race Theory, public policy, education, civic engagement, and sustainability. She is a Research Analyst leading qualitative research efforts that focus on Latinx communities' health and sustainability. As an active community member, she engages in mutual aid education and resource distribution with marginalized communities and focuses on lobbying for institutional policy changes that uplift such communities.

Background of Study and Research Setting

The first author came to MLL as a first-generation Latino college graduate with nearly eight years of professional experience in community-based youth programs in San Antonio, Texas and Kalamazoo, Michigan. His personal commitment is to support Latinx youth in their efforts to pursue post-secondary education and nurture their critical consciousness. His role as researcher and youth facilitator at MLL began during the second semester of his doctoral studies. At the time, his major professor was recently appointed as a board member to MLL and started volunteering as a youth facilitator. This led to an offer to join MLL as a youth facilitator. His responsibilities were to facilitate weekly program activities with Latinx youth and help develop the structure of MLL. In addition, his major professor advised him to consider MLL as a site for his dissertation research. He agreed and was advised through the research design and implementation of a critical ethnographic research project.

MLL is a statewide organization with nine locations. MLL was founded in 2006 by women in a small rural town in Iowa. Their aim was to provide Latinx students with support to overcome educational barriers and pursue post-secondary education. MLL offers services and programs to undocumented and documented Latinx youth and their families. The primary objective of MLL is to offer Latinx student's programs to cultivate their leadership skills, increase their chances to attend and successfully complete post-secondary education, and support their critical civic development (Moya, 2017).

During the academic school year, MLL youth and adult staff meet once a week for at least two hours in a cafeteria of a local church. The church served solely as a meeting site for youth and was offered through a friendship between the MLL director and a church pastor. MLL was a sacred space with very few guest presenters. Also, MLL was a co-constructed space where MLL adult staff and Latinx youth intentionally engaged in authentic collaborations on key structures of MLL. Weekly program meetings were facilitated by a combination of MLL staff and Latinx youth. It was not uncommon for only Latinx youth to facilitate meetings, typically in pairs or in a group of three. Furthermore, at the end of the MLL summer program roughly six MLL youth worked closely with the first author and MLL staff for three weeks on developing the program curriculum. At this point, Latinx youth and adult staff made decisions about weekly program themes, specific activities for each meeting, and larger program decisions.

Although each weekly meeting had a specific theme or topic with a corresponding activity, program meetings followed the MLL 4-stage circle program model structure. In the MLL curriculum the circle model is described as a symbolic representation of wholeness, inclusion, and equality in many cultures, including native cultures of Latin America. The use of a circle represents cycles in North, Central, and South American native cultures. Ceremonies, celebrations, and *temazcal* (sweats) all happen in a circle for our indigenous culture. It ties all participants together and creates safe and secure spaces where all students, adults, and visitors are equal and respected. Each program meeting used the model throughout the year (Author, 2024). The circle model observed at MLL is similar to *pláticas* (Fierros and Delgado Bernal, 2016) and sharing circles (Tachine et al., 2016). *Pláticas* and sharing circles foster both a supportive and trusting space where youth are able to be vulnerable and share their stories, nurturing interconnectedness, healing, and a deeper understanding of youth shared experiences (Fierros and Delgado Bernal, 2016; Tachine et al., 2016). Guided by the circle model, each weekly program session started with an opening circle ritual activity (e.g., sit in silence). This was followed by a check-in, which offered youth the space to reflect on the last program meeting and to share any thoughts or questions. Then, a program activity was co-selected by adult staff and Latinx youth. All meetings ended with one youth counting down ("three, two, one") while all members were in a circle holding hands and arms crossed with the person next to them. When the youth reached one, everyone shouted "¡Sí Se Puede!" as we raised our hands and turned towards the outer part of the circle.

MLL programs and sessions were facilitated using principles and ideas of liberating pedagogy of praxis (LPP) (Casanova & Cammarota, 2019). LPP is theoretically grounded in tents of humanizing pedagogy (Bartolome, 1994; Freire, 1970; Heiman, 2021; Osorio, 2018; Salazar, 2013; Taylor, 2019) and LatCrit Theory. LPP aims to disrupt dominant ideologies, which contributes to eliminating oppression and empowering marginalized youth. LPP views race and racism as (a) embedded into social institutions, (b) intersecting with other social identities and systems of oppression, and (c) critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination through dialogue. LPP is guided by three intersecting principles: (1)

Knowledge holders—the belief that true knowledge, expertise, and assets already exist with Latinx youth, which have been accumulated through their life experiences. (2) Shared knowledge—dialogue with youth that demonstrates hope, the use of their voice, love for each other, their community, and history. (3) Co-construction of knowledge—youth build a community grounded in love and trust amongst themselves through collective authentic reflection, which guides how youth and adults teach and learn from and through each other, which promotes collective action (Casanova & Cammarota, 2019). LPP is facilitated through three pedagogical practices (Casanova & Dominguez, 2024): (1) Sharing circles, (2) Critical authentic dialogue between youth and adults, and (3) Using lived experiences to analyze social injustice and foster a sense of belonging.

Study Participants

Participants in this study are Cynthia and Maya, two Latina youth out of the 18 Latinx youth who participated in the I Am Poem storytelling circle. We chose to present Cynthia's and Maya's poems specifically because of the focus on their educational experiences and their level of involvement in MLL. Both Cynthia and Maya are young women of Mexican heritage and have mixed-status families. At the time of this research, Cynthia was a senior in high school and youth leader for the program. Her parents were employed in the service sector. Cynthia emerged as a vocal youth leader. On behalf of the organization, Cynthia gave speeches and presentations on racism in her school and anti-immigrant politics at several professional education conferences and community events. Maya was a junior in high school and active in sports. Her attendance of the program was sporadic because her sports schedule often conflicted with after-school meetings. In the program she was vocal about inequities in her school. She often shared stories about her schooling experience, which excluded teaching about her Latinx culture.

Data Collection and Analysis

The I Am Poems collected for this study were made when the Latina youth participated in a storytelling circle with peers and adult staff in preparation for their visit with pre-service teachers enrolled in a social justice education course at Midwest State University. Collective poetry writing was often used at MLL. It was selected for this storytelling circle because of its collaborative approach for Latinx to share and critically examine their schooling experiences. The I Am Poem activity aimed to prepare Latinx youth to share their schooling experiences with pre-service teachers, and offer actions pre-service teachers can take to challenge educational injustice. During the three-year study the first author organized, co-facilitated, and participated in weekly storytelling circles. Storytelling circles allowed participants to have a space where transformation and solidarity took place, as youth shared their experiences, reactions, frustrations, and discomforts while developing their critical consciousness and agency (Tachine et al., 2016). The process was organic, and students had a space to share without the fear of being judged (Cervantes & Torres Fernández, 2016).

The first author facilitated the storytelling circle using tenets of LPP, which are outlined above. The youth were each given a sheet of colored paper and marker, asking them to take a few minutes to reflect on their experiences in school. The first author encouraged them to think about how they are treated in their school by teachers, administrators, other staff, and if and how the current socio-political climate impacted their socioemotional wellbeing. The first author read

each line of the I Am Poems aloud and waited a few minutes for the youths to write their responses in the corresponding line. For example, the first line of the poem reads, “I am (list five identities or special characteristics)” (See Table 1 for prompts of the entire I Am poem). After poems were completed, some participants read their poems aloud to the entire group and others shared in small groups. The activity closed with a whole group dialogue that focused on experiences of social injustice and social action. The first author collected all poems at the end of the sharing circle.

Table 2

I Am Poem

I am...	(list five identities or special characteristics)
I wonder...	(something you are actually curious about)
I hear...	(something you actually hear or an imaginary sound)
I see...	(something you actually see or an imaginary sight)
I feel...	(a feeling about something you experience)
I worry...	(something that really bothers you)
I cry...	(something that makes you very sad)
I understand...	(something you know is true)
I try...	(something you really make an effort about)
I hope...	(something you actually hope for)

The authors analyzed the data guided by the relationality between researcher one and youth participants that emerged during sharing circles over the three-year study, as well as tenets and principles of LatCrit theory and ATR. The analysis process involved a three-step approach. In the first round of analysis, each of the 18 poems was inductively analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The first author and graduate research assistant independently read each poem a few times and generated initial descriptive codes. Next, we discussed the codes and compiled them: (1) education, (2) anti-immigrant politics, (3) social justice, (4) social change (hopeful and hopeless), (5) racism, and (6) agency. In the second round of analysis, we decided that we wanted to present entire poems in this paper. We chose two poems by Cynthia and Maya because they most closely focus on educational injustice and hope. From there, we independently analyzed these two poems using thematic analysis again, and identified sub-themes of (1) racism in school pedagogy and curriculum, (2) unequal opportunities and attention, and (3) lack of representation of people of color in school. We discuss these ideas in the following sections.

Findings

This Results section is divided into two sections: (1) Cynthia’s poem and analysis, and (2) Maya’s poem and analysis.

Cynthia’s Poem and Analysis

I am a Latina, the youngest in my family, high school student, and smart.
I wonder why I have to work 2x as hard to finally be noticed.

I hear my classmates complain how the teachers don't do a good job teaching.
I see my peers getting more opportunities than me.
I feel sad for those that lost hope.
I worry about some of my family members' safety.
I cry watching my grades go down.
I understand why my peers with parents with high paying jobs get more opportunities.
I try my best every single day.
I hope that the next generation has better opportunities and chances than me.

Cynthia uses poetry as a vehicle to discuss the ways in which she, a low-income Latina youth, experiences public education. Her poem serves as a warning to other Latinx youth about pedagogical issues and dominant ideologies the education system holds, maintaining a system of meritocracy and equal opportunity. Cynthia highlights her consciousness of social injustice embedded in the education system and her desire for better opportunities for future generations.

Cynthia's poem makes the intersection of race, gender, and social class visible in the education system. In the first line, Cynthia presents a positive self-perception of her academic capacity, as she self-identifies as being Latina, a high school student, and smart. Her identification with being smart suggests that Cynthia believes she has the intellectual capacity to succeed academically. Connected to her intelligence, she describes her strong work ethic in the ninth line: "I try my best every single day." Yet, regardless of her intelligence and strong work ethic, it is still unclear to Cynthia why she has "to work 2x harder to finally be noticed."

Cynthia's poem pushes back against the claim of equal opportunity in the education system for low-income Latina youth. She uses her poetry to express how the education system denies youth like her opportunities that are afforded to students with higher socio-economic statuses (lines 4 and 8). This sentiment is not shared by Cynthia alone, as research shows that low-income students of color have fewer opportunities to be taught by experienced and effective teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000) and often receive an inadequate education focused on vocational training with a lack of access to high-quality learning resources, such as books, laboratories, and libraries (Gutierrez, 2013). The inequity of opportunities Cynthia understands and observes in her school is perpetuated and maintained through the education system, which operates to reproduce the unequal social, cultural, and economic structure in society (Apple, 2017). Regardless of her disheartenment about her lack of access to opportunities, Cynthia nonetheless shares her hopes for future students in the final line: "I hope that the next generation has better opportunities and chances than me." Cynthia's sense of optimism aligns with previous research on how Mexican immigrant high school students counteract hostile school contexts and adverse educational practices (Gutierrez, 2013).

Cynthia's poem elucidates issues she sees with classroom pedagogy. In the third line, she writes, "I hear my classmates complain how the teachers don't do a good job teaching." Her experience is common in many low-income public school classrooms and what Freire (1970) described as "banking education" (Cammarota, 2011). Banking education prioritizes current classroom practices, such as lectures, memorization, and worksheets. These pedagogical practices silence many youths of color in public schools, affect their academic success, and position students as passive objects and teachers as experts who deposit knowledge into students who enter classrooms as empty vessels (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Freire, 1970). This banking style of pedagogy is a way of teaching to blur social reality and deny one's development of their own critical consciousness, which is exemplified by Cynthia in the seventh line: "I cry

watching my grades go down.” In addition to the emotional reaction to the decline of grades, which could be related to the deficit pedagogy or lack of opportunities, Cynthia writes, “I feel sad for those that lost hope.” She recognizes the impact these unjust education practices have on both herself and her peers, including Maya, who also expresses the profound ways that her schooling experiences shape her world view.

Maya’s Poem and Analysis

I am a woman, Chicana, Athlete.
I wonder why in history they only show one side of the story.
I hear people stress because teachers don’t know what students are going through.
I see when a kid of color raises their hand first and the teacher sees them then a white kid raises their hand and the teacher goes to the white kid first.
I feel frustrated.
I worry that I won’t have as many opportunities as the white kids.
I cry because of the frustration.
I understand this country’s education system only shows the white version of history.
I am motivated to go to college and change statistics.
I hope the education system changes their history books and also gets more people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Maya begins her poem by describing herself as a woman, as Chicana, and as an athlete. By choosing these three words, she tells the reader that she prioritizes these parts of her identity. Throughout the rest of the poem, she describes to the reader how her identity, especially being a woman of color, is affected by sources of racism in the educational setting.

Maya’s poem illuminates her struggles with the education system. She describes her difficulties with the White-centric curricula being presented to her and her non-White peers, her challenges with being in competition with her White peers that are worsened by teacher oppression, and her troubles with finding hope and making change. Maya’s poem sheds light on how embedded racism and issues of race are within the education system in which she exists.

In three distinct lines of the poem (2, 8, and 10), we see Maya’s frustration with the curricula presented by the education system. When discussing her history class, she wonders why “they only show one side of the story.” When considering the education system at large, she acknowledges that one side of history is the “white version of history,” as found in a study on the schooling experiences of undocumented and Latinx youth by Del Carmen Salazar et al. (2016). Maya concludes her poem with the hope that the system “changes their history books.”

Maya illuminates the challenges she faces with being in constant competition with her White peers. In the sixth line of the poem, she expresses her concern that she will not “have as many opportunities as the White kids.” She shows us that this problem is only worsened by oppression by teachers. In line 4, she describes a scenario where she sees teachers ignore her peers of color but pay attention to her White peers. In the third line, she shares her experiences with teachers not understanding her peers. From these lines, Maya does not have great experiences with her White peers and teachers because of issues of underlying and/or blatant racism that bleed into the classroom. In the last line of her poem, Maya expresses how youth need educators who create classrooms as spaces of inclusion and allyship, not as spaces of exclusion and isolation for students of color (Irizarry, 2011). She writes that she hopes that the

education system “gets more people of different ethnic backgrounds,” perhaps so that such feelings of inclusion and allyship can develop more easily than they do with solely White teachers.

Discussion

Cynthia and Maya’s poems are part of a larger body of literature of Latina’s telling and retelling stories about the (mis)education they receive in public schools (Mariscal et al., 2017; Rodríguez, 2020). At the center of these poems are notions of racism in education. In every line of both Cynthia’s and Maya’s poems, whether the lines discuss pedagogy, opportunities, or representation, their words convey experiences that are racialized by the schooling system that they exist within.

The dominant ideologies of the educational system suggest schools are neutral and non-political sites that function the same way for all students. However, through the lens of LatCrit theory and ATR, Cynthia and Maya’s I Am Poems challenge the dominant ideology of the educational system, an ideology espousing objectiveness, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. This is exemplified when Maya questions why her history classes only show the “white version of history,” or when she expresses her hopes that “the education system changes their history books.” The history that she is referring to follows the dominant ideology, as guided by White supremacy and a White male hetero-patriarchy educational system and ways of knowing (Mariscal et al., 2017). The overt exclusion and distortion of Latinx history and the exposure to history that capitalizes on Whiteness can be very dangerous for youth of color, as it enforces the beliefs associated with colonialism and White supremacy (Ayala & Ramirez, 2019). It may also have the ability to impose false truths on youth of color that their history is less important than White history, and that some sort of assimilation into Whiteness is necessary in education, perhaps even creating internalized oppression (Irizarry & Raible, 2014).

When educators exist within a system that is built on racism, they create an environment that uplifts White students and oppresses students of color. This is the case because racism “has historically and continues to mediate the everyday experiences of people of color” (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2014). This mediation of experience manifests in school practices in a variety of ways, such as when teachers silence students of color and attend to the needs of White students (see Cynthia lines 2, 4, 8, and 10; Maya lines 4 and 6, when the poets explain their dearth of opportunities compared with their White and/or higher-income peers). To further reveal their teachers’ lack of care, both poets discuss the struggles that they face with their teachers’ apathy toward their success (see Cynthia line 3; Maya lines 3, 4, and 10). This is particularly concerning due to the decades of research that show that some teachers tend to have negative perceptions of non-White students, which can lead to negative treatment (Redding, 2019), such as refusal to provide opportunities to youth of color, as shown here.

Unlike Maya and Cynthia’s experiences in their high school, MLL is a space that nurtured their liberation. When Latina youth are offered a space like MLL, they engage in acts like poetry guided by critical reflection and action, or praxis (Freire, 1970). The creation of poetry is an act of collective praxis and develops Latina youth voice, a group whose voice and experiences are often silenced in public schools. These two Latina youth voices are amplified as they share their dreams and motivations to succeed academically and offer demands for the dismantling of racism in the education system. Cynthia and Maya overcame the tradition of silence in order to bring attention to their oppressive schooling conditions and make their own

knowledge production and truth. Cynthia and Maya's poems also highlight the hope these two Latina youth hold in the face of educational injustice. This hope aligns with Yosso' (2005) aspirational capital which is described as the ability to maintain hope and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers. In Cynthia and Maya's poem hope is revealed through their high aspirations for future generations to have better opportunities, chances, and for the education system to transform their history books and have more people of color in schools.

This study demonstrated methodological benefits of using poetry as a form of qualitative inquiry. Written poetry served as a non-interrogative form of data collection that offered Latina youth space and time to reflect, which may not be offered when using traditional forms of qualitative inquiry, such as interviews (Sjollema & Billotta, 2017). Collecting data through poetry offered Latina youth the opportunity to share private and sensitive experiences without feeling uncomfortable or intimidated. Written poetry as data prevented power dynamics embedded in gender roles and expectations that are present when researchers, and men in particular, interview marginalized youth and women of color (Dixon, 2015).

Implications

Cynthia's and Maya's poems serve as a call for educators to adopt a critical epistemological stance and build alliances with Latina youth, and other marginalized youth, to fight issues of racism in education that are experienced by youth of color at large and Cynthia and Maya particularly. The poems call for public schools to reform their eurocentric history books and add more diverse staff and teachers. These changes can best meet the academic, cultural, and social needs of Latina youth, but also the needs of their *peers and future students of color*. Latina youth call for school reform beyond individual needs demonstrate an act of building alliances with and between students of color. This act alone challenges the dominant meritocracy ideology in education and exemplifies transformative leadership and resistance of Latina youth. The poems highlight lived experiences Latina youth encounter in public schools, which offers a source of knowledge often excluded from classrooms and research literature. This source of knowledge helps us better understand the (mis)education some Latina youth experience in schools.

Limitations

This study is not representative of all Latinx youth in public schools. This study centered the voices and lived experiences of two Latina youth. Future research should examine the schooling experiences of a large sample of Latina youth. There is a need for further critical inquiry regarding the schooling experiences of Latinx students in rural and urban towns and cities in Midwest states, such as Iowa, and across the country. As the Latinx student population continues to grow they can expect to face a continuation of pro-Trump politics and current conservative neo-liberal politics and social oppression in the education system. Additional research on critical literacy in and outside of formal schooling can continue to advance our understanding of the schooling conditions and experiences of Latinx youth. Likewise, future researchers can explore how formal and informal learning spaces use poetry as a tool to support Latinx youth healing from the social and emotional harm triggered by their lived experiences of institutionalized racism and White supremacy in the public education system.

Conclusion

Our study adds to the literature by demonstrating the power of poetry in community-based youth programs to explore the public education conditions of Latina students in the Midwest (Arenas, 2018; Negrette, 2020; Norton, 2011). Our study found community-based youth programs can push back against the face-paced, test-driven culture of current public education and can offer space for critical writing about social injustice in the public education system (López, 2011). More importantly, our study shows how the power of poetry can make visible the racism in education Latina youth experience and reveal Latina youth liberation and aspirational capital (Anzaldúa, 1987; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Yosso, 2005). The experiences Latina youth shared through poetry are critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about race and racism in education.

Our study provides insight into educational injustice of Midwest Latina youth, which extends the educational scholarship on Latinx students in the Southwest. The growing Midwest Latinx student population, such as their counterparts in the Southwest, attend public schools dominated by White supremacy and institutionalized racism. This type of education system reduces opportunities for Latinx youth to learn about and celebrate contributions their communities have made to this country, develop their identities, and achieve academic success. Despite an oppressive schooling context, the two Latina youth in the study show us that poetry can be a way to nurture Latina youth liberation and shows us their aspirational capital for a more socially just education system. As education researchers we must continue to advocate *with* Latinx youth to transform the oppressive education system. Then and only then can we advance toward a process of liberation!

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