Educating South Texas Mexican Americans from Anti-Oppressive Pedagogical Approach: A Call for Culturally Responsive Teaching. Insights from Research Literature

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Abstract
The intent of this academic paper consists of making our Mexican American Graduate students, currently teaching K-12 students, aware of the imperative need of re-shaping and re-shifting schooling and educational practices in South Texas, given the current achievement gap experienced by many Mexican American students.

Using a critical approach, the authors explore not only the historical challenges encountered by Mexican American student schooling practices in South Texas but also, the oppressive cultural ecological system set by Anglo American educational practices and policies after the ratification of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo annexing Texas to the United States. Furthermore, the authors highlight the imperative need for the systematic preparation of culturally responsive PK-12 teachers and school administrators in South Texas in order to stop the ongoing deculturalization and linguistic genocide of new future generations of Mexican Americans.

Implications for culturally responsive teachers and teacher education training, curriculum transformation and preparation of new generation of Mexican-American teachers- authors are discussed.

Introduction
Educating Texas Mexican Americans in US is not a simplistic mission given the historical oppression and structural injustices perpetrated against them from the ninety century. They are, in U.S. today, one of several minorities to be denied their civil and constitutional rights. They continue to experience the negative effects of, what Ogbo (1987, 1990 & 1998) named, “cultural ecology” set by Anglo American practices and policies. This latter is structurally oppressive, unfair and biased. The intent of this article consists of making our Mexican American Graduate students, currently teaching K-12 students, aware of the imperative need of re-shaping and re-shifting schooling and educational practices in South Texas, given the current achievement gap experienced by many Mexican American students from a historico-critical and multicultural educational approaches.

To help our readers understand the structure of this paper, in the introduction, we will discuss some schooling practices in South Texas from some basic tenets of multicultural education and critical pedagogy. Following this section, we will briefly outline the fundamental assumptions of anti-oppressive education. These two sections set the stage for the authors to draw some theoretical implications for implementation of culturally responsive education in South Texas.

In fact, after the ratification of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo annexing Texas to the United States by the U.S. Congress in 1845, Anglo Americans began to construct Mexicans, especially
Mexicans of mixed-race background, as members of an inferior race (Tatum, 2001; Menchaca, 1997) and second class citizens or as “a class apart”. This initial contempt was followed by more egregious racial crimes against the Mexican American population. Some scholars (Tatum, 2001; Spring, 2007) cited many cases of how Texas Anglos commonly lynched blacks, Mexicans and Mexican Americans. This practice increased significantly after the U.S civil war and the U.S. War against Mexico, which resulted in the annexation of Texas to the United States.

Above and beyond outright racist and discriminatory attitudes toward Mexican Americans, school segregation was justified by the same argument used to justify Native Americans isolation (boarding schools). According to San Miguel (1999), schooling of Mexicans in the U.S. southwest following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was one in which “schools, especially public schools, became subtractive institutions, meaning that they sought to ‘de-ethnicize’ the Mexican origin population to remove all vestiges of ethnicity from their operations and curriculum” (p. 31). Educators argued that the segregation of Mexican American children would provide the opportunity to “Americanize” the child in a controlled linguistic and cultural environment. It mostly served the purpose of maintaining white supremacy, privilege and hegemony. So far, some voices among conservative Anglo Americans (Valencia & Black, 2002) are still claiming that Mexican Americans do not value education while, historically, Mexican Americans received little opportunity to attend schools. In addition, Mexican American schools were in poorer physical condition in urban and rural settings (Spring, 2007).

Lessons of minority education in North America have demonstrated that schools have been used purposely as a medium to institutionalize systematic and indirect oppression in order to deculturalize and Americanize Mexican American students. Mexican American communities have been subordinated by unjust use of force, authority and mainstream societal norms. The case of Loving vs. Virginia (1967) illustrated how racism and prejudices, the layer of Virginia’s racial integrity act of 1924, were codified into law and become parts of the American dominant culture.

Sociologically, denigration, dehumanization and deculturalization have being used as oppressive tools against generations of Mexican Americans in the process of forced assimilation. The most common deculturalization methods which were incorporated in educational policies included: segregation and isolation; forced change of language; curriculum content that reflects culture of dominant group; textbooks that reflect culture of the dominant group; denial of cultural and religious expression by dominated groups and use of teachers from dominant group. In addition, the overuse of intelligence tests in English also increased segregation of Mexican American students into programs for students labeled as mentally ill.

In the United States of America, some scholars (Spring, 1996, 2004, 2007; Vigil, 1998; Tatum, 2001; Flores, 2005) are still claiming that the historical issues of cultural and linguistic genocide, deculturalization, educational segregation and social injustice are still alive in the twenty-first century. The hegemonic trend of creating uniform culture and language as a way of maintaining social order and control is encountering resistance from some oppressed ethnic groups who are not ready to give up their cultural and linguistic rights.

Resistance and distrust to/of Anglo Americans’ led- institutions, one of the tenets of involuntary minorities’ folk theory of getting ahead in a pluralistic society (Ogbu, 1990 & 1998), are supposedly associated to many Mexican American students defensive behaviors and higher school drop out rates given the oppressive and biased societal settings they have continued to live within. Currently, many Mexican American Students are still feeling the negative effects of the repressive cultural ecology in their lives. Application of anti-oppressive pedagogical approaches to effectively
develop Mexican American students’ full-range human potential has been at a center of debate between conservative Anglo Americans and allied, policy makers and anti-oppressive pedagogy scholars (Valencia & Black, 2002)

**Notion of Anti-oppressive Pedagogy**

In fact, anti-oppressive pedagogy encompasses multiple approaches to learning that actively challenge different forms of systematic and indirect oppression. The increase of recent hate crimes against Latino and Mexican Americans (due to the fear of ‘illegal’ immigration and post 9/11) suggests that oppression has been consciously or unconsciously stimulated, encouraged and reinforced by way of promoting antagonism towards the others.

Anti-oppressive pedagogy is premised on the notion that many traditional ways of engaging in education under the whiteness (McIntyre, 1997) and white privilege (McIntosh, **) approaches actually contribute to continued oppression in schools and society. It also relies on the notion that many “commonsense” approaches (Kumashiro, 2004) to school reform mask or exacerbate oppressive educational methods. For example, the focus on education reform since the 1990s has focused on groups considered ‘at risk.’ Culturally and linguistically diverse groups continue to be seen as ‘at risk’ for school failure due to cultural and linguistic deprivation ideologies.

Anti-oppressive pedagogies are built upon the pivotal notion of teaching and learning social justice. It mandates schools to bring anti-racism education and social justice upfront of the teaching-learning processes. It opposes whiteness assimilation, extremism and/or radicalism viewpoints and embraces pluralism, tolerance, linguistic and cultural diversity from people’s rights perspective. Teachers, regardless of their cultural and linguistic background, are conveyed not only to overcome their own racial, religious, socio-cultural and political oppression (through awareness and reflection, Freire, 1970), but also to enhance their own social justice leadership skills before implementing any anti-oppressive pedagogical model.

The consequences of educators engaging in anti-oppressive pedagogy includes a deep commitment and third-order change (Bartunek, 1987) of how educators conceptualize and engage in curriculum design & delivery, classroom management, cognitive dissonance, school culture and communication with diverse parents. Educators/Teachers become agents of change within their classrooms, therefore, schools’ structure and policies must be transformed (Bishop, 2002; Gay, 2002).

If oppression is defined as the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unfair manner, it does follow that being oppressed and the feeling of being oppressed cannot yield to higher academic achievement because students are heavily burdened -mentally or physically- by troubles, adverse conditions, anxiety and crisis. Students are seen as empty receptacles that must be filled (Freire, 1970). Therefore, anti-oppressive pedagogy, argued Kumashiro (2004 & 2007) & Bic Ngo (2007) consists of teaching against what is become common sense in education. Teachers move away from the notion of ‘banking’ or depositing information to their students (Freire, 1970), but rather engage them in problem-posing education.

As stated above, the feeling of being oppressed may lead to anxiety and crisis. Therefore, anti-oppressive pedagogy should result in a crisis state for the learner and the teacher. For teachers from dominant classes, this seems wild and unconventional since the traditional practice of education should result in students’ growth and increased knowledge (banking concept of education), not crisis.
From anti-oppressive pedagogy approaches, crisis is understood as a state of emotional discomfort and disorientation that calls on students to make some changes (Kumashiro, 2004). Only when in crisis, students and teachers learn something that requires a non common sense response. In South Texas, implementation of anti-oppressive pedagogies mandate schools and higher educational institutions to create crisis in learners and teachers from dominant and dominated classes in order to stop the ongoing deculturalization and linguistic genocide of future generations of Mexican Americans. It does also mandate for systematic preparation of culturally responsive teachers and school administrators in South Texas.

**Implications for Culturally Responsive Teachers and School Administrators’ Preparation**

*Training Mexican American Teachers and Teacher Candidates from Culturally Responsive Approach*

It does follow from the above discussion that implementation of anti-oppressive pedagogy implies training Mexican American teachers and teacher candidates from culturally responsive approach.

Culturally responsive teaching, an emerging topic in teacher education research literature, is actually been considered as the way to creating equitable and culturally inclusive practices for effective and innovative teaching and learning for all students of a pluralistic society. However, culturally responsive teaching alone cannot solve the underachievement problems of Mexican American students in South Texas. Other aspects of the educational enterprise such as funding, administration, and policy making must also be reformed, and major changes must be made to eliminate the social, political, and economical inequities in American society (Gay, 2000).

The foundational idea of culturally responsive teaching is that responding to diverse students’ needs requires that educators actively, collaboratively, and consistently discuss and investigate multiple human perspectives, while considering their impact on educational experiences. At the heart of culturally responsive pedagogy relies innovative and multiculturalism rather than instrumental and assimilation visions for schooling, based two imperative principles: the ethic of care (Nodding, 1999) – every human being matters and deserves to be heard and respected and the ethic of culturally fair teaching in schools—every student ought to have access to fair teaching and curriculum; each student should have the opportunity to tell his/her own story, to teach and learn from others.

From the above viewpoint, teaching Mexican American students should be viewed as a contextual and developmental process. In multicultural settings, argued Canagarajah (1999) culturally responsive teaching is most effective when prior experiences, cultural backgrounds and ethnic identities of teachers and students are included in its implementation. This basic fact has been historically ignored in teaching Mexican American children and other traditional minorities; especially if they are poor families and communities. Instead, they are taught from the Eurocentric framework that legitimate acquired identities while devaluing their native ones.

If educators continue to ignore, impugn, and silence the cultural orientations, values, and performance styles of Mexican American students, they will persist in imposing cultural hegemony, personal denigration, and academic underachievement upon them. Accepting the validity of Mexican American students’ cultural socialization and prior experiences will help reverse achievement trends (Gay, 2000).
Although called by many different names, including culturally relevant, sensitive, centered, congruent, reflective, mediated, contextualized, synchronized, and responsive, culturally responsive teaching is essentially anti-oppressive education. In South Texas, it mandates teachers and school administrators to make classroom instruction and school atmosphere more consistent with the cultural orientations of Mexican-Americans and other ethnically diverse students. It can be defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively (Gay, 2002). It fosters a culturally validating, affirming, comprehensive, multidimensional, transformative, emancipatory and empowering learning.

The notion of culturally responsive education is premised on the idea that cultures are crucial to classroom interactions. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), it is an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes. The use of cultural referents in teaching bridges and explains the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing the Mexican American students’ cultures.

This link between culture and classroom instruction is derived from evidence that cultural practices shape thinking processes, which serve as tools for learning within and outside of school (Hollins, 1996). Recent research suggests (Haberman, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1995 & 2000) that cultural-match has the potential to yield to culturally responsive practices within diverse classrooms. Thus, culturally responsive education recognizes, respects, and uses students’ identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources (Nieto, 2000) for creating optimal learning environments.

Moreover, Ladson-Billings (1995 & 2000) explains that culturally responsive teachers teach the whole child. Along with the academic achievement improvement, classroom input should help students to maintain their identities while developing a sense of community and acquiring an ethic of success. Expectations and skills are not taught as separate entities but are woven together into an integrated whole that permeates the curriculum content and the entire modus operandi of the classroom. Its multidimensional aspects mean that culturally responsive teaching encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments.

A team-oriented teaching, sometimes, is required to tapping into a wide range of cultural knowledge, experiences, contributions, and perspectives. Emotions, beliefs, values, ethos, opinions, and feelings are scrutinized along with factual information to make curriculum and instruction more reflective of a responsive ethnic diversity. Priority should be given to those cultural aspects that mostly directly affect learning. By doing so, the teaching input helps the learning community to clarify their ethnic values while correcting factual errors about cultural heritages of classrooms’ members. In the process of accomplishing these goals, students are held accountable for knowing, thinking, questioning, analyzing, feeling, reflecting, sharing and acting (Gay, 2000).

The above assumption yielded Gay (2002) to postulate that culturally responsive teaching is essentially empowering students to be better human and more successful learners. Naturally, culturally responsive teachers and school administrators are aware of the risks involved in learning and the need for students to succeed in schools. They plan accordingly and create infrastructures to support efforts of their students. This is done by boosting up students’ morale, providing resources and personal assistance developing an ethos of achievement, and celebrating individual and collective achievement. Empowerment means, in other words, defiance of conventional educational practices. This kind of teaching makes authentic knowledge about different ethnic groups accessible to all students. The validation, information and pride it generates are both psychologically
and intellectually liberating. This freedom allows students to focus more closely and concentrate more thoroughly on academic learning tasks (Gay, 2000).

Gay (2002) research highlighted the following five prerequisites to effectively apply culturally responsive teaching: teachers and school administrators’ cultural competence development; teachers and school administrators’ power of caring; teachers and school administrators’ higher expectations; teachers and school administrators’ cross-communication skills, congruity and mediated education; and teachers’ ability to apply active and constructivist learning principles by transforming the official curriculum. It is unrealistic to expect a teacher, even with higher cultural competence development, to move directly from a highly mainstream-centric curriculum to one that focuses on decision making or social action and personal culturally responsive curriculum design. Reshaping mainstream-centric curriculum comprise several levels of expertise to be learned by culturally responsive teachers.

Systematic Training of Mexican-American Teachers in Curriculum Transformation Strategies
Banks (1993) and McIntosh (2000) identify five levels in reshaping a formal mainstream – centric curriculum. Curriculum’s transformation approach ranges from slight curricular changes to a fully-revised social awareness and action conceptualizations. Banks (1993) and McIntosh (2000) have formulated continuums for curricular reform that help move transformation efforts from the former toward the latter. Here, we will follow the above scholars’ conceptualization on multicultural curriculum transformation.

In South Texas, transforming a mainstream curriculum means making it culturally responsive to the background of the majority of Mexican American students. Reshaping a mainstream curriculum requires that the changes challenge Mexican American students to develop higher-order knowledge and skills (Villegas, 1991), since a curriculum that is culturally responsive capitalizes on students’ cultural backgrounds rather than attempting to override or negate them. (Ismat Abdal-Haqq, 1994).

Recent studies (Scherer, 1991-1992; Spears, Oliver, & Maes, 1990; Banks, 2001; Chion-Kenny, 1994; Dickerson, 1993; Villegas, 1991; Hilliard, 1991-1992; Gay, 2000) on culturally responsive curriculum highlight that an effective culturally responsive curriculum is: integrated and interdisciplinary; meaningful, student centered, and connected to the child’s real life; develops higher-order knowledge and skills; utilizes a variety of learning strategies, such as cooperative learning, whole language, and diverse learning styles.

In fact, it is difficult for novice teachers to learn how to transform a mainstream curriculum into a culturally responsive one. It requests a considerable cultural knowledge-based by the teacher as prerequisite. The starting point of curriculum transformation is the curriculum of the mainstream classroom, the first formal plan of instruction approved by the policy and governing bodies of educational systems. Banks (1993) and McIntosh (2000) suggest that many mainstream curriculums in the United States are Eurocentric and male-centric. Its fully ignores the experiences, voices, contributions, and perspectives of non-dominant individuals and groups in all subject areas. All educational materials, including textbooks, films, and other teaching and learning tools present information in a purely Eurocentric, male-centric format.

The second level of curriculum transformation is called the contributions stage. This stage is harmful for both students who identify with mainstream culture as well as individuals from non-dominant groups. It has negative consequences for the former because, according to Banks (1998),
it reinforces their false sense of superiority, gives them a misleading conception of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups, and denies them the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, perspectives, and frames of reference that can be gained from studying and experiencing other cultures and groups. The curriculum of the mainstream has negative consequences for students from non-dominant groups by failing to validate their culture, experiences, and perspectives. It also further alienates students who already struggle to survive in a school culture that differs so greatly from their home cultures. Moreover, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are viewed as corruption of the dominant culture (Koppelman, 2008, Gruwell, 2007).

Given the increasing diversity in schools, culturally sensitive teachers used the symbolic curriculum (Gay, 2000) to promote diversity within the classroom using additive approaches. At the additive stage (also called Heroes and holidays stage), teachers promote celebration of differences by integrating information or resources about famous people and the cultural artifacts of various groups into the mainstream curriculum. Bulletin boards may contain pictures of heroes and teachers may plan special celebrations for Black History Month, Women’s History Month, Hispanic and Asian heritage months etc. Learning about other cultures focuses on costumes, foods, music, images, symbols, icons, mottoes, awards and other tangible cultural artifacts.

Culturally responsive teachers are critically conscious of the power of the symbolic curriculum as an instrument of teaching and use it to help to convey important information, values, and actions about ethnic and cultural diversity. The strengths of this stage are that the teacher is attempting to diversify the curriculum by providing materials and knowledge outside the mainstream culture and that the Heroes and Holidays approach is fairly easy to implement with little new knowledge needed by the teacher.

Still, the weaknesses heavily outweigh the strengths: by focusing celebratory attention on non-dominant groups outside the context of the rest of the curriculum, the teacher is further defining these groups as the others; curricula at this stage fail to address the real experiences of non-dominant groups instead focusing on the accomplishments of a few heroic characters; students may learn to consider the struggles of non-dominant groups as extra-information instead of important knowledge in their overall understanding of the world; the special celebrations at this stage are often used for justification not to truly transform the curriculum; the Heroes and Holidays approach trivializes the overall experiences, contributions, struggles, and voices of non-dominant groups, fitting directly into a Eurocentric, male-centric curriculum.

The third level of Banks (1993) and McIntosh (2000)’s curriculum transformation is called integration or transformative stage. In this step, teachers move beyond heroes and holidays to add substantial materials and knowledge about non-dominant groups to the curriculum. The teacher may add to her or his collection of books those by minority and women authors. The strengths of the integration stage are that it moves beyond special celebrations to deal with real issues and concepts and that it more closely ties the new material into the rest of the curriculum, but many weaknesses remain: the curriculum design is still teacher – oriented; new materials and units become secondary resources and knowledge as textbooks and the meat of the curriculum are still based on a Eurocentric, male-centric orientation (Banks, 1993; McIntosh, 2000); new information is still delivered from a Eurocentric, male-centric perspective.

The fourth level of curriculum transformation is named structural reform. At this stage, new materials, perspectives, and voices are woven seamlessly with current frameworks of knowledge to provide new levels of understanding from a more complete and accurate curriculum. The teacher dedicates herself or himself to continuously expanding her or his knowledge base through the ex-
ploration of various sources from various perspectives, and sharing that knowledge with her or his students. Students learn to view events, concepts, and facts through various lenses. For example the American History curriculum includes African American History, Women’s History, Asian American History, Latino American History, and all other previously differentiated fields of knowledge orientation (Banks, 1993; McIntosh, 2000).

The last level of curriculum transformation is a continuum of previous stages. The social action stage takes the changes made in the structural reform stage farther. Important social issues including racism, sexism, and classism are directly addressed in the curriculum. The voices, ideas, and perspectives of the students regarding these and all other topics are brought to the fore in the learning experience - the students themselves becoming yet another diversity classroom resource. The textbook is viewed as a single perspective among many, and the relevance of its limitations, along with those of other educational media, are explored and discussed. At this point the reshaped curriculum is an attempt to capitalize students’ cultural backgrounds rather than attempting to override or negate them (Ismat Abdal-Haqq, 1994).

As stated earlier, successful use of culturally responsive teaching methods depends not only on the culturally responsive curriculum, but also on the teacher’s concept of building a learning community. In fact, many students grow up in cultural environments where the group well-being is over the individual and where individuals are taught to pool their resources to solve problems. Teacher’s understanding of Mexican American students’ primary groups dynamic is crucial to foster integrated learning. This latter is highly effective if instruction is organized around low-pressure, student-controlled learning and is based on textbooks that not reflect the cultural perspective of the dominant group.

\textbf{Preparing New Generation of Mexican-American Teachers- Authors}

One of the main challenges faced by culturally responsive teachers consists of finding textbooks that are highly responsive to the culturally and linguistically diverse students, since the majority of textbooks adopted by School districts nationwide are still based on a Eurocentric, male-centric orientation (Banks and McIntosh, 2000). New information is still delivered from Eurocentric, male-centric perspectives which override or negate Mexican American and other minority students’ realities. Given the scarcity of Mexican-American teachers- authors in the textbook industry, preparing new generation of Mexican American graduate students, with classroom experiences, committed to become K-12 authors is a critical for a widespread promotion of anti-oppressive education in South Texas.
References


