

# Disappearing in the Houdini Education:

Julio Cammarota



In urban schools across the country, the enrollment of Latina/o students is increasing rapidly. However, their academic presence—the recognition of their potential and opportunities for achievement—may diminish quickly in many of these schools. In worst-case scenarios, the evanescence of recognition and opportunity may lead to an increase in dropouts. That is, soon after entering high school, Latina/o students may struggle to succeed academically and before their junior year, disappear from the education system altogether. The simultaneous increase of Latina/o students alongside their persistently high dropout rate represents a significant paradox in urban schools.

Unfortunately, the high attrition of Latina/o students is not a new phenomenon. Both the problem itself and its attributed explanations, ranging from segregation, poverty, resource deprivation, and cultural difference, have received considerable attention in education research (Ogbu,

1978, 1991; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Perez & De La Rosa Salazar, 1993; Trueba, 1988, 1993, 1999; Valdés, 1996; Valencia, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). Although the problem as well as its explanation may not be recent revelations, the paradox of a growing student population that demonstrates few improvements in academic success raises new questions. Why does a racial group that is quickly progressing from minority to majority status in certain districts, cities, and counties still manifest the typical and historical patterns of school failure associated with minority status? Meanwhile, these students' White peers who are now in the racial minority still achieve at significantly higher rates than what are typically attributed to minority students.

One might conclude that Latina/o immigration accounts for the increase of students who fail school; foreign-born Spanish speakers face the linguistic challenge of mastering an English-only curriculum. Although the linguistic dilemma may explain some student failure, research shows that first-generation Latinas/os often fare better than their second- and even third-generation—and more English proficient—counterparts (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995).

In my own study of Latina/o youth, stu-

dents were either 1.5 generation or second generation, and all were proficient English speakers. Although many faced the daily threat of dropping out of school, linguistic factors did not weigh as heavily as one might suspect. According to statements made by the youth in my study, a racist ideology based on the assumption of their intellectual inferiority presented the most significant obstacle to their academic success.

Drawing from ethnographic research conducted in an urban school in the U.S., this article examines how the permeation of a racist ideology in the school context can render the academic potential of Latina/o students invisible to school personnel. The Latina/o students in this study indicated that teacher disinterest in their intellectual growth severely circumscribed their academic progress.

The discussion also briefly considers how the ethos of rugged individualism in the U.S. school system obscures the institutionalized ills of racism by suggesting that the only barrier to success is individual commitment. This culture of individualism allowed school personnel to place blame for the students' academic failure on the students themselves while completely exonerating the school system of neglecting their intellectual growth. Once the students'

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# The Experience OF RACE AND INVISIBILITY among Latina/o Students



capacities for learning became invisible, the school system overlooked them as worthy of academic investment by treating them with apathy, withholding from them information necessary for achievement, and then blaming them for their failure.

This study's findings suggest that new pedagogical strategies for Latina/o students must take the three-pronged approach of caring for the students' personal life progress, demythologizing the value of individualism, and countering racist ideology. Because individualism harbors putatively meritocratic structures that perpetuate racist assessments of ability, the intellectual development of Latina/o students, and, for that matter, all students of color, must be safeguarded from ideologies that avow individual (as opposed to collective) culpability for failure and the belief in a natural order of ability.

## Race in Education Research

Most urban public schools in the country exemplify what Boykins and Moll (2002) describe as "vertical diversity"—a racial hierarchy of performance and outcomes, in which Black and Latina/o students exist at the bottom. Research literature supports the existence of hierarchical structures in institutional settings where people of color experience inferior treatment. Social science scholarship offers a variety of important studies on the subject of racism (Miles, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1986; Wellman, 1977). However, the vast literature on racial theories of inequality has not been systematically employed in the analysis of educational inequality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

This analytical failure of understand-

ing the causes of racial inequality in schools derives partly from the proclivity among researchers to attribute "racial achievement patterns" to "autonomous behaviors of assumedly distinct 'race groups'" (Pollock, 2001: 8). Noted anthropologist John Ogbu (1978, 1991), for example, explains racial patterns of school failure as the fault of students who adopt a set of cultural values that impede school success. In his formulation, individuals are blamed with little regard for the context of their actions.

Researchers also tend to claim that racial patterns in schooling occur because teachers have low expectations (Ferguson, 2003), or families do not instill the proper values to motivate students (Lubeck, 1995). Focusing on one distinct group, whether it is students, teachers, or parents, to say that characteristics of the group are responsible for racial disparities in education precludes any analysis that may identify the problem emerging from a wider field of ideological influences. Omi and Winant (1986: 64) offer a useful definition of racial ideology, which indicates its potential influences.

Racial ideology is constructed from pre-existing (or, if one prefers, "discursive") elements and emerges from struggles of competing political projects and ideas seeking to articulate similar elements differently.

Although identifying patterns among individuals may be an important starting point to understand problems in education, any analysis that ends there avoids consideration of the underlying ideologies informing those behaviors or articulating similar students "differently." Achieving a better grasp on racial inequality in school-

ing requires careful attention to the role of ideology in influencing people's subjectivities and experiences.

In this regard, Steele's (1992, 1999) groundbreaking research on race and education delineates the effects of racial stereotypes on academic performance. Steele and Aronson (1995) demonstrate how African Americans who are academically well prepared and have access to sufficient educational resources still can be at risk of failing simply from the threat, which they call "stereotype threat," of being identified as or labeled "intellectually inferior."

The stereotype threat does not have to be enacted by particular people, such as teachers, in order for students of color to experience it. Stereotypes emerge from ideological forms prevalent in society—negative images and media representations that suggest people of color are racially inferior. These forms saturate the students' social contexts and seep into their conceptualizations of their own educational potential. A stereotype threat therefore can operate independently from explicit negative typing by teachers and others.

Mickelson (2003) echoes this accord between context and students' perceptions of their academic abilities. After an exhaustive review of social science research on race and education, including Steele's and her own work, she concludes that racial discrimination in education "structures and conditions" (Mickelson 2003: 1075) the kinds of choices students of color make regarding their own schooling.

Moreover, this research indicates that racial discrimination is less frequently experienced as an isolated event or a personal attack levied by a particular individual.

Rather, the cumulative effects—witnessed and felt over time by students of color—of such systematized racial disparities as under-resourced schools, lowered or differing expectations, racial tracking, segregated schools, and White privilege, amount to a more influential form of discrimination than any single incident. Mickelson adds that discrimination in education is bolstered by social circumstances that exist both within and beyond the confines of classroom walls. Black students may encounter the stereotype threat, according to Mickelson, through:

racial discrimination [as] manifested in the collective historical experience of blacks in America since slavery including decades of lynching, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, and dual school systems; in contemporary racist stereotypes and representations such as those in *The Bell Curve* or the Senate's former majority leader's wistful yearning for the Dixiecrat Party's segregationist agenda; in racially discriminatory treatment of people of color by the judicial system, the electoral system, the health care system, the labor market, the housing market, even the supermarket, and—not least—in the isolation of the chilly, White top academic tracks of most high schools and flagship university campuses, an isolation which signals the "otherness" of blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans. (Mickelson, 2003: 1076)

This broad history of racial discrimination engenders an ideological field of perceptions in schools, which influences not only how students of color perceive themselves but how school personnel perceive—or rather ignore—their intellectual potential.

### Critical Race Theory in Education Research

Responding to Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) call for a more rigorous racial analysis of educational inequities, several scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lynn & Adams, 2002; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Solórzano, 1997; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) now look to Critical Race Theory (CRT) to explicate the institutional mechanisms through which students of color experience racial discrimination. CRT emerged in the 1970s as a legal critique that promoted a fine-tuned approach for addressing racial inequities in the justice system (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Lynn & Adams, 2002).

The primary tenet of CRT, the "centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination" (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002) holds utility for education researchers. By foregrounding racism and its connec-

tion to other forms of oppression, CRT is a useful analytical tool for underscoring how students of color struggle with both subtle and overt oppression in their education (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004).

The contribution of CRT to education research is somewhat in its infancy; thus, the full potential of CRT has yet to be realized (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004: 27). One new and promising application for CRT is in the linkage with educational ethnography (Duncan, 2002; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). The traditional research domain for educational ethnographers has been the practice and experiences of culture within schools (Zou & Trueba, 2002).

CRT encourages educational ethnographers to examine the centrality of race and racism in the shaping of educational experiences. Furthermore, a CRT framework for school ethnographies may uncover how normalized cultural beliefs and practices in schools, such as meritocracy, individualism, or colorblindness, are linked with and perpetuate racism. In a recent issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Moll (2004: 129) writes in his closing commentary about how the featured ethnography of Rolon-Dow (2004) reveals how racial and gender "ideologies 'mediate' social practices; they serve as shared 'cultural' resources" for the students and school personnel's practices in the school context.

The foregrounding of race in analyses of education may help educational ethnographers to illuminate the intersections of discriminatory ideologies and school practices.

### Racial Hierarchy and the Culture of Individualism

Some contend that it is natural to have a racial hierarchy reflected within a gradient of intellectual capacities (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Henry, 1994; Jensen, 1969). Pollock (2001: 9) points out that "American racism has always framed racial achievement patterns as natural facts." The belief that people of color naturally possess intellectual capabilities inferior to those of Whites is one element of a racist ideology that clearly influences the educational experiences of students of color by ignoring their potential and excluding them from requisite information.

Once the cycle of lowered expectations begins in schools, outcomes correspond to low expectations and minimal educational investment in these students. Ultimately, unequal academic outcomes sustain the belief and expectation of a racial hierarchy of intelligence in both schools and society.

In addition, the school system pre-

vents any serious critique of the assumptions and expectations of racial differences in intelligence through its exaltation of individualism. Attaining the status of an American ethos, individualism is the cultural belief "that each person is largely the source of origin of himself or herself," and that "he or she ultimately controls his or her fate" (Irvine, 1978: 252).

Traditionally, school achievement has relied on a merit-based formula grounded in this individualistic ethos, in which an individual demonstrates his or her potential for achievement through his or her merits. According to this formula, those not demonstrating any merit should not be rewarded but should accept their lack of ability as justification for their failure. This allows teachers and school personnel to hide behind the ethos of individualism and the merit-based system and treat students of color as different than White students.

The role of individualism in sustaining racist ideology can be grasped by recognizing how racism emerges from a relationship between culture and ideology. Wellman's definition of racism (quoted in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995: 53) addresses the link between practice and ideas. He argues that racism involves "culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages Whites have because of the subordinated position of racial minorities."

Individualism is a culturally sanctioned belief that masks racism by obfuscating the social and economic forces that perpetuate racial inequality (Scheurich, 1993) and allows for the justification of White privileges and advantages. Scheurich (1993: 7) suggests that "inequitable distribution of resources and power . . . is concealed . . . by people's investment in . . . individualism."

Within the culture of individualism, social disparities are explained as consequences of individual failure instead of emerging from social structures (i.e., ideology, economic systems, and institutional discrimination). White privileges and advantages are permitted, because individualism grants rewards and special treatment to those who supposedly achieve certain merits, albeit some "merits" might be based more on skin color than actual effort.

Furthermore, participating in the culture of individualism ensures failure for many people of color, because even those that meet alleged standards for achievement do not reap the same rewards that White people experience. For people of color, "the nature of racism . . . negates much of individual accomplishment in the first place" (Irvine, 1978: 253). The assumption that people of color should aspire to

the goals of an oppressive system equates to asking them to contribute to their own domination. As Steele (1992: 77) asserts, asking people of color to assimilate to dominant or mainstream cultural practices "carries a primal insult: it asks them to join in something that has made them invisible."

When dominant cultural practices shelter oppressive ideologies, these practices become hegemonic; that is, they take the form of natural, common sense ways of acting or ordering life that sustain the domination of one group over others (Gramsci, 1992; Williams, 1977). "Ideology," as common sense in schools, "pervades what happens and what doesn't, what is said and not, what is noticed and obscured" (Fine, 1991: 180). Racial hegemony plays out daily in our urban schools, with concrete impact on the opportunities and outcomes for students of color. The voices and experiences of Latina/o students presented in this article will illuminate how they perceive racial hegemony, which emerges from the nexus of individualism and racist ideology in their schooling.

### The Ethnography of Latina/o Youth

I set out to study Latina/o youth by conducting an ethnography in a West Coast city. I entered the field with an interest in understanding how working-class Latina/o youth who were helping to support their families financially could manage their education. I began my research by conducting life-history interviews of 40 Latinas/os—20 males and 20 females—between the ages of 17-24. These interviews were completed over a four-year span, from the mid-1990s to 1999.

The youth participating in the research all lived in the same barrio, which I call El Centro; half of the entire Latina/o population (about 40,000) of this city lives in El Centro. Most residents of El Centro are of Mexican origin, while a small percentage is from either El Salvador or Guatemala. The 40 interviewees were all helping to support their families through employment and had completed different levels of education.

Most of the participants—35 youth—attended, at one time or another, the primary high school in El Centro—El Centro High School. The other five attended high schools (public and private) in El Centro or near its border. Some had dropped out of high school and begun working full-time. Others had graduated before entering the world of full-time employment. Less than a quarter of the sample was enrolled in community college at the time of the research,

and a few had graduated from four-year universities.

The selection criteria for the research participants included three key characteristics: work status, family immigration history, and experience in public schools in or near El Centro. I wanted to study Latina/o youth who worked and paid for family expenses to ensure my participants were indeed working class or poor and did not receive the kinds of economic privileges that help middle- and upper-class youth succeed. Recruitment of research participants began with visiting two major youth employers in El Centro, a fast food restaurant and a community center.

At these workplaces, I identified research participants who fit other aspects of my selection criteria. I selected Latina/o youth who were either 1.5 generation (foreign-born but raised in the U.S.) or second generation (born and raised in the U.S.). Their families were "immigrant," with most parents born and raised in Mexico, and a few from Central America. "Immigrant" status also indicated that the youth existed at the bottom of the economic and social structure of this West Coast city. Selecting youth of 1.5 and second generations meant that they were raised in El Centro and had attended local schools. The life-history interviews revealed a great deal about how Latina/o youth perceived their educational experiences, while the ethnographic phase of the research provided me with direct exposure to their schooling.

The second phase of my research involved following and observing (or "shadowing") a subset of six young people periodically from the mid-1990s to 2000. These observations were tantamount to traditional field research in that I shadowed these young people at schools, workplaces, homes, and neighborhoods. My shadowing consisted of following the youth at least once a week for a six-month period. Observations were documented in extensive field notes.

The youth participating in this in-depth phase of the ethnographic research were relatively representative of the larger sample of the 40 life history interviewees. Four were of Mexican origin. One was Guatemalan, and another was El Salvadorean. Three were 1.5 generation, and the other three were second generation. The six were evenly divided between males and females, and three ultimately dropped out of high school while the others continued on to college.

El Centro High School serves most of El Centro's residents, and similar to most urban schools in the area, it does an inadequate job of preparing students aca-

demically. In comparison to other public high schools across the state of California, El Centro High is among the worst. The school has a 17% drop out rate—199 students dropped out in 1997 (California Department of Education 1997). In that same year, only 13% of the graduates were eligible to enroll in the California university system, a state percentile ranking of only six. Thirteen out of every one hundred seniors and juniors in California take courses that give some college credit. At El Centro, only 0.5 % of the students in the 1996-1997 school year took a class that granted transferable units for college. The grade point average for the entire school is 1.4.

The following sections examine the schooling experiences of the youth in my study. This ethnographic portion consists primarily of the voices and perspectives of Latina/o youth, punctuated by my own observations and analyses. Weis and Fine (1993) assert that the most important perspectives in an analysis of educational contexts come from the students themselves, yet researchers often fail to include them in their critiques and assessments. This article attempts to project *primarily* the words of Latina/o youth, rendering their thoughts and ideas visible as they describe the influences of race on their educational experiences.

### Apathy among School Personnel

Schooling at El Centro was significantly marked by apathy. According to students, very few, if any, teachers, administrators, and counselors demonstrated genuine caring and concern for their students. After multiple interviews, classroom observations, and conversations with Latina/o youth, I ascertained that the school and people working in it had given up trying to teach. Most Latina/o youth in this study did not encounter the appropriate learning processes of responsive teaching, applicable curriculum, and college planning.

The common experience at El Centro High was shaped by widespread apathy, according to many research participants. More than half of the 40 youth interviewed for this research felt that many teachers and school officials did not care about their students. Almost every youth complained about the poor quality of his or her education, and of the school system in general. Only three believed that their education was anywhere near satisfactory; of these one had attended a Catholic school and the other two had the rare experience of being tracked into the few advanced classes that existed at El Centro.

It was no wonder that many of these young people had such strong feelings of

discontent regarding what was called “an education.” Observations that I conducted in several classrooms at El Centro High quickly revealed what they were talking about. A teacher in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class wrote on the blackboard a few examples of present and past tense verb conjugations and then a list of verbs for the students to conjugate. He said, “Take out a piece of paper and write out complete sentences using the verbs in both present and past tense. Turn the paper in at the end of class.” The teacher then proceeded to sit at his desk and read the newspaper.

In another class—a pre-algebra course—the teacher had some basic arithmetic problems on the board for students to work on independently, while she sat at her desk listening to a local radio station. She did not provide any instructions for the students; she expected them to do the problems and turn them in at the end of class. She rarely exchanged any words with the students, except for the few times she told someone to sit down and be quiet.

After I directly observed this teacher apathy, I began to probe the issue in targeted questions to my student interviewees. Some comments from the youth paralleled my own observations so closely that it seemed they might have been sitting in the same exact classrooms. However, they were not. They were commenting on different teachers in different classrooms, indicating that such indifference was widespread and entrenched at El Centro High.

**Martha Cesar:** There was this one math teacher, when you went to his class he wouldn't do anything. Everyone was talking in his class, and he would pass out work and write down answers on the chalkboard so that wouldn't help you. He would write the answers for the worksheets they were doing. So that's how they did the whole period, just talk. The teacher would sit down at his desk, but all the students would be talking to each other. He wouldn't do anything.

**Nestor Cruz:** Most classes, the teachers would just write on the board and we just copied it. Assignment, this, this . . . I think it was English 4. He [the teacher] would just write on the board “I want that done,” and he would sit down and read the newspaper and do nothing. He would have students correct the work.

**Julio Cammarota:** So he wouldn't do anything?

**NC:** Nothing at all. And if you swept his room, he'd give you like 50 points. That's like a C.

**JC:** That's not right. Did you have any other teachers like that?

**NC:** No, he was the laziest. Other teach-

ers talked for five minutes and then “Do assignment this.” But he wrote it down first period and that just stayed there, first to sixth.

**Aura Gabriela:** Teachers don't care; they just hand out the work and write the stuff on the board, and then they would sit and read the paper. One of them, every class she would turn on the radio. Or throwing stuff on the board and say, follow this, or fill out this ditto or whatever—that's not teaching. Yeah, we had a lot of teachers in El Centro High like that.

Maria, Nestor, and Aura were extremely bright and as capable of progressing academically as any other high school student in the country. However, many teachers at their school lacked an investment in their students' education, and demonstrated that to them daily. Apathy undermined the learning opportunities that these Latina/o youth expected.

Juan Camacho had an opportunity to attend school outside El Centro in a predominantly White suburban area during his middle school years. However, when it was time for him to attend high school, his family moved back to El Centro. He compared the differences between a decent middle school and the poor quality education at El Centro High:

It [El Centro High] was different in that it was just nobody really gave a shit, the thrust of the school was probably everybody just trying to barely get by. I mean it was like school was taken seriously at the other school [the middle school outside of El Centro]. It had the resources; there was a computer lab and science lab, which was unheard of in El Centro schools.

The most disastrous consequence for students experiencing an apathetic education was that they started to abandon hope and not care about school. Maria Cesar spoke about this phenomenon:

**Julio Cammarota:** Do you think a lot of the students start to not care about school, because they're not interested in school?

**Maria Cesar:** Because of the teachers.

**JC:** Because of the teachers?

**MC:** Yeah, I had a friend—she would just stop going to class because they weren't teaching the way they're supposed to teach.

**JC:** This is a friend at school?

**MC:** Yeah.

**JC:** Did you know any other people who did similar things like that?

**MC:** There were a lot of students just cutting for the same reason. No one teaching.

Apathetic instruction at El Centro High tended to persuade Latina/o youth to adopt a similar apathy toward their education. Apathy therefore became a circular mode of engagement. Students who felt that teachers didn't care matched the teachers and administrators' indifference.

If the school and teachers weren't willing to challenge and teach students, then how would they know whether students were really willing to learn? Many students stressed that they were willing to learn, but that it made little sense to go through the motions when they seemed to have hardly any educational utility. Because of these seemingly insurmountable challenges, many Latina/o youth logically chose to disconnect from the entire schooling process.

### Latinas/os and Racism in Education

Latina/o youth often knew that an assumption of their inferiority underpinned the apathy they experienced in their school. This assumption led to such “teaching down” to students, or expecting very little of them in the classroom.

**Julian Guerrero:** In high school what they got is, if you're Mexican, they put you in the lowest classes just because you're Mexican. When I went in, they put me in ESL and I was like: “Why? I can speak English. I can write English.” They just put me in, and they got mad when I left so I went to a regular English class and it was so easy for me.

Julian's experience was common among Latina/o students. Several youth participating in the research spoke of similar errors, unfair evaluations, and incorrect placements they attributed to their Latina/o-ness. In fact, the administration at El Centro High school was notorious for placing all students with Spanish surnames into ESL classes, despite their English-language competency and without any direct evaluation of the students' English-speaking abilities. The administration appeared to base its decision on the assumption that Latina/o students lacked the capacity to handle the “normal” curriculum and classes.

The ramifications of inappropriate tracking were compounded as students usually became stuck there indefinitely and missed the more challenging learning opportunities that might have prepared them for college. Research on educational tracking confirms that students placed in remedial tracks never receive the material and encouragement necessary for them to “catch up” and be readmitted into the normal college preparatory classes (Oakes,

1985). Students placed into lower tracks become somewhat bound to these tracks and unable to achieve upward mobility, a feature that mimics how caste systems have operated in other societies.

Sometimes it was not just their perceptions but explicit statements that made Latina/o students realize that racism was rampant at their school. Ophelia Echeverria spoke of a comment made by a school security guard:

Some of the Security (guards) are really racist, and especially when we are, we have a ten, you know, five- or ten-minute break between classes, we take our break. We go to the courtyard, and we sit down. All the Mexicans just go and sit down there. It's just an everyday thing, and the Security hates that. So one day it was our free time. And he (the security guard) was standing in front of the door, and we were talking Spanish. He said, "Go back to Mexico if you're going to talk in Spanish. You can't speak Spanish in this school."

Kiri Souza spoke about racist comments made by a teacher that she will never forget:

I will always remember when I was going to [El Centro High], we had this class—it was a bilingual class and the teacher was White. We were a bunch of freshman. You know how, especially in freshman classes, we act like kids. We're still kids. And so, we were just talking and stuff, and then she got really mad, and she said, "Shut up." Although she said it in Spanish, "Shut up" or whatever. She said, "Oh, I don't even know what you guys are doing in the United States. You guys should go back to your land." And she called us bastards.

The content of most racist comments heard by Latina/o youth alluded to a belief that Latina/os en masse are in this country illegitimately. Many suggested that Latinas/os had no right to be in the United States and therefore were an unwanted presence. The presumed illegitimacy of Latinas/os can be noted in Samuel Huntington's (2004) *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, in which he argues that recent Latina/o immigrants actively retain their "foreignness" and thus represent a presence threatening to "American" cohesion and security. The idea of the illegitimacy reaches many levels of American society, including some highly recognized intellectual circles.

Implicit and explicit forms of racism converged at El Centro High to preclude genuine teaching and learning; normative classroom instruction centered on monitoring the students' behavior as they completed rote assignments. Since the underlying assumption was that Latina/os were inclined to fail because of personal

deficiencies, the school was not pressed to produce an education.

### Invisibility in School

School personnel at El Centro High summarily ignored Latina/o students' intellectual capabilities and potential, resulting from the belief that Latinas/os did not "belong." The effect of this attitude was especially striking with students who demonstrated a commitment to working hard. Martha Caesar put great effort into her schoolwork and gained the opportunity to take one of the only advanced-level English courses at El Centro High. Because Martha was Latina, however, the teacher was doubtful that she was capable of advanced academic work and subsequently treated her as if she were invisible.

**Julio Cammarota:** It must have been good to get that [advanced class] experience. Was it better?

**Martha Cesar:** Well, there was a mean teacher—she was kind of racist.

**JC:** Really? Was it a blanca, or a . . .

**MC:** White. White teacher.

**JC:** Really?

**MC:** She was kind of old.

**JC:** She didn't like Latinos?

**MC:** No.

**JC:** Tell me about this. What happened? How could you tell that she was racist?

**MC:** Because there were most of the people that were White. It was just me and this other Mexican girl . . .

**JC:** And most of the other students were White.

**MC:** We were the only Mexicans.

**JC:** Only Mexicans. Probably some Black students, too.

**MC:** There were two Black girls.

**JC:** Two Black girls. Two Mexicanas, and the rest are White. And she ignored you?

**MC:** Yeah.

**JC:** Can you describe that to me? How did that happen?

**MC:** I remember once, we asked her, because we were in a group—me, my friend, and the two Black girls—and we asked for help. And she said, you have to find out yourself. Talk to your group. And I was like, well, can you help us? And she was like, no, I can't help you, and she was going to another group, with the Whites, and she would help them and she won't help us.

In spite of Martha's hard work and the

basic opportunity to demonstrate her potential in advanced classes, racist perceptions such as this teacher's acted to sabotage her chances at success. Thus, even Latina/o students who gained access to quality educational opportunities may have failed because presumptions of inferiority rendered their intelligence and potential all but invisible.

Being ignored or feeling as if one were invisible in the classroom was a common experience for many participating in the study.

**Cecilia Hernandez:** Over there at [El Centro], they would just like ignore— If you didn't know how to do it [school-work].

**Julio Cammarota:** They'd just ignore you?

**CH:** Just saying, "you do it your way."

**JC:** They won't help you.

**CH:** Won't help me.

**Kiri Souza:** I think the worst thing about that school was nobody did anything.

**Julio Cammarota:** Did teachers just ignore you? What did they do? Do you feel like you were being ignored?

**KS:** Yeah! The whole time—not only me, but everybody.

Cecilia and Kiri's statements represent what many Latinas/os in the study encountered day-to-day in school. They went to school, and then so little attention was bestowed upon them that it seemed as if it did not matter if they existed or not. Although they were physically visible in school, the schooling process rendered them intellectually invisible.

### Excluded from Vital Information

Another type of invisibility experienced by the youth in the study was the failure of counselors to disseminate the information necessary for them to prepare for and attend college. Elena Padilla described her ineffectual relationship with her counselor. In high school she had a 3.2 grade average, and now she is attending a local junior college. Combined with her academic success and proper guidance from her high school counselor, she could have attended a four-year university after high school.

**Elena Padilla:** I never really got any [information] from the school as far as teachers and counselors—my counselor sucked. She didn't really care too much about the students. You had to have like a 4.0 in order for her to look at you, to even consider looking at you and to take time out to talk to you. I didn't like her. I think I saw her once in my whole senior year.

Although Elena had plenty of potential and had adequately demonstrated her academic ability, her counselor failed to offer the attention that could help her reach her full potential. School personnel ignored Elena and failed to see her as four-year university material, no matter how hard she tried—and succeeded—at school.

Students felt that counselors frequently withdrew from their responsibility in complete disregard for the academic needs of a considerable segment of the school population. The following statements were responses to questions about counseling and college I had posed to the youth.

**Salvador Portolla:** The counselors, they were terrible at El Centro High School. I used to go into my counselor(s), and they'd say, "Oh, I don't have time for you right now. Come later with an appointment."

**Rogelia Silva:** Nobody ever really talked to me about college, so I couldn't say they encouraged me to go to college. They need a lot of people to talk to students about SATs, about universities, about community college and all that. A lot of people don't know, and especially the ESL students, they don't know nothing about that. They just ignore them.

The racist assumption that Latina/o students were incapable of succeeding academically meant that these students were actively barred from the information and resources that would guide them towards college. Inattention to the students' development probably derived from the counselors' assumptions that "certain" students did not have the same abilities as others.

This negligence, combined with more active efforts to steer Latina/o students away from the information about advanced classes, college preparation, and the like, tended to place a serious obstacle in front of them, which became yet another disadvantage in comparison to students judged worthy of attention and guidance.

### Individualism: A Convenient Excuse

Students' statements suggested that teachers and school personnel paid attention only to those who demonstrated outright some "ability," and overlooked those presumed to be unable to or uninterested in succeeding. One time I was walking a student in my study to one of his classes. He, as well as other students, were late, and the teacher—thinking that I was security or something else—leaned over to me and said, "These kids are not going anywhere; they're just a bunch of monkeys."

This comment was not only racist, since "monkeys" referred to her students

who were people of color, but also indicative of a "why should I bother?" attitude. I also heard teachers and administrators frequently blame the students' failure on the lack of "individual initiative," "no kind of motivation," or their lack of "interest or drive to learn."

In one classroom, I witnessed a few students at the board learning with the teacher and the remaining students were sitting in their seats, chatting away among themselves. Only three students out of 25 in the entire class were working. The teacher did not try to engage the entire class. I asked the teacher afterwards why she taught only a few students at the board. She said that she tells everyone, "If you want to learn, come to the board and I will teach you.' It doesn't matter to me. It's their grade; they're the ones who have to work for it." The students had to show initiative first before this teacher would make an effort. And if the students did not respond, or if the teacher was not expecting them to learn, then the teacher was willing to avoid teaching them and accept their failure.

Because many students did not immediately reveal "ability" in the classroom and their individual potential, many students felt that teachers were satisfied with their decision to not teach. It was common, therefore, for students like Cecilia Hernandez to state that teachers ignored students who "did not know" the material. The practice of selective education—helping only the best and ignoring the rest—was evident when I asked Veronica Valdez about receiving college preparation at El Centro High:

[I got] nothing. Believe me. There was a program there that helped people with SAT's, but they really don't do a good job. They probably encourage the students who have a higher GPA, and they work with them. But if you are a nobody, they're not going to help you.

Aura Gabriela explained how teachers and school personnel indicated that their job was to identify and educate those who first showed them they could succeed, and that they consequently accepted the failure of those who did not immediately exhibit their "potential" to them in expected ways. According to Aura:

We live in El Centro. We live in this district: everyone thinks we are all bad. They don't expect much of people here. The first paper they get, like a little essay writing, they'll [teachers] pick which ones are going to be their favorite students already because by your writing you can tell what kind of level you're in. The other students they don't pick, they just ignore them.

School personnel serving primarily students of color and embracing ideologies of natural inequality and racism tend to expect that many more students will fail than succeed (Noguera, 2003). Justifying racial patterns of failure through individualism allowed schools to attribute this failure to the students' inability to learn and their resistance to embracing the ideology—and responsibility—of individual achievement.

### Compassionate Education: Making the Invisible Visible

Many Latina/o youth emphasized that the best educational situation for them was one characterized by compassion. When educators connected learning with genuine care and concern, Latina/o youth experienced a compassionate education. Here are some examples of Latina/o youth who benefited from compassionate teachers.

**Nestor Cruz:** We had a teacher... she would tell you what you need, what you need to graduate, what you need to pass. She would just constantly tell you every Friday. She was White but different than most. Way different. She was something else. She would tell you everything you didn't understand, "Come at lunchtime, come in between period time. If you don't understand, I'll give you my phone number. You can call me at home." She was just plugged into you, all her attention. She'd just help you all she can.

**Rosie Juarez:** The good teachers always took time to find out who we were. They were always there, and they would find me absent. They knew about you; if you were absent, they said, where were you yesterday? They always asked, "What do you want from me?"

Compassionate educators who demonstrated empathy for their students had an understanding of the multitude of factors affecting their students' success and a belief in their potential and worth as learners and as people. In comparison to teachers who operate within the paradigm of individualism, these teachers did not wait to see whether their students would excel on their own. Rather, they took responsibility for their students' progress in life and motivated them to succeed. Consequently, these teachers' demonstrations of care encouraged students to learn and excel.

**Rogelia Silva:** I had a teacher. That was the only sophomore English class that she taught. She just talked to you like she was your mom, and hardly anyone would totally ever drop out of her class. We always went back, and she talked to us and told us how important education is. I think she was more of a counselor for your personal education. She just kind of expected college of all of her students. It

was never an issue. She taught us all as a group to go to college and do well. She really cared.

Nestor, Rosie, and Rogelia were the first in their families to graduate from high school. Although there were several factors involved with their success, compassionate teachers may represent at least one salient reason they made it through the invisibility at El Centro High. Other students, such as Kiri and Cecilia, were less fortunate. They stated that they did not encounter any teachers who cared for their education. By the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, they became tired of the apathy and dropped out of El Centro High.

Only 43% of the entire sample of 40 Latina/o youth in my study graduated from high school. This percentage is lower than the national graduation percentage for Latina/o youth. The U.S. Census (*Statistical Abstract of the United States 2003*) reports that 57% of U.S. Latina/os between the ages of 18 of 21 have completed high school. These statistical differences indicate that El Centro may need more compassionate education.

In many ways, compassionate education parallels West's (1993) "politics of conversion," which he has prescribed to defeat the nihilism within the African-American community. A "politics of conversion" starts with a social justice perspective and ends with "love and care. Any disease of the soul [nihilism] must be conquered by a turning of one's soul . . . done through the affirmation of one's worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others" (West 1993:19).

Students of color must learn strategies and ideas that challenge racial hegemony and safeguard their self-worth. Racist ideology saturates the social context of students of color and jeopardizes their intellectual development (Steele, 1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995). With an education based on compassion, students of color can progress academically, intellectually, and psychologically.

### Conclusion

This article examined Latina/o students' experiences of racism at El Centro High. Many felt that negative relationships with school personnel were deleterious to their education. These relationships had grown from teachers' and administrators' ideological assumptions of Latina/o students' racial inferiority. These assumptions had stemmed from two prevalent and deeply racist ideologies: One was that Latinas/os were an illegitimate presence in the United States, and therefore had no right to exist in the country or have any fair claim to service by U.S. institutions. The other was that Latinas/os lacked the intellectual capacity for school success.

School personnel thus reflected attitudes that adhered to ideologies designating Latina/o students as either undeserving of an education or incapable of being educated, or both. Because many assumed urban youth were incapable of learning, Latinas/os in this study often encountered apathetic school personnel who did not care whether they learned or not.

This racist ideology of inferiority rendered the potential and intelligence of Latina/o youth invisible to school personnel, as documented by the comments and schooling experiences of students. Therefore, students repeatedly felt ignored in the classroom and deprived of the information vital for their success. Their statements also suggest that school personnel seemed to rely on an ethos of individualism that the school endorsed at the expense of teachers' caring and involvement with students—particularly students of color.

This individualistic approach allowed school personnel to wait to see whether a student demonstrated academic "ability" on his or her own. If a student did not immediately display "ability," then the school justified its own disinvestment in and disregard for the student. This perspective encouraged a passive stance from educators, and absolved them of responsibility for teaching those who did not immediately reveal evidence of "intellect" or school interest.

When the culture of individualism combined with racist ideology, the school tended to presume that most of its students were failures. Many Latina/o youth in my study had encountered years of neglect and did not display the skills demanded in the classroom. Without offering students the means to demonstrate their intellect, school personnel assumed them to be failures.

We live in precarious times, in which American apartheid looms on the horizon. Latinas/os comprise one of the fastest growing racial groups in the country, yet Whites still hold all key positions of power. The net effect of such an unequal distribution of power is that Whites will continue to fill the classroom seats of the most privileged universities, while Latinas/os will continue to disproportionately occupy the service jobs (as janitors, cooks, etc.) at these same institutions.

Remediation and reversal of this trend, I argue, can be accomplished through a compassionate education for Latina/o students. This approach will counter the negative effects of racist ideology and the culture of individualism. A compassionate education for Latina/o students will keep them in school and make visible to students

themselves, as well as to others, their self-worth, intellect, and future possibilities.

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