Marcos Pizarro & Andrew Christian

The challenge facing teachers in urban schools today, particularly those serving disenfranchised students of color, is to clearly define the goals of the job and engage in meaningful daily practice in the midst of what often feels like chaos. What should our focus be? Grades, Test Scores, Reaching Content Benchmarks, Classroom Management and Meeting Behavioral Standards, Skill Development, Mentoring Students, Surviving as a Teacher? Teachers need to be precise about our goals so that those goals are not drowned out by the endless and shifting “reforms” that are intended to define our goals for us.

Our experience working with Latina/o students in urban high schools has proven that our foundation, our most essential goal, has to be providing them the space and skills to deconstruct their past and on-going school experiences and how those experiences define their racial and academic identities: their understanding of who they are, who they are “supposed” to be and who they can become. With this foundation, students can begin to develop the tools to be engaged learners, which has positive effects on every aspect of their school lives, from their relationships with peers and instructors, to their attendance, test scores, grades, and skill development, all making the job of the teacher easier, more dynamic, and fulfilling, particularly in communities where students and schools face the most severe challenges.

The force of racial ideologies at work in shaping the orientations and approaches of the teachers of Latina/o students have a powerful effect on teachers’ daily classroom practices (Pizarro, 2014a, 2014c, Valenzuela, 1999, Yosso 2006). The subtle manifestations of these ideologies also have a dramatic impact on the cumulative k-12 lives of Latina/o students (Yosso, 2006). For most students, the daily practices are not seen or understood as overwhelming or shocking. A teacher doesn’t call on a student, or talks to a student as if she is not as smart as other students, or is quick to reprimand a student. That experience might not stand out to the student; she might just understand that this is what this teacher does or what school is like. Over time, however, after a year in this classroom and possibly after a few years in classes where these are common practices, the student begins to believe in her own deficiency. Teachers are the experts. They know who can be successful and who cannot. The cumulative effect of these minor manifestations of

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1 Pizarro is a Chicana/o Studies college professor and researcher and Christian is a high school English teacher. We came together to create and implement a Latina/o Literature course at the high school, teaching three sections of the class in 2012-13. In the fall, Pizarro came in every other week to share a key lesson that covered content essential to the class. In the spring, Pizarro was in the class four days a week as a co-teacher. This chapter was initially conceived as part of Pizarro’s research, but later became a co-constructed analysis of the class, with Christian also adding a section on dealing with the complexities of this work as part of daily high school teaching.
racialized ideologies that explain student ability and possibility is that these students learn their destiny for school failure. They often do not and cannot see themselves as high school graduates, let alone college students or graduates. When these students arrive in our high school classes, we cannot ignore their histories. Instead, we must help them develop the skills to "make sense" of what has already happened to them (Camangian, 2011). If we do not, then everything they do in our classrooms is filtered through their established understanding of who they are as students and the deficiencies that they have learned they are so unlikely to overcome.

Latina/o students who have been negatively racialized over the course of their school experiences need teachers who can begin to help them deconstruct these educational histories. This is challenging work and it can call into question so much of our daily practices in schools, putting us and our colleagues in a spotlight that may make us all uncomfortable. Yet, it may be the only way to truly center Latina/o students’ as learners and thinkers in the classroom, something many have never experienced in their school lives. It is the means by which they can take back control of their learning and begin to understand their strengths and abilities.

As Pizarro has explained in previous research (Pizarro 2014a, b, c), the power of racial ideology in contemporary schooling has several damaging effects on so many Latina/o students. First of all, the reinterpretations of historical deficit models used to explain Latina/o student failure have resulted in the Normalization of Latina/o Student Failure, whereby the common expectation for Latina/o students is school failure (below average test scores, dropping out, or just barely passing [often due to social promotion]). This normalization translates into almost universally-accepted low expectations for these students that shape daily school practices and limit the opportunities for Latina/o students to develop higher order skills. Simultaneously, the systemic failure of Latina/o students is not seen as such, but instead is Individualized so that students learn to blame themselves as individuals for their failure, even when the vast majority of students in a given classroom or school may be failing (removing the need, in most people’s minds, for any analysis of the issues being described in this article). These undiscussed forces combine to create the Internalization of Racism, whereby Latina/o students learn to associate their race and ethnicity with their individual school failure and see it as inevitable. With all these forces at work, and not ever discussed, it is typically only a very lucky few who find success in the schools that so many Latinas/os in disenfranchised communities attend. Because of this, any teacher who hopes to achieve success in these communities, has to do much more than simply care or want success or commit to Common Core Standards or develop effective classroom management.

Teachers, with their Latina/o students, need to co-create classroom communities dedicated to processing the past experiences that have limited and even damaged Latina/o students, as a foundation for centering them as students and helping them develop the skills and the confidence to succeed by melding their
academic and racial identities in meaningful ways. This requires three inter-woven cornerstones of the Latina/o Success Classroom: student-centered curriculum and pedagogy, and social justice ethics. The model that is explained in the subsequent pages is based on work addressing these issues with college students, which was then modified for the high school classroom and implemented over the last two years in an 11th grade English class.

Seeing School Life through the Eyes of Latina/o Students

In most schools, people of color have been erased from the core curriculum (Duncan-Andrade, 2005; Huber, Johnson & Kohli, 2006). Students of color rarely get the opportunity to see themselves as historical or even contemporary agents in the content of their courses. As multicultural education has been emphasized and become politically necessary, they do see themselves on occasion in the curriculum, but they learn that they are the footnotes in history. They know, as their experiences are “celebrated” in a given week or month—often acknowledging only what seems to be an exceptional individual, distant time period, or annual cultural celebration—that they are an addendum to what matters in school. They even get the sense that this inclusion is tokenism and done to make them feel they cannot say they have been excluded. Given how what they do learn about themselves in school

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2 We understand that the vision of teaching highlighted in this article requires much more work than many teachers might have anticipated when they first decided on the profession. We acknowledge that this may be more than we should have to do as teachers, but we also know that this is exactly what we must do if we are teaching Latina/o students in disenfranchised communities. Furthermore, the task of engaging Latina/o students is much more complex than most achievement gap reform efforts ever acknowledge, as it requires confronting the damage done to these students, often from their earliest years in school.

3 There is a body of research that exists that highlights the power of comprehensive school-wide approaches to engaging disenfranchised students (Garcia, Woodley, Flores, & Chu, 2013; McKillip, Godfrey, & Rawls, 2012). That work is helpful to school leaders. This article is more focused on meeting the needs of teachers who are in schools that may not have that shared vision, the majority of schools attended by disenfranchised Latina/o students.

4 This brief overview is based on our research and work with students as they described their experiences in school from elementary through high school. This is background and not the focus of the article, so this section does not provide detailed student accounts of their experiences, but instead builds a collective analysis that reflects the common themes that the vast majority of students helped us to understand. Pizarro (2014a, 2014c) provides more depth on these student experiences.

5 This section references students of color because this analysis does not only apply to Latina/o students but to other ethnic groups who are and have been racialized in schools. This project focuses on our work with Latina/o students, the vast majority of students in the classes, but we have found that it applies to other students of color as well, so at times we reference those connections.
may contradict the lessons and histories they learn in their homes, they can often learn to feel that the content of their schooling is designed by and for other people. They are taught that they are not knowledge producers or historical agents. Instead, they learn that history has happened to them and that their place in history has changed little, if at all, over time. A student who Pizarro interviewed for a previous project (Pizarro, 2005) explained how he saw this when he reflected on his experiences with the curriculum.

I remember in eighth-grade US history, we were covering the war with Mexico, and I had this total feeling—I couldn’t tell you what we talked about that day. I couldn’t show you the book. I couldn’t say that’s the story we read. But I had this horrible feeling that I was supposed to stand up and apologize. Like that’s how the history was covered. I had this feeling like its time for [me] to stand up and say, “Sorry for making you take our land and having this war with us, wasting your time with us.” But that’s how I felt. So I always had this feeling (maybe it was before that or maybe it started then) that this education wasn’t for me, it wasn’t about me. Maybe I was included in it in like certain incidents, but it wasn’t for me and that’s why they [white students] got it and I didn’t. (Pizarro, 2005, p. 69)

In our work in the classroom, students continuously share these kinds of “feelings” that shape their self-perceptions and daily approaches to school.

The way in which their classes are taught reinforces the content messages students of color receive. They learn that their role in the school is to listen, read, and learn what they are told to absorb. Since the students are seen as deficient, the teacher is the center of learning. While teaching practice increasingly includes activities and group work, because of how these are integrated into daily classroom practice, they are seen as the mechanism for students to arrive at the knowledge the teacher has already predetermined that they lack. Furthermore, the dominance of testing as the ultimate demonstration of school success solidifies the understanding that the purpose of classroom instruction is to teach students how to reflect precise nuggets of knowledge in a circumscribed form. For so many students of color in school, they experience little if any classroom focus on higher-level critical thinking skills. It is still quite common for students of color to attend classes with little to no instruction. Although it might seem contradictory that class time has been turned over entirely to the students while teachers are still centered in learning, this approach to teaching reinforces the teacher as knowledge keeper. The message students of color often receive in these classrooms is that they are so limited in their abilities that it isn’t worth the teacher’s time to actually try to teach them something substantive. Instead, they learn that before the teacher can take on “real” learning with them, they have to get past the below-basic level and learn material that a worksheet is teaching them, which in itself is likely beyond their ability, according to the instructors engaging in these approaches to “teaching.” Like the curriculum, standard classroom pedagogy decenders students of colors in the learning process and sends a clear message that they are deficient and not expected to be true thinkers.

Finally, the approach to classroom management in so many schools attended by students of color reinforces the messages students learn from standard
which will be discussed in detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.

6 reflected their attention to each of the three critical facets of schooling that we knew to be essential for student engagement: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Social Justice Ethics.

Engaging Latina/o Students

In response to these realities, for the fall of 2012 we were tasked with the assignment of developing a class that would engage Latina/o students and replace standard 11th grade English. Since the school was beginning to implement Common Core, we were able to focus our work on the skill development deemed essential in Common Core and were not bound to the high school English canon. As we designed the class and then developed it over the course of the year, we gave attention to each of the three critical facets of schooling that we knew to be essential for student engagement: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Social Justice Ethics.

Curriculum

We began the year with the goal of introducing content to the students that reflected their life experiences and that explored those experiences substantively

6 This insight is based on our work with hundreds of students at a high school, which will be discussed in detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.
and holistically. Given the issues that we knew our students had faced in school (as explained in the preceding sections), we wanted this content to cover different facets of the Latina/o experience and give each of them the opportunity to see themselves and their families, friends and communities in the content of the course.

The students began by reading about Stereotype Threat (Steele, 2011), learning that the dominance of racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes in our society meant that when these stereotypes were brought into different contexts they had significant effects on students of color as seen in their confidence, test scores and GPAs. This was an important point of departure because it addressed issues the students had seen, experienced and felt, but often did not yet have the concepts or language to explain. This allowed the students to begin to integrate past experiences they had in the classroom that had bothered them but which they did not previously have the facility to unpack. They began to develop answers to the most pressing question that they had faced in school: Why do Latinas/os underperform in school? It was important that this work was based on valid scientific research as it gave the students the confidence that they were not just untested hypotheses, but rather well documented and proven facts. They began to understand the concepts and to access the language that would help them answer the looming questions about Latinas/os and school.

Angela Valenzuela’s Subtractive Schooling was a subsequent and crucial step in the curriculum. Valenzuela’s (1999) research documents the ways in which schools systematically subtract the culturally embedded strengths of Mexican descent students, leaving them vulnerable to academic failure. Including the stories and examples of Chicana/o high school students, Valenzuela’s work was meaningful to the students in our class because it reflected their own experiences and affirmed that someone understood and cared about those experiences, and, even more importantly, was striving to transform those realities. Our discussions of Valenzuela’s analysis of “educación,” for example, were transformative to the students because it allowed them to see the strength and importance of the values their parents taught them in the home.

We also introduced Tara Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model as a counterpoint to Valenzuela. Yosso (2006) demonstrates the ways in which Latina/o students and families bring multiple forms of cultural capital into the school that are often unacknowledged, but which have the potential to be powerful assets in their pursuit of school success. As we shared this model with students, they were able to list all of the different forms of capital that they had and to consider how they were truly assets in their lives. This began the process of what we called “flipping the script” on the deficit narrative that is so common in school approaches to Latina/o students. We discussed and considered the ways in which we could use these different forms of cultural capital in our work together and in their lives beyond our class.

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7 Camangian (2013) provides a critical analysis of the benefits of developing ideological literacy with youth of color. Our work was well-aligned with the approach he outlines.
At the same time, we also considered historical analyses of the school experiences of Latinas/os and theoretical constructs to explain not only what had happened in the past in Latina/o schooling, but also the way it affects us today. Reading an early draft of one of Pizarro’s chapters (2014a), the students considered concepts and issues like historical trauma, deficit models, normalization of racism and inequality, the individualization of Latina/o school failure, and the internalization of racism. The importance of this work is that it allowed students to understand the historical trajectory of racism in the United States and its link to the evolution of Latina/o schooling. Again, the concepts resonated with students because it gave them a means of explaining things that they had seen in their own experiences and in the experiences of family members.

One of the specific content areas that proved particularly meaningful to students was our consideration of racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions refer to:

1) subtle verbal and nonverbal insults directed at people of color, often automatically or unconsciously; 2) layered insults based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and 3) cumulative insults, which cause unnecessary stress to people of color while privileging Whites. (Smith, Yosso, & Solorzano, 2006, p. 300)

After reading about this concept and beginning to understand its meaning, students were tasked with giving examples from their own experiences. These came slowly at first, but then, as they began to understand the concept, it became a cornerstone to their understanding of what it meant to be Latina/o students. Students gave examples from every level of schooling they had experienced, from their parents’ lives, and from daily life in their communities. One of a handful of white students in our three classes demonstrated how this one tool gave them all a new lens by which to make sense of their daily lives. He told us a story of being on the light rail in the same car as two African American boys who were similar to him in terms of age, dress, and behavior. He recounted how the conductor, who is supposed to ask all the passengers for their tickets, went and asked the other two boys for their tickets but never asked him. After telling the story, he said that he never would have paid attention to that if it had not been for the work we were doing, which impacted both how he saw things and how he acted on what he saw. For Latina/o students, understanding microaggressions and how they work allowed them to finally explain experiences that they had, which they knew were not right, but which they struggled to put into proper context as they tried to explain them to the people in their lives who often thought these incidents were no big deal.

Each student dealt with this content differently. Some had direct and overt experiences with one or more of the ideas we covered and used that work to help them unpack those experiences. Others had no direct experiences but recognized

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8 We chose to use this example to also address the question that readers may have about having non-Latinas/os in classes such as this. Our end of the year debrief with students showed us that the white students found the class invaluable to their growth both as students and as people.
subtle patterns in their schooling that reflected different constructs covered. Others challenged some of these ideas and constructs, wanting to blame laziness and other factors for the issues being considered.\(^9\) What was important, however, was that they were all engaged in this process of connecting course content to their own lives and experiences and adopting complex concepts and theories to develop an understanding of experiences and issues that mattered deeply to each of them.

All of this work served as our foundation. These were the tools we used to build student engagement, confidence and skills. The first piece of literature covered after this work was Luis Rodriguez’ *Always Running* (2005), an autobiography of his teenage years growing up as a gang member in East Los Angeles.\(^10\) Students found the writing and the content engaging. Again, they had different levels of connection with the experiences he relayed but most found parts of his experiences that reflected their own challenges, whether related to school, family, or friends. It was through the readings, that we then turned the class back to the students and centered their lives. After writing essays that broke down the key concepts in Rodriguez’ work in relation to the material we had already covered, they had to write personal essays that covered different aspects of their own lives. We looked at various Latina/o writers who wrote short essays about their life experiences to show the different approaches that could be taken to bring the reader to a specific conclusion through storytelling. The students each wrote about family members and about their own challenging experiences. As we read Rodriguez and the short stories and as they covered their own lives through their stories, we continually brought back the key constructs covered early in the year so that all of our work was continually reinforced and the concepts that may have been more complex became easier for them to grasp through the examples that we were generating.

Next, we covered poetry, allowing the students to learn the history of Chicana/o and Latina/o poetry through multiple examples that spanned generations and themes. This led to the students writing multiple poems that integrated the lessons they were learning about poetic devices, but that also continued to echo the key constructs covered in the course through the focus on their own lives. The freedom of not being bound by typical sentence structure allowed many students who were not comfortable with formal writing to make important contributions to the class and to begin to see their talents as knowledge producers in the class. Despite the initial dread of writing poetry that many students shared, they dove into this work, which was made easier by the multiple examples they had of poems that

\(^9\) Through our discussions and analyses of the cumulative experiences of the students in the classes, we were able to develop a complex means of explaining these different student analyses. One piece that was revealing for many related to this last belief was when students who were framed as lazy revealed that they had not always been that way, but that this was often a learned behavior in response to forces in their lives.

\(^10\) Picower (2012) provides an example of the strengths of teachers using this book with students. Her research is important in its analysis of the need for teachers with an “activist” orientation to the job.
challenged conventional writing norms and the relevant content that connected to what some might consider the mundane aspects of being Latina/o. Having students write about their own lives and share this with their peers proved to be a powerful way for students to connect with each other and us as instructors. Students read and then wrote “counter stories” and “counter poems,” personal narratives that run counter to mainstream canonical works. Through this creative process we continued to create a safe space for students to tap into emotions to create powerful and meaningful writing. Another key to this was sharing our stories as instructors as well.

As we entered the final third of the class, we intentionally turned the content of the course almost completely over to the students. We simply explained that they now had to develop research skills that mirrored those in the first readings we covered in the class and that they had to research topics that mattered to them. We used the work we had done in class with the key concepts and, in particular, with their personal writings through the short stories and poems to help them begin to consider topics. The students began by identifying a topic and question they wanted to answer, then conducted research on what was already known about the topic, designed a means of collecting any information that was still needed, conducted the research (typically surveying and/or interviewing peers, parents, siblings, gang members, college graduates, teachers, and others), and put it all together into a paper. During this process, we highlighted different approaches to conducting research, sharing some of Pizarro’s examples as well as those of colleagues who had researched some of the issues that they were considering. While it was challenging, the students appreciated the opportunity to analyze something that mattered to them, many choosing to consider issues that had been going on in their communities and schools that they hoped to be able to address in some way.

The final component of the curriculum was for the students to engage in collective projects. We grouped students together based on their strengths and needs as well as their topics for the individual projects, and charged them with picking a topic that needed even further investigation. This process mirrored the individual project with the added requirement that they had to consider some way of doing something about the issue; teaching others the insights from their work or engaging them in some way as part of the process. The students planned presentations and workshops with peers in the school, at nearby middle and elementary schools (often returning to schools they had attended), and on-line for anyone to watch. Finally, they had to present their projects at a public forum that was attended by community members. They not only appreciated the opportunity to determine the focus of our content in this final component of the class, but they also gained a sense of confidence from the process of having to choose meaningful topics that mattered to them, seeing their interests mirrored in the research of academics, and becoming experts on specific topics, as they learned that they knew more about these topics than did many of their teachers and were even able to teach their teachers things that they needed to know. One of the essential benefits of this approach to the curriculum was that students became far less likely to buy into the low expectations they had learned others had for them and that they then had learned to have for themselves. As they told us in the end-of-year evaluations, they began to see the strengths in their peers that they previously had not, and similarly
began to see their ability to succeed in ways that they often had lost through their prior schooling.

The curriculum had a cumulative impact on the students that, almost to a person, they found meaningful. At the end of the year, one of the students in class, Chloe, explained that the concepts that we covered (like subtractive schooling and internalized racism) were powerful to her and allowed her to make sense of things she and her family had seen and experienced. Chloe told us, “I lost motivation a while back, in middle school, and this class helped me realize why and how I can combat that. ...I used to be skeptical about my abilities in school. Now I see there is no reason I should be, and I’m confident in showing my abilities.” She explained how the content specifically grabbed her, “It wasn’t your typical boring English class. It was a class that dealt with real world problems that everyone could relate to. There wasn’t a day where I felt bored. It was the kind of class I could go home and talk to my parents for hours about.” She also told us that, while she had been losing interest in school prior to this course, she could now see herself going on to college and knew that she wanted to be able to continue this kind of work in higher education. She said the work we had done, and in particular the concepts that she had learned through the material covered, gave meaning to her schooling and built her confidence in her potential to succeed in school. When we checked in with her toward the end of the first semester of her senior year, Chloe was excited to tell us that she was getting all A’s in her classes, something she never thought was possible before.

Each component of the curriculum was intended to center the students both through the content covered and through the fact that the learning was not predetermined but was theirs to define. We never told students what they should take from the content covered, but instead engaged in debates and discussions and worked to avoid demanding they arrive at any conclusions so that students who disagreed with one of the core concepts covered in class as it was analyzed were given as much validation as those who shared experiences that reinforced the given analysis. Our focus was on providing students material that they could engage meaningfully and to use that process to help them develop skills as readers, writers, researchers, presenters, team members, thinkers, and agents of change.

Pedagogy

Our approach to the teaching was to focus on learning itself. Students were the focus of the classroom. We arranged the room so that students faced each other and sought to avoid being in the center of the classroom so that they were often looking at and speaking to each other.

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11 All of the names of students used in this chapter are pseudonyms selected by the students.

12 This also resulted in the content sometimes changing directions at unexpected times and in unanticipated ways. We often supplemented the content we had planned with new content (including films and other materials available on the internet) that addressed themes and interests the students raised in our class discussions.
We often introduced topics but let students have as much time as they wanted to wrestle with content. If someone highlighted an issue or experience that was meaningful to them, they became the teacher, often coming to the center of the classroom, and also becoming a cornerstone for whatever theme was being covered that we returned to and highlighted as we moved forward.

On a typical day, one of us would introduce the focus of the day and spend some time providing background. If we had new content to introduce we would then do that, but all of this would rarely take more than 15 minutes. Then, the students would be tasked with applying the content through their own work, which typically involved some combination of individual, paired, and group work. Usually we would come back together as a class and talk about the work they were doing, discuss their examples, and sometimes break down those specific examples/work for everyone to consider.

The goal of this approach was to show students their power as individuals, and for them to see that they each had the potential for success and that they all had an important contribution to make. A critical component to this process was that we offered students individual support any time they were working. We would walk through the class as they worked and provide immediate feedback to offer them the direction they needed to challenge themselves. This was particularly important because of the varied skill levels of students (which ranged from AP students to students transitioning from support classes into the mainstream). We could help students set specific goals for themselves that were appropriate and also challenging. Obviously, it is difficult to see every student in a given class period but we were each able to typically check in with each student in the class at least once a week, often spending much more time with those who needed extra support.

The power of this approach was that we had solid relationships with every student in the class. We understood their abilities, the strengths that they could offer their peers, as well as the areas they needed to work on to help us in getting them the peer support that might benefit them. We could see who was working hard and find out why those who were not, were struggling. We knew who we could push and who we needed to support more. We knew who responded well to being centered as an example to the class and those who we had to work with one-on-one. We knew more than just who they were as students, we knew who they were as people.

All of this allowed the pedagogy to be organic, so that it emerged from the students themselves. As a result, the way we covered the material with the students was different each period, benefiting from the examples and processes that were emerging in a given class. A critical component of this was the students learning from each other. We consciously sought to share examples from the students that were inspirational and distinct, with the goal of highlighting each student in some way at some point in time. Students who had never been picked as an example of great work were asked to share because of a powerful poem they wrote, because of an amazing story they told that no one had ever heard, because of a creative approach to research they had developed, or because of an insight they offered in an informal conversation. These students included former gang members, pregnant teens, students who had just been suspended, undocumented students, ESL
Building on this process, by the time we got to the group projects at the end of the year, the students had already become quite comfortable with the idea that they were surrounded by very talented peers. They typically had lofty goals for their projects and believed that they could achieve those goals. Group work is never easy, and many complained as we started, but as they engaged in the work and built on the lessons from our process and approach, the students recognized the way that it allowed them to play to every group members’ strengths and achieve something much more powerful than the sum of their independent work. The groups almost all faced some kind of conflict at some point in their process, and we emphasized that working with others is always a difficult process, but that this was a skill they would use repeatedly in their lives. There were also individual students who struggled to perform in the groups, but we saw their groups challenge and support them and almost always come to a place where, most importantly, they understood and appreciated each other. At the end of the year when we allowed time for students to acknowledge each other and reflect on the year, almost all of the students took the opportunity to thank their group members, even if they admitted that it was not always easy to work with them or that they had preconceived notions about each other. They made it clear that they not only learned and applied complex research and speaking/listening skills, but also skills we did not intend to assess such as collaborating with others, conflict resolution, time management, being an effective group member, fulfilling professional responsibilities, and other social skills that go beyond the classroom.

This pedagogical approach taught us the importance of what we now call Classroom Mapping. As teachers, to be able to support all of our students and design a pedagogy that centers students, we need to clearly understand the topography of the classroom. In fact, we envision this as a multi-layered map. We need to be able to see the skill levels of our students across many domains. Similarly, we need to understand the personalities and behavioral tendencies of the students in each class. Teachers often think of both of these layers, but there are many more that actually influence each of these. We need to know their families: Who never knew a father? Whose parents are or have been in the criminal justice system? Who struggles with substance abuse (either themselves or in their families)? Who is still learning to speak English? Who is undocumented? Who would be the first in their families to go to college? Who has struggled with their academic confidence and why? Who has had negative relationships with teachers and why? Who has struggled with gangs? But also, who has a talent for building theory through their own life experiences? Who can code switch in ways that make them able to break down complex concepts through their writing? Who can bring humor to discussions of challenging topics in helpful ways? Who is skilled at providing others assistance? Who has an unstoppable will to thrive? Who commands attention whenever they speak? Who has consciously used their challenges as a resource? Who manifests an impenetrable integrity? As we map out our classes and consider the different layers and how they impact each other, we
have a better understanding of how to engage in our classroom work with students in ways that resonate with them. What matters most is our ability to see the work we are doing through their eyes so we understand how best to help them use that work to grow as people and students.

Throughout the year, we continually saw the benefits of this pedagogy. One example was Yazmine, who had been struggling in all of her classes. She was someone who had a strong character and did not back down from challenging anyone who she felt had slighted her. She had gotten into confrontations with students and teachers alike. While she had been negatively labeled in the school because she is outspoken, we recognized her passion, independence and strength as vital. Yazmine also clearly understood the material we were covering in the course and often cited examples from her own experiences to explain those concepts. As a result, we highlighted her examples and analyses as we went through this process. During our individual check-ins with her, we each acknowledged her insights and powerful ability to clearly put them into words in a way that everyone could understand. We explained that this was the foundation for school success, including in college. She doubted us and herself and during the middle of the school year would often return a day or so after one of our talks saying that she was not going to be able to succeed or even complete the required work. We supported her and continually focused on the content of her insights and how she could translate that into strong academic work. As she began to realize that we were serious, she not only gained the confidence to complete the project, but recognized that she could excel in her academic work and translated that recognition into her goals for herself. She completed a strong final project and the following semester she enrolled in her first AP class and several weeks into it was convinced that she would be as successful as any other student in that class. The consistency of our approach and the focus on relationship building in which the students are the heart of all the teaching and learning allowed us to offer her the support she needed to define and achieve her goals. After reading this summary of her experiences, Yazmine told us, It is dead on of how things went. I think what would be great to include is how resistant I was about doing the work with full effort at first and after having conversations with me I started to be more and more outspoken about all the topics in class. Also it helps that teachers be more understanding with students no matter how strong a student’s personality is because breaking down that wall will result in having a better relationship, and when that student is no longer in class they’ll come to you in the long run with their issues with academics or even personal life and will want some guidance/advice. And that will result with the student making good decisions rather than naive decisions because of how they’re feeling.

While the curriculum provided us a way of engaging the students, as Chloe demonstrated, and, as Yazmine explained, the pedagogy allowed us to build relationships that gave the learning process meaning to the students, the success of

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13 Latinas/os in general, and Latinas in particular, who exhibit these characteristics are often framed as behavioral problems, whereas when other students display the same traits and behaviors they are praised.
our classes depended on the ethics that defined every aspect of our work with the students.

Social Justice Ethics
A common concern among teachers striving to be creative in their approach to classroom practices is maintaining order. How do we maintain discipline in a classroom where learning is turned over to the students and they recognize that they and what they have to say is always central? How do we meet all of our content standards if we are not in control of the pace of learning? How do we avoid our innovations turning into classroom chaos?

These are actually the wrong questions to ask. The most common approach to maintaining control in the classroom has been about discipline. Teachers' typically emphasize the importance of establishing clear guidelines to students on what is and is not acceptable behavior in the classroom. The vast majority of our students already know this very well. When they do not engage in “appropriate” behaviors, it is often for a very good reason, whether we understand or agree with it or not. Most often, it is because they are not getting their basic needs met: safety/security, belonging/caring/community, autonomy, integrity, and purpose/meaning (as just a few examples).\(^{14}\)

When we ask ourselves how we can help meet student needs in our classrooms, it forces us to think differently about things like classroom discipline. Our approach is grounded in recognition of the centrality of social justice ethics to effective teaching. Teacher ethics (and the corresponding classroom ethics that emerge from this) are the most fundamental aspect of creating a successful classroom culture with disenfranchised Latina/o students. Teacher training often forgets to help teachers understand that the center of all classroom learning is our ethics.\(^{15}\) For so many Latina/o students, they learn from teacher behaviors that they are not assessed fairly (in terms of their academic skills or their behaviors), that they can be targeted without warning, that the ethics that often dominate the learning in their homes have no place or value in school. They learn the ethical inconsistency of schools and teachers as they hear messages of the importance of values that are not manifested in daily practice.

In order to center students in the classroom, we need to embody truly just ethics that reflect, in every way, the principles needed for them to create paths to pursuing success in school. Although the themes covered in the previous sections of this article are important, the most essential ingredient to engaging disenfranchised Latina/o students in the classroom is not the material covered (although it is critical

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\(^{14}\) This overview of basic human needs was adapted from Marshall Rosenberg's work in Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg 2003).

\(^{15}\) Shevalier and McKenzie (2012) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and identified the problem that ethics is central to effective culturally responsive teaching, but that it has been ignored due to the emphasis on curriculum and pedagogy. Their work emphasizes employing Noddings theory, which our approach takes to a more applied level by building on an ethnic studies approach to teaching (Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009)
to provide them with an overview of complex constructs that they have experienced and always known but not been able to explain), nor the pedagogy (which also provides powerful insights to students about their own abilities), but it is the ethics that define the classroom community and culture.\footnote{Since this section is the heart of this chapter, we believe that the previous two sections make much more sense in the context of this one, so readers are encouraged to re-read those sections after reading this one, thinking about the way in which ethics define and enhance both curriculum and pedagogy.}

The previous sections suggest that the reason the curriculum was so successful was not just because of the content we chose, nor was the reason the pedagogy was so engaging simply because we centered the students. In fact, our belief in the importance of centering the students was what made this work. This was not, however, just the product of our wanting to improve student grades or test scores or graduation rates (although we hoped for each of these).

Our approach to the classroom was centered on one main principle: the Mayan concept of in lak'ech, our ethic.\footnote{Other researchers have highlighted the significance of this approach to working with Latina/o communities (Rodriguez, 2010; Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009)} This concept explains that we are each a reflection of the other and that the other is a reflection of us. It suggests that, in fact, we are each other. The student is me and I am the student. This approach to the classroom asks that we always strive to walk in the shoes of our students. Rather than seeing a problematic behavior and quickly moving to squash it and punish the student, we have to immediately ask why the student is engaging in the behavior. Looking at the why, we then have to ask ourselves: if that was me, what might help me?\footnote{The practical way we used this approach was that any time we dealt with a student who was struggling (whether academically or as evidenced through specific behaviors) we approached that student recognizing that we could have easily been in her shoes. We focused on striving to find what we would have needed were we in that student's place. That thought process in itself was not always enough to help the student, but the approach allowed us and the student to connect in a way that often led to him helping us see how we could offer support in a meaningful way that eventually led to addressing the specific needs he had related to the issues we were seeing in class.} This approach far exceeds the simple standard of just giving the students respect (which they do crave and often lack in schools). Our actions with the students tell them, "I see you. I see myself in you. See yourself in me. You have the power to be more than me."

Obviously, our ethics shape our approach to curriculum. As explained earlier, we want the students to see themselves in the curriculum. Even more so, we want them to see themselves in the authors and researchers they read. We want them to be able to compare their experiences to those of the people whose works they are reading, to see the ways in which the unique life experiences of these authors and researchers led them to important contributions to our understanding of the world, suggesting that the students have equally powerful insights to unpack and share.
Related, these ethics impact every facet of the pedagogy. Clearly, we center the students through our classroom practices. Our ethics mean that this pervades everything we do in the classroom. We want the students to see themselves as thinkers, as poets, as researchers, as presenters, as writers, because that is how we see them. At the same time, we know this is challenging for students, especially when they may have never been at the center of the classroom or of the learning before. We, therefore, have to see ourselves in them, striving to understand why they may be disengaged so we can design our approach to instruction to address those experiences and student needs. Allowing the students to see themselves in us, we never asked students to do or share things we were not willing to do or share. We used ourselves as examples to show them our struggles and challenges and failures. We shared these personal stories so that they could see us as people and not just teachers, and so that they knew our weaknesses and challenges. We conversely used the students to show examples of success and hard work and then compared that to our own examples, sometimes highlighting that the students had far exceeded where we were at their age.

In lak ech as an ethical approach to classroom practices also meant that we treated our students like family. This is very distinct from treating students like friends. Again, the critique of a student-centered approach to classroom management is that we can lose control when students think that the teacher is a buddy. This can, in fact, happen. Students who see their teachers as their friends may not develop a sense of accountability and responsibility to fully engage in the work. We told the students that we did see them like family, and that we treated them like we would and did treat our own children. What we explained is that seeing them as family, meant that we could never give up on them, that we always had to push them to be their best, and that we held them to high standards. We sought to explicitly show them love. That love meant that we would give them all of our attention and energy throughout the school year and beyond.\(^{19}\) This familial love represents the centrality of relationship-building to effective teaching with Latina/o students. Success with disenfranchised Latina/o students is heavily determined by the strength of the relationships teachers and school staff develop with them. We always sought to show them that these relationships were meaningful to us and not simply about helping them do well in our class. Related, we were building community in the classroom. We worked for an ethically rich community in which the students felt connected to each other because of who they were as people and what they brought to this community.\(^{20}\)

This relationship- and community-building focus emerges from the in lak ech ethic, which allowed us to focus on creating a nurturing classroom culture of

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\(^{19}\) One of the ways we demonstrated this was through a College Preparation Workshop for the students over the summer. We wanted to build on our work during the year and let students know that our connection with them would not end in June. We were committed to supporting them in achieving their goals long after our class ended.

\(^{20}\) Our work to manifest social justice ethics builds on Valenzuela’s (1999) explanation of the necessity of authentic caring in Latina/o schooling.
accountability. Typically, in school when we think about accountability, it is about students being accountable to the teacher or to the class. In lak eich asks us to flip the construct and instead emphasize how the teachers and the class become accountable to all of the individuals. Rather than making a student feel guilty for missing class, as one example, as we moved toward the end of the year, we made sure the groups checked in with students who were absent to find out how they were doing, what they needed, and how they could catch them up so they stayed with the group. Similarly, we checked in with students individually and asked how we could support them with whatever was challenging them, letting them know that we knew they needed support and that they could turn to us for help or simply take care of what they needed to take care of to get back on track in our class.

Our ethics meant that we were always honest with the students too. We always started our one-on-one work with students by highlighting their strengths. We wanted them to see that part of themselves that we always saw when we looked at them. When they were not doing the work or were under-performing, we told them. We had them tell us why they were struggling or not engaging. They always had a reason, and knowing that reason gave us a way to challenge them and to offer support. We would acknowledge these challenges and then help them think through their options, the possible outcomes, and show them a path that they could follow that would allow them to succeed. The students learned that we were always honest, approaching them from a desire to help them fully become the people we saw in them, and that our assessments of them were our truest reflections of their character and personas.

We knew that it was not only our ethics that were important to the students, but that the consistency with which we exhibited those ethics was just as critical to our effectiveness in working with them. Often, when people talk of ethics, they speak of what they aspire to believe and manifest, and their daily practices do not always reflect these principles. We knew that we had to manifest these ethics everyday and in every action in the classroom. For Pizarro, as I engaged in any interaction with a student, I sought to focus intently on where she was at and how she saw things, and I would reflect that back to her and ask if I was following her. I also made time to reflect back on each class and my interactions with the students and assess how focused I was. There were times when I thought back and realized I was too rushed or stressed and messed up in some way. When I saw that, I would

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21 This approach does not mean that we never get upset by student behaviors, but it does mean that when we do get upset we have to strive to understand why we are upset. So, at times, that translates into us explaining to the students how we feel about a given behavior or pattern of behaviors. In these instances, we are trying to help them see the classroom through our eyes. We want them to understand what our goals are for the classroom and even what our frustrations are. As we engage in these conversations, we do it as community members who care about them rather than as the person who holds power over them, bringing them into sophisticated discussions where they are expected to understand and respond to someone else’s emotions. Even this is framed from seeing ourselves in the students and explaining to them our desire to help them achieve the greatness that we see in them.
make it a point to check in with the student the next time I saw him, tell him this, apologize, and offer any support that I could. As teachers, we know we often make mistakes. We have to expect to. Students watch us very closely to see how we respond to those mistakes. Thinking about my own schooling, I know that when my teachers made mistakes I wanted them to acknowledge them and apologize when they needed to. I had learned in my home and life that was the right thing to do. I also learned that teachers did not acknowledge their mistakes and definitely did not apologize for them. So, seeing myself in the students, I sought to manifest in lak ech for them by acknowledging and apologizing when I messed up. This example highlights the importance of living our ethics. Ethics are not what we espouse; we rarely spoke of ethics in our classroom work. Ethics are what we are and what we do, everyday. So we often acknowledged students when they manifested their ethics in ways that supported others in the class.

Obviously, we cannot cover every kind of teacher-student interaction and the many different ways in which we engage students in the classroom. One of the students in our classes, Jarome, provided perhaps the greatest challenge to our ethics. His most problematic behaviors included blurting out inappropriate comments in class (in terms of language and content), wandering about the classroom, riding or trying to ride his skateboard in class, confronting other students verbally and almost physically. We knew he had gotten into conflicts with other teachers as well, and heard many teachers who had him in class talk poorly of him. We could have easily made him a disciplinary target on virtually any given day. Our manifesting the principle of in lak ech in our relationship with Jarome, however, meant that we had to learn much more about him than just his undesirable classroom behaviors. We learned that he faced severe challenges in his home and personal life and that he had a diagnosed psychological condition and was inconsistent in taking his medication. We also learned that he was perhaps the most sincere and earnest student in any of our classes. When we did personal narratives and poetry he shared harsh, raw, and emotional work without blinking an eye. When other students would share examples of personal challenges or hardships they faced, Jarome would listen intently and always offer support. We centered him and the strength of his contributions to class whenever we could. This served at least two functions. First of all, it allowed him to see that we valued his insights, and secondly it allowed the other students in the class to see that he was much more than a class clown. This was possible because we never publicly reprimanded him for his outbursts in class. What we were saying to him and the class is that we understand that this is what it looks like for him to be engaged in class and that what matters most is that he is engaged because we all benefit from this. When we would check in with him individually we would highlight his strengths but also challenge him to work on shortcomings. On some days he would accept that challenge and on others he might even say that he was really struggling. This approach allowed us to increase his engagement as the year progressed, since the respect, caring, and understanding we showed him allowed him to trust us and to be honest. Jarome understood the importance of honesty when we came to him to talk seriously about his role in the class and what we were hoping to see from him, and
became more and more engaged with each passing month, while his behaviors in class were less and less problematic.

One interaction with another teacher showed us how a different approach could be really difficult for him. One day we had a substitute in class, and after some instruction and discussion the students were working and Pizarro was floating around the room, checking in with them. Jarome was being his normal self in class, doing some work and making cracks as he did. The substitute heard him and then began to focus on him, asking him to be quiet and then to be respectful. A few minutes later he made another joke and the teacher got upset and threatened him. I went over and got down on a knee to talk to him. Looking up at him, I said that this sub was coming after him and told him that I did not want that to happen. He listened intently as I asked him if he could just stay focused for the rest of the class. He told me he could and he did. I understood that the job of a sub is the hardest there is in a school. I also saw that this is what school often looked like to Jarome, but usually there was not someone to intervene. Still, our work together and the relationship we had developed allowed him to see himself through my eyes and to also see me. It helped us agree on a strategy in that moment.

By the end of the school year, Jarome assumed a leadership role in his working group, and eventually coordinated a workshop for a local middle school class, as well as a public presentation of the final project to the local community. In our final class session, so many of the students acknowledged him for his amazing contributions to the class and what they learned from him. We could see that he was seeing himself through our eyes and the eye of his peers and not solely through the eyes of those who had categorized him as a problem needing to be fixed.

Through our student-centered approach to ethics, and to curriculum and pedagogy, Jarome began to see that his academic identity and his ethnic identity and who he was in the school could be melded into one powerful identity. This was the most important outcome of our classes, as this one student reflected the vast majority of his peers in that new found ability to create a vision of hope and true possibility for himself.

In lak ech grounded us in our approach to our everyday practices in the classroom. As explained above, there are many facets of this ethic. The point of this analysis, however, is not to encourage teachers to simply replicate our ethics for their practice. Rather, we want to demonstrate the centrality of social justice ethics and of teacher clarity on our ethics as we map out curriculum and pedagogy for our classes. Each of us manifested our ethics in a distinct way, emphasizing specific facets because of our unique strengths, experiences, and character. It is important to acknowledge, however, that in lak ech, as a way of being in the world, resonates with many disenfranchised Latina/o students because it reflects an ancient wisdom that, whether consciously or not, their families often emphasize and teach. Interestingly, because this ethic is based on core human principles, including social

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22 Because Pizarro was not a credentialed teacher, when Christian was out, the district required us to have a credentialed substitute in class. When this would happen, Pizarro would just tell the sub she could sit and do whatever she needed to do since he would run the class.
justice, we have found that students of all backgrounds appreciate this approach to classroom practice.

**Practicing Social Justice Ethics while Meeting the Demands of Teaching**

When it comes to creating social justice ethics in a classroom, one of the questions many teachers ask is simple: how? Most teachers, especially those in urban public schools, find themselves inundated with the daily grind of lesson planning, grading, instructional frameworks, district initiatives, slashed budgets, transitioning standards, meetings, and being made out to be “the problem” with public schools, all while teaching classes that are overfilled with students, including English language learners not given proper support, special education students struggling to catch up to grade level, and reluctant learners who have just been left behind. How indeed does a teacher navigate this world to make time for something as untestable and unrecognized as social justice and ethics? The answer is also simple: teaching is social justice. Good teaching requires ethics.

Still, this is not what we learn as educators. In credential programs attention is paid to curriculum, educational psychology, classroom management, delivery of instruction, and other various important topics, but never ethics. The notion that we are gatekeepers, the idea that we have a profound and long-lasting impact on students’ lives is never addressed, let alone studied. This is not something we as teachers discuss. We might discuss instructional practices, content choices, and pedagogy, but not ethics or social justice. In an age of testing and accountability, for many of us it hardly seems like a worthwhile endeavor investing in ethics when attempting to best teach and engage Latina/o students. As many of my colleagues have noted, there is no time for anything besides preparing students for the curriculum because, according to test scores and school data, many of these students arrive in our classrooms with underdeveloped and deficient skills. So the “real” teacher questions arise: How do we get these students where they need to be? How do we convince Latina/o youth, as well as all of the other students, that we care about them and want them to do well? Why don’t they believe us when we tell them what is at stake?

There is no magic solution to these uphill battles. In teaching, there never is. But, what often occurs when teachers continuously face these challenges without any support is that those questions become ammunition for weapons that teachers use against their own students. The constant failure to reach mandated goals causes teachers to rationalize how this could have happened: “It’s their own fault. If they just studied more. Their parents just don’t care. They don’t try. They’re lazy.” Unfortunately, these stereotypical explanations are popularly accepted as the rationale for the lack of achievement among Latina/o youth and it often further isolates these students, allowing them to internalize the negative messages and stereotypes to the point that they often become how Latina/o youth define themselves as students, as well as how they define themselves as individuals in our larger society.

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23 This three-part section is written by Christian to provide a clear vision of what these issues mean to the daily practice of a classroom teacher.
There are many common practices that teachers engage in with Latina/o students that feed into these assumptions and work contrary to the goal of engaging Latina/o students. One of the first things many teachers establish in their classroom are the rules or norms. For many teachers, the creation of these rules stems from a perspective that students need to be quiet, passive learners who become virtuous through their ability to follow instructions, obey commands, and not stick out. This was the way many teachers, myself included, experienced school. While there is value in having silence at times in a classroom, being silent for six to seven hour-long periods a day can be challenging for anyone and can significantly diminish student engagement in their own learning. It also establishes a sense of hierarchy and power in the classroom. That is, there is one individual who not only has all of the decision-making power, but s/he is the one who validates expected behaviors and only when it fits into a narrow perspective of what is deemed “acceptable” or “appropriate.” Teachers also often resort to conventional and ineffective methods of discipline. One method is to have the students exit the classroom for behavior deemed inappropriate and have an administrator decide on a punishment. Most often, the offense, especially with Latino/a students, is defiance. Not only is defiance a general word that can be used easily for a number of actions or things said, it also is more hastily applied to certain students because of perceptions teachers may hold, particularly if a student is or has been viewed as a “trouble maker.”

We were able to counter many of these common practices through an in-lak approach to ethics that demanded that we see the classroom through our students’ eyes. This required that we look to understand behaviors and their causes above all else.

The key aspect of creating a safe, respectful, and trusting learning environment is ignored if ethics are not a fundamental pillar of our work in the classroom. More than curriculum, more than classroom management, more than any other aspect of teaching, creating a successful classroom is determined by our ethics as teachers. Ethics provide the basis and foundation for everything else and for building a culture of respect, success, professionalism, and ultimately caring. If the relationship between teachers and students is not built around ethics, there is no way we can expect anything besides the status quo. What is at stake is the students’ own view of themselves and their identities. School is the primary world in which students live and how they view themselves in school greatly shapes how they view themselves in the world at large. With that responsibility, providing a space where they can learn how to be, not just what they “need” to know, is fundamental. A student who feels loved, cared for, respected, and trusted will always be more successful than if s/he did not. The curriculum and other essential parts of the profession will fall into place much easier if this foundation is laid properly.

One simple value that we invoked in Latino Literature boiled down to one word, which students agreed is an important value in their life both in and out of the
classroom: respeto.\textsuperscript{24} By not being punitive, but allowing students to reflect on how their actions and the things they said are disrespectful to others and themselves, our conversations were elevated beyond chastisement. Through our conversations with them, the students also saw how something may upset us as teachers, which gave them the opportunity to understand our perspective as well. In the end, we wanted students to see who they could be. We wanted students to understand that we expect the best in them and to know that they can be that.

When we set out to establish ethics as a cornerstone of our classroom, we agreed to assume the best intentions from the students. If they exhibited a negative behavior, we assumed there was a valid reason for it. It may have been a bad day, they may have been dealing with issues outside of class, they may have been having drama with another student, or a variety of other reasons. As a result of this, we learned more about our students and their lives, which not only connected us to them, but also allowed us to understand their perspectives and see why they were not being the students we knew they could be. If we would have kicked the students out or had them punished punitively, we would have lost the relationship with them, making it more difficult for us to help them to be successful. Removing students, in our view, was a last option only used for issues that were violent or volatile, however it was never used. It was never used because it is the exact opposite of the concept of in lak ech.

In essence, having ethics and social justice as the fundamental pillars of the class alleviated many behavior, attendance, and academic issues. Through our ethical work with students we were able to get through difficult content, teach key skills, have clear behavior expectations, and build the type of classroom culture that we wanted. We saw gains in many students not as a result of any specific instructional methods, assessments, or interventions, but due to something much more basic. We saw them as our students, our children. We refused to give up on them and constantly challenged them. But this challenge did not come from a place of us wanting to meet certain district-mandated goals. It simply came from us wanting our students to be good people and see themselves as that. In other words, our perspective in creating this class was for the students to see themselves as we saw them. We were mirrors for our students to show them the best they have to offer. We wanted to reflect their hopes, dreams, and desires and make them see exactly what we saw in them, even if others saw only the negative.

Grading as a Means of Manifesting Social Justice Ethics

One of the ways we built on social justice and ethics was by exemplifying them through our own practice as educators. The most obvious place this took shape was through grading. The grading system we developed was a portfolio, standards-based assessment strategy that utilized elements of project-based learning. The first decision made was to rethink what grades meant, what they communicated to the students, and how they affected our students. Guskey (2004)

\textsuperscript{24} When the term respect is used in schools, it typically references the importance of not disrespecting teachers and their rules. The idea of Respeto in the Latina/o community invokes the importance of honoring those who have earned our respect.
explains that, “Developing honest and fair grading policies should begin with candid discussions about the purpose of grading and reporting. Teachers must consider what message they want to communicate through grading, who the primary audience for the message is, and what the intended goal of the communication is” (p. 35). Unfortunately, many teachers do not set out developing grading practices in this way. This is not necessarily their fault. Credential programs often do not prepare teachers to create and evaluate assessments, let alone their own grading systems. Many teachers rely on what they already know about grading to set up their own systems. What they know is their own experience and because of that, many teachers grade their students based on how they were graded. Guskey (2004) points out that, “As a consequence, when teachers develop their grading policies, they typically reflect back on what they experienced as students and use strategies that they perceived to be fair, reasonable, and equitable. In other words, most teachers do what was done to them” (p. 31). This can obviously be an issue when teachers are typically highly educated, come from middle-class backgrounds, and learned how to “play school” well enough to be college graduates. Projecting those expectations on Latina/o students, many of whom will be the first in their families to graduate high school, can be unfair, and using grades as a weapon to enforce those expectations is a surefire way to create conflict with students. Stiggins (2001, p. 11) explains that,

We all grew up in classrooms in which our teachers used the threat of assessment, evaluation, and grading to instill fear, believing that this would cause us to behave in academically responsible ways. They believed that to maximize the learning, one had to maximize the anxiety. Threaten students with dire consequences of low test scores and you center their attention on learning. Assessment was almost universally regarded as the great intimidator. In effect, the role of assessment was to provide a basis for the doling out of rewards and punishments.

In essence, teachers expect Latina/o students to be like themselves when they were students. Latina/o students are often not like them and the threat of failing grades or zeros often isolates these students more. Rarely does a zero create intrinsic motivation in a student. Latina/o students often see low grades as a reflection of their innate ability and withdraw even more from the learning process, blaming themselves, and feeling that they are destined to fail.

When making choices concerning grading and assessment, we kept this in mind. In our class, we decided to emphasize skill development. To best measure this, we identified Common Core State Standards which we wanted to focus on and we structured our activities, assignments, and assessments to always revolve around these key standards. To measure their progress, we created qualitative rubrics that were used by us, as well as the students, to measure their progress in developing the skills reflected in those standards. The rubrics contained no zeros (a 1 through 6 scale was used and subsequently translated to a simple point system for the grade book) and students were not graded on anything else besides the key standards. All student work was collected and formally assessed every six weeks in the form of portfolios. This meant that there was no daily “homework,” no immediate due dates or late penalties, and no extra credit. We wanted to see what
the students were able to do in front of us, not at home where extraneous factors play into the completion of homework. Therefore, students were constantly engaging in performance tasks in class with our supervision and feedback. There was also a significant amount of time devoted to self and peer reflection, as well as revision (students were able to revise any task at any time). At the end of each grading period, students “defended” their portfolios by presenting their evidence of mastery of the standards while their peers provided feedback on the rubric.

This may seem like a dramatic shift, but it matched well with the skill building and development we set out to measure. It also allowed students to interact with us in new ways. By being very open, honest, and transparent about how grading worked, students understood and were able to internalize what they needed to do to develop their skills. There was no mathematical equation of weighted points. They just had to hone the skills they were learning were critical to their own development as students. In this way, students began to have different conversations with us. Instead of asking about extra credit and what they had to do to make up work, we simply pointed to the rubric and told them they need to show us that they were able to demonstrate these skills. Scriffiny (2008, p. 71) discusses her shift to standards based grading in her high school math classes,

Many notions I had at the beginning of my career about grading didn’t stand up to real scrutiny. The thorny issue of homework is one example of how the status quo needed to change. I once thought it was essential to award points to students simply for completing homework. I didn’t believe students would do homework unless it was graded. And yet, in my classroom, students who were clearly learning sometimes earned low grades because of missing work. Conversely, some students actually learned very little but were good at “playing school.” Despite dismal test scores, these students earned decent grades by turning in homework and doing extra credit. They would often go on to struggle in later courses, while their parents watched and worried.

Our own experiences in the classroom taught us that student learning is often not translated to accurate and fair grading and feedback. We had seen many students who were really engaged in class and developing essential skills, but whose grades in conventional approaches to assessment never reflected that growth and skill development. We connected our work on assessment and grading to our ethics and our overall effort to engage our students. We did not want grading to be a weapon used against students. Instead, we used grading to help students begin to see themselves as we did and as their peers did. In our view, it was a moral issue and so our mantra was to reward students for what they do, not punish them for what they did not do. Because of this, many students who may have previously been unsuccessful in English or school in general were able to see their progress and in turn become more intrinsically motivated, more likely to be present in class, and continue their progress on achieving mastery of the skills. Students also felt the grading was fair and through teacher-led calibrations where we would look at student work and agree on scores, students actively understood and internalized what they needed to do in order to progress to the higher scores on the rubric.
Another key aspect of our approach to grading was utilizing the project-based learning approach rather than traditional assessment measures like tests and quizzes. The social justice project was set up in this way and when it came time for students to present and for other students to give feedback, the process was open and honest. This aligned with having summative grading only occur every six weeks and having formative feedback along the way. Having their peers reiterate what we as instructors said made it clear to the students where improvements needed to be made. Not every presentation was of the highest caliber, however every group did present and did give and get useful feedback. What we noticed from having the students participate in a meaningful, high-level project was that the students cared about the quality of the work much more than had it been a regular assignment, the inquiry process forced students to synthesize information and seek out answers on their own, and the work they produced was not only significant for content but also significant in their own growth and development. Ironically, this approach also led to students creating their own “homework.” By the end of the year, all of the groups were doing work outside of class, from research and reading, to data collection and working with communities, to developing and implementing interventions based on their findings, to preparing their presentations to share their findings.

None of this could have been possible if there was not the student buy-in that was created by filtering all of our decisions through our social justice ethics. Social Justice ethics was not and cannot be an afterthought. It must be an integral part of every classroom choice from setting up rules to grading to selection of content to instructional practices. It goes beyond equality and equity and into the realm of morality and responsibility. Most teachers will admit that teaching is not a job or even a career but a vocation. With this vocation there is a tremendous unspoken obligation to be compassionate, empathetic, and ultimately, caring. I once overheard a teacher respond to the question, “What is your philosophy on public education?” with an answer that reflects our approach to engaging Latina/o students: “It’s the backbone of democracy.” Her answer reminds us that when Latina/o students fail, not only are we ourselves failing as educators, we are failing them at something much larger.

Doing Ethnic Studies as a White Teacher

Being a white male, I initially had a sense of apprehension about teaching Latina/o Literature. The primary reason I had for creating the class was giving our students more of a choice in the curriculum. Given the demographics of the school (70% of the students are Latina/o), it was obvious that the class was needed. I was hoping that our class would make them feel part of the academic life in the school in ways that I had not often seen in our classes. This was not about me and my race, but it was about seeing my students’ strengths not being fully acknowledged or developed in our school. I did not yet know about in lak ech, but my students had taught it to me in the years before we developed this class. I began to understand this even before we began the school year. The more I prepared, the more obvious it became that the class was going to be about much more than just the curriculum. For me, as I reflected on the student needs I had seen in the past, the class became about “unlearning.” How do my students unlearn all of their preconceived notions,
how do they “undo” shame, how do they rediscover who they are as students and people? Learning to really see my students, to imagine what it was like to be in their shoes, had allowed me, as a white teacher, to ask these questions.

Many other teachers look at me awkwardly when I tell them I teach Latina/o Literature. Many students are surprised to see me standing in front of them on the first day of class, but instead of this being a barrier or hindrance, it acts as proof of the power of in lak ech. That initial anxiety is broken down and continues to fade away through creating a safe environment and connecting to students in the ways we have described in this chapter. Even though racially I am different, in lak ech teaches us how to see ourselves in the other, both through our similarities and our differences. The more I taught and got to know the students, the more I learned about them and my craft. Our class was a learning experience for me, as I learned to navigate the complexities of race and schooling, in an inverse reflection of the way my students navigate race in their daily lives in and out of the school as young adults. In writing my “counter-stories” alongside the students, I was also able to share on the same level as they did, which deepened the appreciation we developed for each other. Our emphasis on ethics allowed us to use race as a learning tool for students of all races and for me. This is the foundation of Latino Literature; we connect not because of our race but because we seek to acknowledge, appreciate, and understand each other in the most real and holistic way possible. Our work allowed us to create community in a multi-racial classroom, where my initial apprehension and the anxiety of the non-Latina/o students became just one of many lessons for us all.

Conclusion

Engaging disenfranchised Latina/o students requires that we strive to understand our students. We do not do this to coddle students, to make them feel sorry for themselves, or to give them excuses for not trying or for engaging in self-damaging behaviors. Rather, we want them to understand that they are seen and heard and that the challenges they have faced can be used as strengths. We want the curriculum to show them a reflection of their lives and experiences, through individual researchers and writers, which translates into a meaningful form of success that they can achieve. We want our pedagogy to expose them to the tools and build the skills that they can use to both “make sense” of their experiences and to translate those experiences into whatever they want to pursue in school and life. We want to embody an ethics that reflects, affirms and strengthens their own, showing them that it is possible to live these ethics in all facets of their lives in a way that honors their dignity and that of their families. Through these actions, we found that the students improved in their attendance, grades, test scores, but most importantly in their confidence, as they met the challenge of engaging in applied, transformative, theory building.25 In the end, we found that we not only engaged

25 We recognize the desire for “data” to support the benefits of this model that are highlighted in this article. Our findings from the first complete year of the program do include data that show our students exceed their peers in these areas. We are convinced, however, that the full benefits of this approach are not shown in end-of-
Latina/o students, we built meaningful relationships and a community of support that allowed them to envision a future for themselves that they began to see was attainable.

References


Pizarro, M. (2014c). The twists and turns of ethnic prejudice and discrimination: 21st century manifestations of historically entrenched racial ideologies. In M. [year data], as we know that the effects often take hold well after the class has ended. Furthermore, we are equally certain that if our work using this approach was mirrored by other teachers in one or more classes, the effects on students would be exponential. Our efforts to “obtain data” are on-going and will likely be a work-in-progress for some time.


