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# “A Hidden Part of Me”: Latino/a Students, Silencing, and the Epidermalization of Inferiority

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## **Abstract**

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) as analytical tools, this article examines the experiences of a seven Latino/a high school students at various points of engagement with the school-to-prison pipeline. Building on and extending Franz Fanon’s (1952) concept of the epidermalization of inferiority, the authors demonstrate the nuanced ways that institutional racism and other interrelated forms of oppression function to contribute to a sense of internalized oppression among Latino/a youth. We critically examine the ways in which dialogue and collaborative research undertaken in a supportive classroom atmosphere can help students move from feeling shame and guilt to having an enhanced critical understanding of their experiences with incarceration, including an analysis of their own involvement with the school-to-prison pipeline.

Having family members in prison, that’s like a hidden part of me, like something that hurts me real bad, and I think about it all the time, like all the time. In school, sometimes I stare out the window and wonder, what is happening to my father and cousins now? Those places [prisons] are like hell. I worry about that all the time in school. School don’t care about that. They just want you to pass tests so they look good. What about all the stuff we are dealing with? Do they care about that? Nope! (Carmen)

As we write this article, there are more than 2.2 million people incarcerated in the United States of America (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013a), the so-called beacon of democracy and freedom. The rate of incarceration in this country is by far the highest of any nation on the planet (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2013). Often lost in debates on crime and punishment is the disruption of families that occurs when loved ones serve prison time, which can have particularly deleterious effects on the children left behind. More than half of all men and approximately 70% of all women in prison have children under the age of 18 (National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, 2009). For teachers, this means that on any given day, there are more than two million school-aged children, the overwhelming majority of whom are African American or Latino/a, with a parent behind bars.

Within the multicultural education literature, significant attention has been given to affirming the unique cultural identities and life histories of students, especially those who, because of their race/ethnicity, class, language, and other target identities, have been and continue to be underserved by schools (see Banks & Banks, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). However, because of the social stigma associated with incarceration, the experiences and needs of students who must attend school while feeling disconnected from a loved one as a result of incarceration often remain obscure. As Carmen notes in the opening quote, this “hidden part” of her identity is accompanied by a burden she carries with her to school, and her school, like the majority of schools in the United States, remains unaware and in her estimation, uninterested and un-invested in helping students work through these issues. Her comments and those of many of the students with whom we have worked motivated us to question our roles as educators, as well as the role of schooling, in perpetuating among minoritized<sup>1</sup> youth what seems to be a pattern of discipline and punishment that contributes to a negative image of Latinos/as as a group.

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) as analytical tools, this article examines the experiences of seven Latino/a high school students at various points of engagement with the school-to-prison pipeline. Each student participant has a parent or sibling who has been incarcerated or who is currently serving time, and several have been targeted for incarceration themselves. Consistent with the goal of CRT and LatCrit to center the experiential knowledge of communities of color, we highlight the youth participants’ perspectives to answer the following research questions: (a) How do Latino/a youth make meaning of the incarceration of their loved ones as well as others in their community? (b) What roles, if any, do schools play in shaping and responding to these perspectives on incarceration?

With the dual goals of locating Latino/a youths’ perspectives within a larger sociopolitical context of Latino/a education and engaging educators, researchers, and policymakers in a dialogue on how to serve more effectively students whose families have been fractured by incarceration, we briefly explore the research literature on the school-to-prison pipeline. Next, we offer an overview of Critical Race Theory and Latino/a Critical Race Theory and their relevance to this line of inquiry, and describe the methods of the study. We then review the major findings of the research project, which include the systematic silencing (Irizarry, 2011a) of young people who are dealing with family disruption as a result of incarceration. Building on and extending Franz Fanon’s (1952) concept of the “epidermalization of inferiority” (p. 45), we demonstrate the nuanced ways that institutional racism and other interrelated forms of oppression function to contribute to a sense of internalized oppression among Latino/a youth. We critically examine the ways in which dialogue and collaborative research undertaken in a supportive classroom atmosphere can help students to move from having feelings of shame and guilt to having an enhanced critical understanding of their experiences with incarceration, including an analysis of their own involvement with the school-to-prison pipeline. The article concludes with a discussion of the broader implications of these perspectives for educators, particularly for those who work with minoritized youth.

### **A Closer Look at the Intersections Between Schools and Prisons**

Schools that serve large percentages of students of color and students from lower socioeconomic strata (two demographic characteristics that are often interrelated), are typically plagued by disparities in funding (Kozol, 1992, 2005; Lipman, 2011; Vaught, 2009), have a

higher volume of uncertified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010), and higher teacher attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Jacob, 2007) than schools in middle and upper class, predominantly white communities. The quality of teaching often varies greatly within and across schools, with many teachers mandated to adopt scripted curricula and employ “test prep pedagogies” (Rodriguez, 2011) that focus on skill-and-drill learning rather than a more comprehensive and robust education that prepares students to pursue higher education and reach their personal and professional goals. Additionally, in many schools serving minoritized students, there is an emphasis on surveillance and discipline, particularly targeting students of color, that results in a loss of instructional time (Brockenbrough, 2014; Brown, 2007; Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2003). The heightened focus on control and discipline can outweigh the educational and personal needs of students, often resulting in the alienation of targeted youth from school (Noguera, 2008). Students are not immune to messages of implied criminality. Not surprisingly, the dropout/pushout rates for students of color are astronomically high, as students connect their school experiences with their cumulative interactions with school officials, security guards, local police, and the penal system.

Racialized patterns in school discipline, narrow pedagogical approaches, high-stakes assessments, and other school policies and practices combine to establish an “expectation of incarceration” (Meiners, 2007) for a growing number of youth. Not coincidentally, the demographics of the prison population correlate to the masses of students who have been poorly served by schools, with almost three-quarters of all inmates identified as African American or Latino/a (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). Approximately 60% of federal inmates and 75% of state prison inmates have not completed high school (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013b). Furthermore, despite the obvious need for increased educational opportunities, General Equivalency Diploma (GED) programs in many penal institutions have diminished in recent years. Even those incarcerated individuals that have successfully completed high school or achieved an equivalency diploma are now impeded from pursuing higher education, since the passage of legislation in 1994 disqualifies people convicted of felonies from eligibility for Pell grants, thus ensuring that the majority of men and women serving time will remain undereducated and essentially cut off from future employment opportunities. In many states, conviction and incarceration rates have created a new class of citizenship status, reflected in the termination of voting rights ostensibly guaranteed by the Constitution (Mauer & King, 2014). The disproportionately racialized disparities in incarceration rates suggest that more and more people of color will become disenfranchised, losing their ability to participate in the democratic process. With the demographic imperative fast approaching where people of color become the numeric majority in the United States, due largely to the rapid and consistent growth of Latino/a populations, perhaps this is not an unintended consequence.<sup>2</sup>

The research literature as well as the dominant popular discourse regarding the racialized dynamics of incarceration have largely focused on the African American community, and rightly so, given that African Americans currently account for the largest single group of incarcerated people. However, as the country and its penal institutions become “brownier” with each passing year, more attention should be given to the overrepresentation of Latinos/as behind bars. In 2000, Latinos/as accounted for 16% of all inmates in federal, state, and local prisons; by 2008, that number shot to 20%. Over that eight-year period, the Latino/a population in the US rose only two percentage points, from 11% to 13% (Lopez & Livingston, 2009). On average, Latinos/as are incarcerated at more than twice the rate of non-Latino/a Whites. Steadily increasing incarceration rates among Latinos/as suggest that the fracturing of families will continue to impact Latino/a youth. The implications for schools, we argue, warrant closer scrutiny from educators and researchers alike.

## Methods

### *Setting and Participants*

Data were collected as part of a two-year ethnographic study in a high school in the Northeastern United States (see Irizarry, 2011b). In an effort to create a research project that aimed to be mutually enriching for Latino/a high school students and university-based researchers, one of the authors (Jason Irizarry) organized and taught a class at a local high school. The class was embedded in a larger multigenerational research collaborative known as Project FUERTE (Future Urban Educators conducting Research to transform Teacher Education). In Project FUERTE, Irizarry led high school student researchers and a cadre of university graduate students to critically examine the educational experiences and outcomes for Latino/a youth. This Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project led to the development of empirically-based recommendations for improving the preparation of teachers (both pre-service and in-service) to work more effectively with this community.

The cohort of youth participants consisted of seven students from Rana High School (or RHS, a pseudonym), which served approximately 1,000 students, approximately half of which identified as Latino/a. All of the students in this study were Latino/a, five self-identifying as Puerto Rican and two as Mexican-American. Six of the seven students were juniors at RHS at the outset of the project, and one was a senior. They varied in age from 15 to 18. Three of the students had (im)migrated<sup>3</sup> to the mainland United States, two coming with their families from Mexico as young children and one moving from Puerto Rico as a 14-year-old. All of the other participants had completed all of their formal education up to that point in Rana City schools.

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

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data for this article stem from a larger ethnographic study of Latino/a students engaged in participatory action research that critically examined educational opportunities and outcomes for Latino/a youth in urban schools. All of the participants were enrolled in a class, Action Research and Social Change, which was offered at their high school by Irizarry and spanned two academic years. During one class session, the students began to speak about a schoolmate who had recently been suspended. One student commented that their suspended classmate would “soon wind up in jail.” This comment set off an emotion-filled conversation where the participants began to list all of their schoolmates that had already been arrested and were involved in the court system. As the list of names increased, students laughed nervously, seemingly trying to mask their alarm with humor. Alberto, in a somber voice that

shattered the laughter, disclosed that his brother was recently released from jail. One by one, each student began to list members of their families that had been incarcerated. At that point, it was decided that the next class would be dedicated to examining the overrepresentation of Latinos/as in prisons, and introducing the notion of the school-to-prison pipeline.

After this emotionally intense classroom discussion, Irizarry returned to his office and called John Raible, the second author, to share the events of that day because of our shared interest and previous collaborations on this topic (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Together we developed a set of questions for the subsequent class discussion, which spanned three class periods and was to re-emerge at various points over the next year and a half. Extensive field notes were developed after each class session. In addition, each student was formally interviewed six times over the two-year period, using a standard format for in-depth phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006). Every interview was transcribed, and along with field notes and transcripts, students' writing on the topic served as the primary data. We employed grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) to cull themes that emerged from the collected data, with a special emphasis on the class discussions and writings that focused on incarceration.

Instead of operating as casual observers who examined the students' experiences from a safe distance as supposedly objective researchers, we disclosed to the students our own stories of family disruption as a result of incarceration and the burden that it presented for us at different points in our lives. This shared experience of personal disclosure contributed to the development of a safe, non-judgmental space where students felt empowered to narrate their stories and interrogate the feelings the narratives provoked. It also allowed us, as researchers, to think more critically about our own roles, and the potential role of educators, in more effectively supporting youth who are simultaneously navigating school and the far-reaching grasp of the prison-industrial complex.

### ***Theoretical Framework: Latinos/as and Critical Race Theory***

As we listened to students naming racism as an influential factor that affects their lives and schooling, it became clear to us that we needed an analytical framework that spoke directly to race and racism while allowing for consideration of other interlocking systems of oppression, including sexism, heterosexism, linguisticism, ageism, and classism. Because of the ways we have observed and interacted with various groups of Latino/a high school students (at Rana High School and elsewhere) as they were being racialized both in and out of school, we chose to draw theoretically on LatCrit. As multicultural educators, our decision to adopt LatCrit as an analytic tool was heavily influenced by the analysis of Christine Sleeter and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2004), who argue that multicultural education could be sharpened in three significant ways by drawing on a more critical theory of race. First, they maintain that a focus on race and racism furthers the anti-racist goals of critical multiculturalism, while forwarding an analysis of the intersections of racism with other forms of domination. They argue further that CRT challenges hegemonic epistemologies and ideologies, such as notions of meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality; and they point out the benefits of counter-storytelling as a pedagogical practice and as a tool that could be useful in educational research (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004).

We understand LatCrit as growing out of CRT to address issues that were often excluded from examination in CRT. LatCrit extends the scope of CRT to address how variables other than race (including gender, class, immigration status, language, accent, ethnicity, and culture) also shape the experiences of racialized peoples (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006). LatCrit challenges the standard Black/White<sup>4</sup> binary that tends to limit considerations of race and racism to the power relations between African Americans and European Americans, thereby creating discursive space for Latinos/as, who can be of any race, as well as for individuals who may identify as multiracial or multiethnic. Such an expansion is crucial to understanding the complexity of the context facing Latino/a youth in schools today, while taking into account intersections with culture and ethnicity.

CRT itself emerged primarily within critical legal scholarship as lawyers, activists, and scholars sought to address the comprehensive persistence of racism within the legal system and society at large (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Drawing from critical legal studies, CRT explicitly focuses on the roles of race and racism in shaping the experiences of people of color (Bell, 1980). The centrality of race within CRT makes it a particularly appropriate lens to apply to this study of Latino/a students, given the influence of racialization in the history of Anglo subordination of “Brown” peoples.

Pushing CRT toward a more specific focus on Latino/a contexts, Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) forwarded five themes that underpin a LatCrit framework in education. These include: (a) the centrality of race and racism and intersectionality with other forms of subordination; (b) the challenge to dominant ideology; (c) the commitment to social justice; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective. These five tenets shaped all aspects of our study from data collection through analysis.

Consistent with a CRT and Lat/Crit framework, we foregrounded the perspectives of the students in order to document the insider knowledge they have gained through their personal experiences. Moreover, the use of LatCrit speaks to the racialized aspects of schooling for Latino/a youth, including a history of segregation, as well as the severe over-representation of people of color caught up in the prison-industrial complex.

## Findings and Discussion

Three main findings emerged, all related to the ways the student participants viewed themselves as a result of having an incarcerated family member and their personal experiences with the prison industrial complex. The findings highlight the powerful and extensive impact of the intersections of multiple forms of racialized oppression on young people who are navigating school while separated from a loved one who is incarcerated, underscoring how students internalize negative perceptions about themselves and the racial/ethnic groups with which they identify. Discussed in more detail in what follows, the data suggest that students conflate race and criminality, believing racial and ethnic identities to be a predisposition for “being bad,” breaking the law, and serving time. Because of the social stigma of incarceration and students’ perceptions of school personnel as uncaring, students in the study often bore this burden in silence, unable or unwilling to share their experiences and solicit the social support they might need to deal with the psychological trauma that can accompany the incarceration of loved ones. Finally, the findings demonstrate how creating a supportive classroom environment for students, that honors and affirms the full complexity of their identi-

ties and acknowledges the sociopolitical contexts in which students are embedded, has the potential to help students move from internalized oppression and self-defeating resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), where students begin to diminish their own self-worth and lose any sense of agency over their futures, to an increasing sense of empowerment and critical consciousness.

### ***Conflating Race and Criminality***

Adolescence is a time where young people are developing a refined sense of self; racial and ethnic identity development is a significant part of this process (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001; French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006; Phinney, 1993). Students in the study were prone to internalizing hegemonic ideologies about criminality, frequently placing blame on individual community members who land in jail, and viewing these individuals as moral failures. Comments from participants such as Alberto and Ramiro offered during one of our class sessions demonstrates the internalization of a negative group image:

Irizarry: So why do you think so many Latinos are incarcerated?

Alberto: Because we think we are all that and we act up a lot. . .

Ramiro: That's true, Mister. We are bad. Just look at who is in In-School Suspension and who always be in trouble with teachers. Look at who is in the news all the time wildin' out doing crazy stuff. Look who is out there [pointing out the classroom window] selling drugs.

Alberto: When you do bad things, you gonna get caught and go to jail, and we do a lot of bad things . . . more bad things than the White people.

A limited understanding of criminality is understandable, given that the dominant narrative argues simplistically that bad people do bad things and therefore have to pay the price. While this dominant narrative may have merit in the case of some incarcerated individuals, it is largely insufficient to explain the glaring racial disparities in rates of arrests, prosecution, sentencing, and incarceration. Without a more critical analysis that considers the larger sociopolitical contexts in which the processes of crime and punishment occur, and with people of color being 300% over-represented among those incarcerated or under some form of state control, it is easy to see why students might conflate race with criminality. Not surprisingly, brown skin equaled criminal behavior in the minds of many participants. Young people were not oblivious to this racialized narrative, perpetuated throughout the popular media, which became reified through their own experiences with law enforcement and their connection to other individuals who have been incarcerated. Subsequently, students tended to internalize the belief that criminality is an expected outcome or precondition ascribed to their racial/ethnic identities.

With very little attention given to larger institutional forces such as schools, racial and economic isolation, and histories of racialized oppression, students saw their criminality and serving time as predetermined fates. Taína, a 16 year old who was on probation at the time of the interview from which these comments were taken, said:

So many of us are locked up, on probation . . . parole. That is what is out there waiting for us, when you think about it. My father was locked up; my uncles been locked up. So many people I know been locked up. Mostly everything I see tells me that is what is out there for us. The teachers here even tell us [Latinos] we ain't shit and are going to be locked up soon. They're probably right, but this is me. I ain't no blanquita [White girl]. Latinos, we are not like los blancos.

As evidenced in the quotes above, in this context White and good became synonymous, and the students saw themselves and other people of color as deviating from this "norm." Criminality among people of color became the dominant narrative for students, foreshadowing what they believed was a predetermined fate. Schooling, according to the students' experiences, offered few counter-narratives—perspectives that challenge and have the potential to disrupt the problematic perceptions of people of color, replacing them with a more accurate, more positive, and more robust depiction of minoritized communities. The participants in this study, like most students of color across the country, attended a segregated school, didn't see people of color widely represented in the teaching force or in other prominent jobs in their communities, and didn't have access to a rigorous curriculum that would prepare them for a more optimistic personal trajectory. There is a pervasive stereotype that students of color, and Latino students more specifically, are apathetic about education; some have even suggested this to be a cultural trait (see Irizarry, 2011b). Apathy and lack of effort, as opposed to access to quality educational opportunities, are often cited as the cause for race and class-based disparities in educational outcomes. Conversely, the participants in the study spoke of having high aspirations and levels of engagement with schools, particularly early in their lives. These perceptions shifted over time, resulting in some of the pessimistic views expressed here. In fact, students claimed that the longer they went to school, and as they grew in age and experience, they started to see what was, in their words, "really out there" for them. Being bombarded with negative depictions of people of color, with few opportunities outside of their homes to engage with counter-narratives, led the participants to often conflate identification with a minoritized racial group and criminality.

### ***Silencing***

In part because of the social stigma associated with having a family member in prison, students felt forced to suppress significant aspects of their family lives. While the psychological weight of being embedded in a system that has taken their loved ones away, alienated them from family, and that targets students (and people like them) for incarceration is frequently problematic, many students reported they felt constrained from talking about it.

Students' reticence about sharing their personal stories with their teachers, counselors, and/or administrators may stem from their not feeling cared for in these spaces. Some students expressed a fear that school agents might use this sensitive information to further stereotype them and limit their opportunities because of perceived pathologies that result in a gross over-representation of people of color in prison. Additionally, some students reported that they received messages from home that explicitly discouraged them from talking openly about incarcerated relatives.

When students internalize perceptions of their incarcerated family members merely as a reflection of individual failings, with no systemic analysis of the sociopolitical factors, including institutional racism and classism, that contribute to high incarceration rates, they under-

standably may be reluctant to discuss this issue in public and outside of the family circle. In a journal entry composed as part of a class assignment, Carmen expressed the silencing power associated with the internalization of such negative perceptions:

For me, it was difficult because I always saw my family members being incarcerated as a weakness. It is embarrassing to say, "Yeah my family members are incarcerated" and seem ok with it. It's hard to deal with because, you know, there's always people who judge you as an individual just because of your family member's mistake.

Also relating the suppression of voice to the social stigma associated with incarceration, Taína commented during a class discussion:

Both my parents were locked up. I have had mad people in my family locked up. What does that say about me? It's not good, you know. So what can I say? There is nothing to say; that is just how it is.

Carmen's and Taína's comments tap into a popular narrative that depicts all individuals who come into contact with the prison-industrial complex as deviant, pathological, and in need of being separated from society. While this description might fit a small percentage of incarcerated individuals, it is important to note that the majority of people in prison are serving time for nonviolent, arguably victimless drug-related offenses. The disproportionate surveillance, targeting, and incarceration of parents (and other family members) of color results in children being left behind, dealing with the psychological trauma that arises from separation and reinforces the internalization of negative perceptions associated with criminality and incarceration.

In addition to the self-imposed silencing power that emanates from the social stigma and lack of critical consciousness around how multiple forms of systemic oppression shape individual choice sets, students' voices were sometimes stifled as a result of their interactions with teachers, according to the participants. Students noted that most teachers are woefully unfamiliar with the sociocultural realities of students' lives, including their constant struggles under the cloud of the prison-industrial complex that hangs over their lives. The participants clearly indicted teachers and other school agents for their apparent lack of caring. Some depicted their teachers as not interested or invested in their lives beyond the confines of the school day. In a journal entry, Alberto described why he never alerted anyone in school when he was struggling to deal with his brother's incarceration:

I never got to talk about my brother's story in school because no teacher really cares about their Latino students. They also start talking about you, and they say that just because someone in your family went to jail you're not going to go nowhere in life. That's not true because you can be the one that changes things and you are responsible for your own actions.

Along those same lines, Natasha's contribution to a class discussion sheds light on students' pessimistic perceptions of school personnel and how these perceptions can influence decisions to share (or not share) sensitive information and, perhaps more importantly, to seek support in dealing with the emotional strain of losing a family member to incarceration:

Teachers and counselors don't want to know about us. Most of what they know about us is wrong. They say all the time that our parents don't care about education. That's wrong. They think all we care about is money and stuff, like we don't want to be anything in life. That's wrong. So that's why I don't say anything. For real, they really don't want to know about me, so I don't tell them nothing about that.

The students' reluctance to discuss the incarceration of their loved ones, for fear that they would reify racialized stereotypes that already plague the group with which they most closely identify, may be understood as a variation of "colormuteness," a concept forwarded by Mica Pollock (2004) to describe the impact of White teachers' fear and reluctance to talk about issues of race. Pollock's work is particularly useful for understanding the impact of racialization on classroom discourse, that is, over what can and cannot be uttered at school. Taína extended her analysis beyond individual teachers who may not be invested in students in ways that would provide much needed support for dealing with the trauma of the fracturing of family to include a critique of the school culture and climate. Taína observed:

This school is not for the Latinos. It is for the Whites. Everything is about the Whites. The only time you hear about Latinos is when we do something bad. Teachers never see the good, and if they do, it never replaces all the bad. It is different for the White kids. I don't want to give them more bad to use against us, and getting locked up is bad, so I don't say anything.

### ***Developing Critical Consciousness***

As noted above, the silencing power of schools and other social institutions contributes to the internalization of dominant perceptions of crime and punishment. As a result, students with incarcerated family members often feel forced to shoulder the burden of family disruption alone. As they tried to navigate school, participants reported being fraught with shame and guilt, and unable to reach out to teachers or school support staff. When opportunities arose in class for students to share their stories with each other, they expressed appreciation for the forum and how they took comfort in the fact that they were not the only ones dealing with family disruption. For instance, Tamara shared, "It felt good to know that I am not the only person dealing with this stuff. We are all in the same situation, so I guess that helps to talk about this with people dealing with the same thing."

Through dialogue with each other and their Puerto Rican teacher, the student participants enhanced their understanding of the institutional forces that frequently result in the disproportionate incarceration of people of color. For example, during one classroom conversation, Alberto noted the connection between disparities in educational opportunities and high rates of incarceration:

I always knew that so many people in my family and in my neighborhood get locked up. I never really knew why. When all of us have family members in jail, that tells you something. The system isn't fair. It starts with education. Look at the type of education they give us, put us in the lowest classes and don't help us to get to college. What kind of job is out there for me? We have to survive out there, but we don't have a lot of choices. White kids at [a suburban school in a wealthier community] don't have to deal with all this.

Similarly, Ramiro, who missed three weeks of class to serve time at a youth work camp resulting from an assault conviction, shared the following during a class discussion:

We get treated like criminals in school, so what do they want us to be? They [teachers and other school agents] always be staring at you, yelling in your face, telling you what to wear and all that. They care more about the rules and keeping you in check than teaching you.

Ramiro's comments underscored the culpability of the school environment that often felt prison-like to many of the students. No longer solely blaming themselves or alleged cultural traits for the over-representation of Latinos/as in prison, the youth began to implicate their schools and the inferior quality of education offered as contributing to their chances for being locked up, as evidenced in the comments from Ramiro and Alberto. Students began to see school as a site of resistance, a place where they could join with other students (and a few committed ally teachers) who shared their experiences and ethnic/racial backgrounds. They realized that in solidarity together, they could identify and begin to disrupt the hegemonic influence of negative stereotyping and the ideological grip of the prison-industrial complex. Prior to the classroom conversation, the students reported feeling isolated and alone, well aware of the racialized patterns of punishment and incarceration, but simultaneously unaware that many of their friends and classmates were dealing with the same issue in their own families. Connecting the dots, Carmen shared:

If this was just happening to one or two people, that is one thing. When it is all of us, including your father, your brother, your brother [pointing at the teacher and various classmates] it makes you think. This is a system thing, not just an individual thing. It isn't just that my father did a bad thing and went to jail. There is a system working against him—and against all of us, to tell you the truth.

After spending time conducting research into the issue, the students shifted their focus from internalized oppression to developing a more critical consciousness. That is not to say that this was a quick, easy, or permanent shift. Students moved back and forth, articulating personal shame and guilt as well as offering sharp critiques of institutional oppression, sometimes contradicting themselves within the same conversation. Nevertheless, new perspectives unfolded, whereby students began to articulate an understanding of larger systems and social forces at play that stimulate an exodus of Latinos/as from school and into prisons. Without stripping individuals of personal agency, they spoke to the intersections of personal choice and the impact of structural forms of oppression in shaping those choices:

Yeah, like we all want to go to college but half of us [Latinos/as] don't graduate from high school. Like we talked about, that isn't only our problem. What are schools doing for us? How are they teaching us? Without education what are your choices. If you gotta feed your kid, what are you gonna do? [Working at]McDonalds ain't gonna get it done. You gotta work hard but you also need chances. School don't always give you those chances. (Jasmine)

Having students talk about this issue together provided a discursive space not offered in other areas of the school. Furthermore, it represented a chance for students to speak back against racism, and other forms of structural oppression, including classism, linguisticism, sexism, and nativism, as they are manifested in schools and society at large. Providing students with safe spaces such as this follows Patricia Gándara's (2008) model for "cocooning:"

Sometimes the most effective antiracist strategy for helping students of color to navigate high school and move on to college is to give them opportunities to be "cocooned" for some period of time in contexts that allow them to analyze in a safe environment what it means to be a racial-ethnic group member in and out of school and to draw inspiration and support from those who have traveled the same road before them. (Gándara, p. 48)

Cocooning in this manner—specifically, in a class taught by a teacher who shared with the

students not only a Latino identity, but also family experiences with incarceration—offered a methodology through which the Latino/a youth participants could gather strength from each other. In the process of conversation and research, youth generated a more critical analysis of highly politicized social processes that directly influence their educational chances.

### Updating the Epidermalization of Inferiority

That people of color, particularly the urban poor, are disproportionately targeted for surveillance and incarceration is hardly breaking news. This phenomenon is evidenced in nationwide patterns of biased arrest and sentencing records that result in a gross overrepresentation of people of color in the nation's jails and prisons. Our study demonstrates that students, while aware of the phenomenon that disrupts their families and neighborhoods, may benefit from explicit teaching to develop a discourse of critique through an analysis rooted in social justice that articulates the intricacies of the prison-industrial complex and its influence over communities of color.

Fanon's (1952) use of the construct of "epidermalization," referencing the metaphorical absorption of racial inferiority through the skin and into the mind, resulting in an internalized oppression, emerged from his analysis of the devastating psychological impact of the European colonization of his homeland, Martinique, on the identities of his colonized Black compatriots. Offered almost 60 years ago, the notion of epidermalization still provides a useful heuristic for understanding the internalization of self-loathing and pathological views of people of color articulated by students in the study. Fanon (1952) argued that under a racist colonial system, the colonized are positioned as inadequate while the cultural identities of the colonizer are exalted, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and inferiority among the oppressed. There are significant similarities between Fanon's analysis of colonized peoples of African descent in Martinique during the middle of the twentieth century and the experiences of Latino/a youth navigating life and learning as students in the twenty-first century. Most notable is the juxtaposition of "bad" Latinos/as with "good" White people.

Schools re-inscribe this racial hierarchy in multiple ways, some subtle, others more overt. Achievement gap discourses that continually reference the disparities in test scores and academic outcomes between students of color and White students, for example, tend to normalize the performance of White students, holding it up as the gold standard. On a whole, students of color continue to be reminded that they do not measure up. Often absent in conversations around the so-called achievement gap is any analysis of the unequal distribution of educational opportunities across school settings. The students in this study, attending school in one of the lowest performing districts in the state, are acutely aware of how they are positioned and the racialized implications of such positioning. A racial hierarchy that privileges the experiences, talents, and knowledge bases of Whites also is evident in the curriculum that students in the study experienced, which was largely Eurocentric and described as culturally unresponsive by the students. The fact that there were no teachers or administrators of color on staff also subtly suggested that Latinos were inferior to Whites. Without a systematic analysis of race, class, and other forms of oppression, students can and, in this case, did develop negative perceptions about their ethnic group.

Because their voices are often rendered silent and because of society's general lack of comfort with talking about race and racism, the challenges facing Latino/a students, and specifically their engagement with the prison industrial complex, remain obscure and at times invisible to educators. As teachers and researchers, we have found that an unwillingness to

address issues of race and the tendency to silence the voices of students regarding race and racial discrimination reinforces and legitimates Whiteness within schools (Castagno, 2008; Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014; Pollock, 2004). Although rarely named in the process of public schooling, the students in the study struggled with the pervasiveness of Whiteness and the accompanying system of race-based privilege embedded in their schooling experiences. They constructed their identities in contrast to what is held up to them as the norm, or standard. For us, it makes sense for schools that serve large populations of youth of color to actively work with students to meaningfully address this pressing national issue. Our work with minoritized youth has documented, how through a critical examination of the school-to-prison pipeline offered through “cocooning” in a supportive, culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) classroom environment, students may become empowered to move from individualized shame around having a loved one incarcerated to a more critical understanding. Educators who teach minoritized urban youth, in particular, have an obligation to address the sociopolitical factors that lead so many students away from school and toward the prison-industrial complex. As we educate today’s urban youth, we must work to ensure that the school experiences we provide do more than simply prepare them for a future behind bars.

Although police officers, security guards, and administrators normally assume primary responsibility for managing and enforcing school discipline, it is teachers who frequently make the first referral in the discipline process and exert tremendous influence in determining which students receive disciplinary treatment and why (Noguera, 2008). Rather than feed into the “epidermalization of inferiority” (Fanon, 1952, p. 45) and shame experienced by many students, caring teachers can educate themselves about the exigencies of the school-to-prison pipeline, and their role in upholding it. Furthermore, teachers can collaborate with students to create safe spaces within schools where the highly personal can combine with the keenly political to offer school experiences that are much more relevant to the lived realities with which numerous young people grapple. As members of the largest minoritized group in the demographically changing United States, Latino/a youth currently face life challenges in childhood and adolescence that often portend a predetermined, pessimistic fate. Teachers can commit to disrupting this expectation of incarceration (Meiners, 2007) by working to ensure much more optimistic schooling outcomes, not just for Latino/a youth, but for all our students.

## Notes

1. By way of definition, we use the term “minoritized” to suggest that while black and Latino/a students may share status as members of historical numeric minority groups, in many cases they constitute the majority of the student body within the schools they attend. Research has documented that numerous urban school districts are more segregated now than during the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement, leaving many youngsters in our nation’s cities to attend predominately Latino/a and black schools. In more and more communities, students of color can hardly be said to constitute minorities when their community populations are overwhelmingly Black and Brown. Minoritized captures (better than “minority”) the ongoing political and social status that racializes Black and Brown individuals in predictable, frequently stereotyped, ways.
2. See Raible and Irizarry (in press) for a discussion of the ideology of containment in the education of Brown youth.
3. The parentheses in (im)migration are employed to signal the diverse immigration experiences among individuals and communities who journey to the United States, specifically underscoring potential differences in citizenship status. For example, Puerto Ricans born on the island of Puerto Rico, a colonial possession of the United States for over a century, are US citizens by birth. Subsequently, their move from the island to the mainland can be viewed as “migration” rather than “immigration.” However, Spanish is the dominant language on the island and when Puerto Ricans, who are free to travel throughout the United States without re-

striction, migrate to the US, their experiences share many similarities with those of other immigrants from Latin America, especially in their encounters with xenophobia, racism, and linguicism. Therefore, we use the parentheses to call attention to the complexities of (im)migration that are often overlooked.

4. The choice to capitalize racial categories is a difficult one fraught with political implications. In this article, we endeavor to talk about racism and the racialization of minoritized groups while simultaneously acknowledging that race is a social construct. That is, we would like to unpack and destabilize race without diminishing the impact of racism. However, at a time when Black men and other racialized minorities are being killed because of their racial identities, we choose to capitalize race to capture the power embedded in particular labels.

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