

# A Critically Compassionate Intellectualism for Latina/o Students:

## Raising Voices Above the Silencing in Our Schools

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Latina/o students often experience coursework that is remedial and unchallenging—benign at best, a dumbing-down at worst (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). This potential limiting curriculum is not only failing to provide Latinas/os with the credentials necessary to advance economically, but their education denies them the opportunity to develop the critical voices and intellectual capacities necessary to do something about it. To borrow the words of Carter G. Woodson (1977), there is a “mis-education of Latinas/os,” in which their voices and potentialities to challenge an unjust world is suppressed by the consistent battery of standardized tests, rote learning, and curricular content that has little bearing on their everyday struggles as young people of color.

Thus, the standard educational experience for young Latinas/os tends to submerge them into silence, where they are taught to be quiet and avoid independent and critical thinking. This is a dangerous lesson for them to learn, and it is dangerous for everyone. Young Latinas/os are the next generation that will significantly change the composition of our society. And if they are encouraged to become silent adults, this new burgeoning majority will not have the capacity to effect social change that moves toward an egalitarian reality for all people.

In this article, we present an educational model based on a critically compassionate intellectualism that can foster the liberation of Latinas/os as well as

other students of color from the oppression of silencing they currently experience in school. A teacher following critically compassionate intellectualism implements the educational trilogy of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993), authentic caring (Valenzuela, 1999), and a social justice centered curriculum (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). For students of color, critical pedagogy affords them the opportunity to become critical agents of social and structural transformation. Authentic caring promotes student-teacher relationships characterized by respect, admiration, and love and inspires young Latinas/os to better themselves and their communities. A social justice curriculum dispels ideological notions of racial inferiority while cultivating the intellectual capacities of students of color.

We argue that the trilogy’s elements—critical pedagogy, authentic caring, and social justice curriculum—must be implemented simultaneously in the classroom to present the most effective preparation for Latina/o students to participate in the development of a truly democratic society. Each element becomes stronger and more effective with the integration and reinforcement of the additional constituent elements. In critically compassionate intellectualism, the sum is much greater than its separate educational parts, and the individual parts become greater when they are combined in a collective, tripartite approach.

### The Silencing of Latina/o Students

Studying a cohort of Latino students at different grade levels, Quiroz (1997, 2001) compares their autobiographical narratives written in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and then again in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, noticing that silencing was a common theme throughout

the texts. She discovers that the students’ reactions to silencing change over time, with the effects becoming more profound toward the end of their grade school tenure. In the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, students respond by engaging “in self-denigration, internalizing failure in school and directing anger at themselves instead of at those responsible for their failure” (2001, p. 340). By the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, they are more familiar with the institutional factors behind their marginalization and adhere to “perceptions of apathy, injustice, and racism, as students recognize how profoundly these conditions affect their educational lives, and many are convinced of teachers’ general lack of interest in their educational progress” (2001, p. 339).

The eventual outcome of the “school-sponsored silencing” (2001, p. 328) is the students’ widely held belief that academic success is unattainable for them. Quiroz argues that such beliefs explain “why the majority of these students disengage from schooling or only perform intermittently” (1997, p. 14). The irony, as Quiroz (2001, p. 328) points out, is that these Latina/o students could communicate in more than one language, yet “had no voice, at least in matters related to their schooling. They spoke through their narratives but no one listened.”

### The Uses of Power in School-Sponsored Silencing

The urban, low-track curriculum emphasizes order and discipline, and as Michelle Fine (1991) argues, it also actively silences young people by treating them and their intellectual capacities as insignificant. Principally, it is through “power” that educational institutions “nurture, sustain, and legitimate silencing” (Weiss, Fine, & Lareau, 1992, p. 1). The power in school-sponsored silencing is exercised

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and experienced through the curriculum, teacher and student relationships, and racist discourse.

Regarding power in the curriculum, Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b) argues that educational content based on the achievements of the dominant group actively silences the cultural capital<sup>1</sup> and thus intellectual contributions of subordinate groups. Schools accomplish silencing by rendering certain curricular processes, such as the acquisition and exposition of “valid” school knowledge, appear universally available and possible for every student. However, Bourdieu argues that educational institutions, which are invested in maintaining certain power relations, elide the fact that “valid” school knowledge is culturally specific and thus not universally available. Bourdieu (1977a, p. 494) states:

By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of . . . cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture.

Knowledge acquisition is easier, in most societies, for one social group—the group that has the power to control educational institutions. In reality, access to “valid” school knowledge is an arbitrary process related to one’s social and cultural location. If a student is a member of the dominant group, he or she will display all the mannerisms, codes, and communication patterns that symbolize, according to the dominant group’s criteria, someone who is knowledgeable. The opposite is true for students from subordinate groups. Educational institutions silence—through curricula highlighting the contributions of the dominant group—the subordinate group’s knowledge and intellectual capacities.

Freire (1993, 1998) writes extensively about the traditional teacher and student relationship, and how it might contribute to the silencing of students. In the traditional educational format, which he categorizes as “banking education,” the teacher is perceived as the only true authority of knowledge while the student is perceived as an unknowing subject that should passively accept, without questioning, the knowledge disseminated by the “legitimate” authority within the pedagogical process. Freire (1998, p. 71) illustrates the practice and effects of banking education:

The teacher’s task is to . . . “fill” the student

by making deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true knowledge. And since people “receive” the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still . . . Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it.

Although Freire wrote about banking education some 30 years ago, the practice is still prevalent in our schools today. The primary assumption holds true; teachers supposedly possess all the knowledge, and their job is to fill students’ supposedly blank minds with the state’s official perception and understanding of the world. The result of such direct, one-way depositing of information is the cultivation of students who are taught to accept the conditions of their existence “as is” and forced into a marginal space where racial discourse maintains a silence about their potential to rectify problems of injustice. They are left thinking that their world will never change, or more importantly, that they can never change it. Thus, their realities become nihilistic states of suffering and distress whereby they believe that nothing can be done but accept the way things are—including the inequities that cause the suffering of many, and in some situations, themselves.

Although acts of power experienced through the curriculum and pedagogy may impede the academic progress of Latina/o students, everyday racism in society and schools has enough impact, in and of itself, to present serious impediments to success. For example, teachers who believe that Latina/o students are hopelessly and helplessly uneducable could countermand the positive effects of a democratic pedagogy and culturally competent curriculum. Thus, the effects of racism upon teachers who then transmit racist ideas to their students can stand alone and have a destructive impact on academic outcomes (Reyes & Rios, 2003).

The historical backdrop, according to Pollock (2001, p. 9), of “American racism” consists of “naturalizing a racial hierarchy of academic and intellectual potential ever since racial categories were created and solidified with pseudo-science.” This nefarious racial dynamic of the American past is still active today in the consistent and widespread expectation and acceptance that racial differences in achievement are part of the normal outcomes of education (Pollock, 2001; Spring, 2001). Thus, racism

in schools reinforces a racialization process that constructs a hierarchical order of social groups. This stratified racial order corresponds to capitalist imperatives for subordinate classes that are in turn exploited economically by a dominant ruling class (Darder & Torres, 2004). A certain economic utility underpins the schools’ production of racial differences in academic outcomes.

Governments, districts, officials, administrators, teachers, parents, and even students often internalize the belief that people who are phenotypically light tend to be smarter than their darker-skinned counterparts. Although biological explanations for racial differences in achievement are somewhat passé, current theories harboring assumptions about deficiencies in the culture, normative structures, and environments of non-White communities not only have a similar ring but have attained significant currency in many educational settings (Valencia & Black, 2002).

For example, in Pollock’s (2001) study of racial achievement patterns in a California high school, she discusses how teachers and administrators often cite “culture” and “parents” as explanations for the failure of students of color. These culturally-based explanations contribute to racist ideology because they do nothing more than point to the putative “foibles” in certain races while avoiding the real systemic problems of racism, White supremacy, and White privilege.

In short, power is enacted through the curriculum, through pedagogy, as well as racist ideologies. Power issued through these particular forms foments a practice of silencing that can permeate attitudes, policies, and actions and thus instigate the treatment of students of color as intellectually inferior and ultimately uneducable. These abuses of power in education invariably impel students to withdraw, either permanently by dropping out or partially by “checking out” mentally and becoming silent.

### The Social Justice Class in Tucson

We have the opportunity to implement and develop an alternative, social justice pedagogy in a high school located in Tucson, Arizona. The school principal allowed us to work with a cohort of 20 Latina/o students during their junior and senior years, teaching them the state’s social studies requirements but adjusting the content and pedagogy in ways that facilitated the students’ critical consciousness around ra-

cial inequalities affecting their educational and general life experiences. The students participated in this social justice curriculum for two years and received credit for all high school graduation requirements in U.S. History and U.S. Government.

More importantly, these students were afforded the opportunity to cultivate the skills and knowledge to address everyday injustices that limit their own future opportunities, and those of other Latina/o youth. Our goal was to help students' raise their own voices above the silencing of traditional schooling. In addition, we hoped that they would become active citizens armed with a critical consciousness that could lead them toward the transformation of educational and social structures presently failing to meet their specific needs.

The location for the social justice education course is Cerro High School.<sup>2</sup> The socioeconomic status of many Latino families served by Cerro is among the lowest in the Tucson metropolitan area. Consequently, two-thirds of all Cerro students receive free lunch, a rate that is more than 25% higher than the Tucson district-wide average of 39%. Student Achievement Accountability for Results (STAAR)—a set of standardized tests measuring academic performance—reports that Cerro has the lowest ranking in standardized test scores of any public high school in Tucson. Furthermore, in 2004-05, Cerro offered only seven Advanced Placement (AP) courses, while the most predominately White (64% White to 20% Latina/o) school in the district, Ultimate High School, offered 62 advanced placement courses.

The history of racial inequality at Cerro makes for interesting dynamics in implementing social justice education. Latinas/os represent 62% of the Cerro student population, and they are more likely to fill the lower ranks of the school's academic hierarchy. Sixty percent of the Latina/o students at Cerro write below a level denoted as "standard" by the state, while White students are the highest performing group on campus. Whites represent 51% of the students enrolled in AP courses while comprising only 18% of the student population. A counselor at Cerro mentioned that the special magnet program at Cerro, which offers many of the advance placements courses, has only 20 Latinas/os enrolled out of 400 students. The overwhelming majority consists of White students.

In addition, White students receive most college scholarships given to Cerro graduates. Although Latinas/os are more

than 60% of the student population, they received only 31.3% of the college scholarship money given to graduates in 2002. Some 60% of this scholarship money goes to White students. Cerro High School has been more efficient at guiding these students into academic tracks and on to college.

### A Critically Compassionate Intellectualism

Drawing from our experiences in the social justice class and from the voices of the social justice students, we have developed an approach to educating Latina/o students that can help them to deflect the institutional power maintaining their silence. This approach follows a trilogy of educational practice, combining the essential characteristics of critical pedagogy, compassionate student/teacher relationships, and social justice content. We call this pedagogical trilogy *critically compassionate intellectualism*, and it is our belief that educators who implement this learning process will provide their students with the opportunity to counter the institutional silencing that prevents their full and active participation in shaping their futures.

The following sections will delineate the parameters for a critically compassionate intellectualism while showing how each part of the trilogy is inextricably related to the others and necessary in combination for breaking through the silence and promoting critically engaged citizenship among students of color.

#### Critical Consciousness in Education

In the social justice education course, our experiences with the students have been both encouraging and troubling. On the one hand, the curriculum has been effective in raising the students' consciousness with regards to racial inequalities. On the other hand, the innovative instruction has also revealed the failure of the standard public school curriculum to help young people evolve into critically-minded citizens who actively work toward improving conditions in their communities and society at large.

This failure became evident during a student photo presentation on the challenges for Chicano/Latino students. The students chose to take photos and develop attendant slide presentations on topics related to a critical study of their educational experiences. For two weeks, students roamed around their high school campus with disposable cameras and took pictures

related to racial stereotypes, cultural oppression, misrepresentation of students of color, and critical thinking vs. passivity in education. It was during the slide presentation on critical thinking vs. passivity and comments made by a specific student that we realized the standard education for many Latinas/os at this school was practically barren of any content encouraging critical thinking.

High school student Kati Diaz showed a slide of students in the auto-shop class, who were primarily Latino males. At first we didn't know what this slide had to do with critical thinking, but Kati made these comments.

In advanced placement [AP] classes, students are always being challenged . . . always using your brain, you are always moving a step ahead. And how critical can auto shop be? And I don't see any difference between the people here and the people in AP classes except race.

Kati's comments parallel the analysis that education scholar Jeannie Oakes (1985) reported in her book, *Keeping Track*. Oakes states that Latinas/os as well as African Americans tend to fill the ranks of the lower academic tracks, which focus more on remedial or vocational education. In contrast, White students are more apt to be placed in the advanced placement classes, preparing them for the best universities in the country. One of the most interesting findings in Oakes' study was that:

. . . teachers of high-track classes were more likely to emphasize such behaviors as critical thinking, independent work, active participation, self-direction, and creativity. At the same time, teachers of low-track classes were more likely than others to emphasize student conformity, students getting along with one another, working quietly . . . being punctual, and conforming to classroom rules and expectations. (1985, p. 85)

These habits of conformity and compliance encouraged in lower tracks stifle students' expression and thinking, and lead to the passive silence evident in the education of Latino/a students at Cerro.

Another student in our social justice course, Sandra Sanchez, is concerned about her classmates' perceptions of their own muteness and concomitant inefficacy. Similar to the juniors in Quiroz' study (2001), Sandra started to comprehend the impact of racism and injustice on her education, as well as that of other students of color. She spoke about racial bias evident in news reports on Tucson schools. In her low-income community, reports tend to focus on

negative traits, such as poor performance on standardized tests, whereas the media represents schools located in whiter and wealthier areas in the most positive light. She adds, "We are good students and we are very respectful compared to other schools, but I don't think we show them how great we are by test scores. We could show them in many other ways. But the difference is, will they listen?" Sandra recognizes the injustices around her, but feels her words on these matters would fall on deaf ears.

### A Pedagogy of Critical Literacy

In the social justice education course, our pedagogical approach is greatly influenced by the work of education scholar Paulo Freire. We design lessons from the framework of critical pedagogy and related non-banking education approaches to teaching. This framework is based on the key premise that the high school students should be equal partners in the construction of knowledge, identification of problems of social injustice, and implementation of solutions to these problems.

Therefore, we offer the students a curriculum that closely follows Freire's concept of critical literacy, which encourages students to adopt "an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context" (Freire, 1998, p. 86). Critical literacy renders both students and educators as Subjects of knowledge, collaborative creators of knowledge that can be used to transform the oppressive conditions of reality.

To establish this type of a learning partnership—knowledge production through collaboration—between high school students and classroom coordinators (high school teacher of record and university researchers), we structure lessons so that we (students and coordinators) are consistently engaged in dialogue. Our first dialogical exercise involved having students and coordinators write poems about their identities. The poems, or what we call *I Am Poems*, gave us the opportunity to understand the students' realities, to see where they were coming from and how they comprehend the issues and problems most relevant to their lives.

As Freire states, "the starting point for a political-pedagogical project must be precisely at the level of the people's aspirations and dreams, their understanding of reality and their forms of action and struggle" (Freire, 1998, p. 214). The coordinators and students shared their own dreams and realities by writing poems that they

presented to the entire class. See Figure 1 for an example of an "I Am" poem.

The coordinators used generative themes and issues discovered in the poems to create questionnaires for the students to fill out. We studied their responses and created a list of potential topics that could function in many ways as particular lenses for the students to conduct a class research project on inequalities in education. The students and coordinators dialogued and came up with the four research topics: *cultural assimilation, critical thinking vs. passivity in education, racial and gender stereotypes of students, media representations of students of color*. These topics became the basis for student research and subsequent presentations to the school, district officials, academics, educators and community members, with the intent of making recommendations to improve education for students of color in their district.

The back-and-forth dialogue between students and coordinators lasted for over two months; this lengthy process was necessary to empower students to become equal partners in the research project. Otherwise we would be guilty of establishing a learning process that would amount to no more than another form of oppression. According to Freire, "coordinators must be converted to dialogue in order to carry out education rather than domestication. Dialogue is an I-Thou relationship, and thus necessarily a relationship between two Subjects. Each time the 'thou' is changed into an object, an 'it,' dialogue is subverted and education is changed to deformation" (1998, p. 89). We wanted to avoid provid-

ing the students yet another experience of being the static objects of learning, stuffing information into them without having them criticize, discuss, or question what is being taught. Such educational experiences represent the norm for these students and force them to be uncritical and tolerant of a life of subordination.

Because students are more familiar with banking education, encouraging them to think critically, to voice their opinions, and to contribute to the construction of knowledge are challenging tasks. Most of their educational experiences have revolved around the banking mode of learning. Many students recount how they have experienced years and years of banking education: teachers constantly telling them what to do, what they should learn, and never asking them about their opinions or asking them for their input, suggestions, comments, feedback, or thoughts about their education. The students said they are conditioned to learn within that type of education.

So now, in the social justice class, when we ask them to speak up, give their opinions and think critically, they really have a hard time. In fact, Sandra Sanchez said that if we don't tell them what to do, "crack the whip," and get on them to make sure things are done, they will just sit there and not do anything. She added that they do not know how to take the initiative to become responsible for their own education, have input on what they learn, or participate in the construction of their own knowledge.

We are amazed how Freire (1993) was right in terms of the oppressive and

Figure 1

### I am by Lil Vero Trujillo

I am what you call a Chicana  
 I wonder when there is going to be no such word as minorities  
 I hear my conscience scolding me for not speaking out for what I think is right  
 I see the hegemony of this world  
 I want equality and unity  
 I am what you call a Chicana  
 I pretend not to see how society is changing this world  
 I feel the pain and tension of my people "the minorities"  
 I touch their filthy paper  
 I worry that this world is never gonna change  
 I cry because of this injustice  
 I am what you call a Chicana  
 I understand that this world is corrupted  
 I say society will corrupt us all  
 I try to make a difference  
 I hope my people become aware  
 I am what you call a Chicana

stifling effects of colonization. According to Freire, liberation from the silencing force of oppression is extremely difficult for the colonized, because they tend to gravitate toward the model of living imposed by the dominant class. The model emphasizes the tacit acceptance of the established hierarchical order of domination and subordination. Because this model is so pervasive—so entrenched in the psyche of the oppressed—they have difficulty acting differently or deviating from it. The students first needed to *unlearn* the myriad lessons of banking education to feel confident and capable voicing their opinions and engaging in dialogue.

Although the challenges of establishing a critical pedagogy seem overwhelming at times, educators must stay on task to avoid failure and the continued subordination of their students. The stakes are too high to loosen the commitment to critical pedagogy. Latino students can no longer remain silent; becoming vocal is imperative for them to attain some faith in their intellectual abilities. It is important to note that the silencing they experience in school does more than keep them quiet.

We stated earlier that school silencing encompasses enactments of power through the curriculum, traditional pedagogy, and racist ideology, with the intended effect of erasing the intellectual potential of students of color. Therefore, learning to speak one's voice is vital for advancement to the higher levels of education and society. The converse leads us towards the depths of oppression wherein Latinas/os are abysmally exploited for capitalistic gains (Delgado, 1999).

*Compassionate Relationships between Students and Teachers*

After struggling with the numerous days of silent students, we realized compassion was necessary to establish a strong and trusting relationship between students and coordinators, which in turn would lay the foundation for free-flowing dialogue. The need for compassion in education became apparent when a student, Kati Diaz, told us after class that perhaps we (classroom coordinators) would have an easier time getting the students to talk if we would open up and let them know us personally.

She suggested that we start talking about ourselves as people. In essence, the students wanted to know something about our lives and family experiences. According to Kati, students wanted to trust us first before talking and communicating with

us. We, in positions of institutional power, had to take the first step before we could expect the students to open up.

We took the first step by sharing our feelings and concerns. Students needed to see us as complete human beings and interact with us on an emotional level before engaging with us intellectually.

Our response to this student's request was to create and read our own "I Am" poems. The poem in Figure 2 reflects one of the author's experiences as a Puerto Rican male, and the personal and social struggles that have captivated his attention and energy throughout his life.

We realized that a critical yet humanizing pedagogy was crucial for generating dialogue and a sense of ownership among the students. The following is an excerpt from an exit interview conducted with two students who graduated from the social justice class. Their words demonstrate how a humanizing pedagogy can help students to feel they are knowledgeable Subjects that guide the educational process.

**Vanessa Acosta:** The social justice class was interesting because we had a part in it. And usually we don't have a voice in nothing. So that's why it interested us and plus what it was about. And plus all our subjects. And plus our teachers were cool too.

**Julio Cammarota:** Was it interesting for you because you were looking at some of the problems in society and trying to find out solutions for the problems?

**VA:** We got to explain to other people. To teachers what was going on. We got to tell them.

**Figure 2**

I hear, sometimes, voices of family and friends who have passed away. My Titi Elsa, Abuelo Julio, Cunado Renzo, and mi Chavaló Fabricio, who died from broken hearts and gunshots. But appear to me when I need strength and guidance to overcome obstacles of self-doubt arising from that imposed inferiority.

I see faces of people who I don't know . . . but I will know, maybe not now, but in the future or in the past that is still unknown to me. I want peace, justice, equality for all people who suffer from oppression, from poverty, from the pain of having one's heart, mind, and soul be invisible to those willing to sacrifice their hearts, minds, and souls for the power to dominate and control.

**Maria Perez:** We got to teach them.

**VA:** Yeah. And they loved it. And they loved us. And that was bad [meaning 'good'] too.

**MP:** And some of them said they didn't even realize that we were teenagers.

**VA:** They loved us.

**MP:** We are loved.

**JC:** Did you have any other opportunities like this in other classes?

**MP:** No.

**VA:** In other classes its like open your book. "Do this." "That's it." "Write this."

**JC:** Tell you what to do?

**VA:** Yeah. You couldn't be like, "well could I do this?" "No." I think that if we had more classes like the social justice class then a lot more kids would be interested in school. They would want to learn.

When they presented their social justice research to educators, administrators, and other members of their community, the students' sense of empowerment extended beyond the classroom. The presentations in the community and at academic and youth conferences offered them the rare opportunity to see themselves as knowledgeable Subjects. In contrast, the standard educational system treats them as empty slates ready to be carved and etched on by teachers. In the presentations, they were carving and etching out knowledge. Our deepest hope was that the students would gain a 'voice' in the class and carry their confidence and sense of efficacy to the world outside the classroom walls.

Thus, dialogue—real discussion for generating ideas that construct knowledge—occurs through a humanizing as well as critical pedagogy, in which genuine and compassionate relationships form between students and educators. Freire states:

Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. . . . Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love . . . because love is an act of courage, not of fear; love is commitment to others. (1993, p. 70)

A humanizing pedagogy is accomplished by educators interacting with students on an emotional level and sharing their deepest concerns and feelings about life. What

must be avoided at all costs is treating students solely as empty receptacles that must be filled with academic skills. An educator should not only reveal what he or she cares about personally but also show the students that he or she loves them in the caring sense and shares similar concerns about the world. Compassion is another crucial step for enacting a critical pedagogy and ultimately a critically compassionate intellectualism.

The idea of a critical yet humanizing pedagogy correlates with the caring literature in education (Noddings, 1984, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela (1999) claims that the lack of care and respect in teacher/student relationships may be a key factor behind the failure of Latina/o students. Her study is based on research conducted at a high school in Texas with primarily Mexican American and Mexican immigrant student populations.

At this school, she noticed two types of teaching methods: authentic caring and aesthetic caring. Valenzuela (1999, p. 61) states that authentic caring is a "form of caring that emphasizes relations of reciprocity between teachers and students." That is, the teacher establishes that emotional, human connection with his or her students and demonstrates a real interest with the students' overall wellbeing. Aesthetic caring is tantamount to treating students like objects, seeing them only as blank slates that need to be inscribed with academic skills, and not as complete people with real-life problems.

Lalo Garcia, a classroom teacher from our social justice course, engages in authentic caring. We observed this while he was consulting with a student about his future academic plans. Nestor wants so badly to drop out of Cerro, because school is not engaging him. He is failing in his classes, and wants and needs to move on in life. His mother is leaving Tucson and moving in with her boyfriend who lives in California. Nestor has the option of moving with her, but he has so many ties in Tucson that he is preparing to stay. He states, "I need a full-time job to support myself, because I will be on my own."

There is an opportunity cost for Nestor: stay in school where he is failing or drop out to find a job to support himself. He understands that life will be harder for him without a high school education, so he says that when he drops out he will obtain a GED. Lalo spoke with him earnestly. He said that he understood Nestor's situation. He gave Nestor several options to stay in Tucson—making up credits at charter

schools or staying at Cerro to graduate. Nestor said that's a possibility but he preferred getting a GED and to start working full-time.

We noticed how Lalo was talking with Nestor. He listened to Nestor and his words and actions were filled with love and respect. Lalo figuratively had become a father figure. Nestor's body language indicated that he was taking Lalo's words seriously. He seemed relaxed in the chair, although a bit pensive about his situation. His posture indicated that perhaps a positive outcome would result from the conversation, because he was conversing with someone who genuinely cares about his fate. We liked how Lalo didn't refute or put down Nestor's ideas. He said that they were good ideas and possibilities, but also mentioned others, such as charter or week-end school, that Nestor might consider.

Lalo's interaction with Nestor is a good example of authentic caring in action. He was able to give Nestor authentic advice, because he developed a caring relationship with him. Lalo acknowledged the social and economic conditions impacting Nestor's life. Therefore, Lalo could provide advice formulated from a viewpoint that emerges from Nestor's reality. Listening to the students' problems and showing some compassion for their situation may be necessary actions for educators to improve relationships with their students.

Unfortunately, at Cerro High School, most teachers or teaching styles fall under the category of aesthetic caring, being concerned with only the technical (i.e., skill level) side of their students' experiences. With the current climate in education, resulting from high-stakes testing policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), aesthetic caring is becoming more prevalent in schools such as Cerro High. Because of the fear of being labeled "under-performing" as a result of standardized tests, Cerro High and the school district pressure teachers to barrage students with test content. The students in our social justice course consistently speak of how they are inundated with a curriculum that prepares them solely for standardized tests.

These test-based lessons, called "focus lessons," review test content in multiple subjects (math, English, etc.), and usually it is the same exact focus lesson reviewed repeatedly in every class throughout the school day. Furthermore, the increased focus or state-mandated testing forces an aesthetic pedagogy upon the teachers. Cerro student Validia Tejerina says,

Focus lesson usually takes the whole period. It's the same thing over and over and over. With the focus lesson you go from one period to another learning the same thing: It's usually like...before the AIMS [Arizona Instrument for Measuring Standards] test [is administered] here...the whole week is just focused on focus lessons, you know, they are just reading it over and over and over. Each period. So that when the test comes along you can remember. You don't learn anything.

Validia asserts that the boredom of the focus lesson has the tendency to disengage students from their education.

### *Social Justice Content in Education*

Social justice educational content is the basis for promoting authentic caring. Teaching to the test—course work that drills students on academic skills—will create a chasm that places teachers and students miles apart from each other. On the other hand, teachers will make strong connections with students when the educational content is based on matters most significant and meaningful to the students' lives. And what matters a great deal to many of the students in our social justice course is determining how to challenge social forms of oppression that limit opportunities for themselves, their families, and communities.

At Cerro High School, students are familiar with oppression produced by racist ideology. Suggestions of racial inferiority besiege students of color on a regular basis. Conversations with Cerro students reveal this consistent burden of injustice. Validia Tejerina mentions how teachers regularly tell Latina/o students that they are incapable of academic success and should drop out. She talks about a specific event in which she was supposed to turn in a report to her teacher but forgot to bring it to school on the due date. When the teacher asked for the report, she said she forgot. The teacher then said, "You should just drop out of school and work in a restaurant and wash dishes."

Validia interprets these comments as racist. First, by telling her that she should drop out, the teacher indicates that she has no belief in Validia's intellectual capacity. Second, because she suggests Validia should work as a dishwasher, the teacher implies that is all Validia is capable of accomplishing in life. Validia adds that when she was a freshman, a science teacher told her the same thing—that she should drop out of school. Arturo Reyes said that he had the same teacher who told Validia to

become a dishwasher, and this teacher told Arturo that he shouldn't even bother trying to pass this class and he should drop out of school.

We must recognize how racist ideology engenders conflict between students and teachers and prevents them from forming strong meaningful relationships. Indeed, Freire emphasizes that oppression prevents us from realizing our full humanity, and oppression must be challenged to reach the point of seeing the full humanity in others and in ourselves. It is at this point of mutual recognition and respect for each other's humanity that strong human connections are established.

Teachers cannot become authentic caregivers to students of color unless they merge their caring with counter-hegemonic content that dispels notions of racial inferiority and recognizes the wealth of knowledge, culture, and understanding of every student who walks into the classroom. This is the moment when caring evolves into compassion for the student's social and economic situation that may render him or her less than human and thus deny him or her any possibility for self-determination.

### *The Practice of Critically Compassionate Intellectualism*

Educators can attain a liberating education for Latina/o students by combining three approaches to learning into one educational framework—critically compassionate intellectualism. The following represents the three components of critically compassionate intellectualism:

- (1) *Critical Pedagogy*—elevating students to the status of Subjects in the creation of knowledge.
- (2) *Authentic Caring*—treating students as full and complete human beings.
- (3) *Social Justice Content*—teaching content that directly counters racism and racist stereotypes through epistemological contextualization of the students' social, economic, and cultural realities.

To facilitate critically compassionate intellectualism, we recommend that a social justice perspective feed into and guide all educational practices. That is, we suggest progressing beyond the ordinary multicultural approach that at best validates the cultural capital of marginalized groups (Banks, 2002; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 1996). Although elevating the cultural capital of such groups is essential, students

should focus on the injustices that engender marginalization in the first place, and then develop remedies for palliating them. This has been our approach in the social justice course.

For instance, this course provided Latina/o students with the opportunity to discuss their experiences with the state's oppressive language policies that have essentially banned bilingual education. In effect, the state of Arizona's Proposition 203 has followed in the footsteps of California's Proposition 227 by rendering English the only instructional language in the school system. Our students have spent numerous hours discussing the direct and subtle effects of this proposition.

Students contend that Spanish speakers are now more likely to drop out, because teachers cannot by law speak to them in any language except English. Since these Spanish-speaking students do not understand what's happening in the classroom, they simply disengage, biding time until they leave school altogether. The students of our social justice course have decided to bring this problem to the Tucson school board, and recommend the development of a waiver program that expands outreach to Latina/o communities and supports administrators and teachers who wish to adequately serve their Spanish-speaking students by implementing bilingual education.

The study of language and cultural politics via Proposition 203 served as a vehicle for critically compassionate intellectualism. By positioning the students' experiences with anti-bilingual language policy as the centerpiece for knowledge acquisition, students share the status of co-investigators—equal with the project coordinators. Students and coordinators both become Subjects and equal partners in the construction of knowledge. In addition, focusing on language and cultural oppression meant that the students' education related to something that mattered to them. It matters to them, their families, and their younger brothers and sisters, because they perceive Proposition 203 as an attempt at eradicating a language essential for the development and advancement of Latina/o communities—their communities.

By examining ways to preserve the vitality of the Spanish language, students recognize our intentions as sincerely demonstrating compassion for them and their families' futures. Finally, the students engage in social justice work by taking their concerns to policymakers (i.e., the school

board) with the hope of rectifying a problem that threatens the academic success as well as the intellectual development of many Latina/o students. Critically compassionate intellectualism involves more than discussing problems of inequality; it requires students to engage in activities that promote social justice in their own context.

### Concluding Remarks

We will end our discussion on critically compassionate intellectualism with bell hooks' description of teachers she had while attending segregated schools in the South. Her description highlights the importance of a pedagogy of liberation, and suggests that other factors—beyond lack of resources—may impede the progress of students of color. In particular, schools often fail to prepare these students to deal with a society that treats them as racially inferior. Our sense is that the teachers from bell hook's childhood engaged in critically compassionate intellectualism, because they achieved authentic caring through a critical yet humanizing pedagogy that promoted a social justice perspective. Adopting this perspective counters notions of inferiority that result from the institutional dehumanization of children of color. hooks describes how:

The work of all our progressive teachers, was not to teach us solely the knowledge in books, but to teach us an oppositional world view—different from that of our exploiters and oppressors, a world view that would enable us to see ourselves not through the lens of racism or racist stereotypes but one that would enable us to focus clearly and succinctly . . . to see ourselves first and foremost as striving for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body, and spirit. (1989, p. 49)

Despite a lack of resources, these teachers instilled in their students a critical perspective on the hegemony they experienced, as well as a belief in their own humanity.

It is essential that we implement an education for Latina/o students that follows critically compassionate intellectualism by drawing on critical pedagogy, authentic caring, and social justice content. This educational trilogy may elevate the voices of Latina/o students and expand their rights in this society. We live in precarious times in which apartheid is looming on the horizon. Latinas/os are one of the fastest growing racial groups in the country, yet Whites still hold onto the key positions of

power in state institutions. The net effect of such an unfair distribution of power is that Whites will continue to fill the classroom seats of the most privileged universities, while Latinas/os will more likely fill the service jobs (janitors, cooks, etc.) at these same privileged universities.

Educational disparities have other frightening consequences. As the U.S. government and corporate leaders wage their wars for global dominance, it is young Brown and Black blood they trade for brown and black oil. It is in our best interest to transform the education of our people so that our blood is no longer used to grease the wheels of global capitalist greed.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cultural capital refers to the mannerisms, style, dispositions, customs, and cultural knowledge that symbolize and confer a certain degree of social currency or value. That is, cultural capital has social value or "symbolic value" that distinguishes a person's different and higher social standing in relation to others (Bourdieu, 1977b).

<sup>2</sup> The names of schools have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

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