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# Telling Stories About School: Using Critical Race and Latino Critical Theories to Document Latina/Latino Education and Resistance

Lilia Fernández  
*University of California, San Diego*

*Education researchers have increasingly begun to use critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical theory (LatCrit) in their qualitative studies. This article draws on those methodological and theoretical frameworks to examine the educational experience of a Latino student in a public high school in Chicago, Illinois. By exploring this student's narrative, the author gained insight into how the student understood his own personal educational experience as well as that of his fellow Latina/Latino classmates. Moreover, this narrative highlights how he and his classmates resisted inadequate schooling by sometimes choosing alternative activities or practices over attending school. The author argues that it is of critical importance to use Latina/Latino students' stories, not as accessories to our research but as the centerpiece of qualitative studies that aim for a better understanding of the issues these students face in contemporary schooling.*

The last two decades have seen an unprecedented emergence of research on Latina/Latino education.<sup>1</sup> The growth rate of the Latina/Latino population in the United States and, more specifically, the increased enrollment of Latina/Latino children in kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) public education has warranted a focus on Latina/Latino educational issues.<sup>2</sup> Discussions on Latina/Latino education, however, have often been characterized by "crisis talk," emphasizing quantitative indicators of educational failure. Qualitative research on K-12 Latina/Latino education at times still offers evidence of educational failure but provides more in-depth, descriptive accounts (Carger, 1996; Moncada-Davidson, 1996; Sola & Bennett, 1991; Soto, 1997; Suarez-Orozco, 1987; Tapia, 1998). Some recent qualitative work has even begun to focus more specifically on student "voice" and narrative (Casey, 1995; Davidson, 1996; Miron & Lauria, 1998). But as Marcos Pizarro (1999) points out in reviewing the literature on Chicana/Chicano students, "Research that address[es] the critical problems facing Chicanas/[Chican]os in the schools [does] not include the students' perspectives to any substantial degree" (p. 55). What gets left out, then, if we do not hear students' voices?

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How complete of a picture can we get about Latina/Latino education if we rely only on the dominant (school) discourse?

A number of education scholars have begun to use critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical theory (LatCrit) in educational research, some focusing mainly on teacher education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn, 1999; Solórzano, 1997), others using CRT in a broader range of qualitative research (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Tate, 1997).<sup>3</sup> Both CRT and LatCrit have the potential to contribute significantly to the work done on and about students of color. These theoretical frameworks prioritize the social categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality and recognize them not only as social constructions but also as categories that have material effects on real people. CRT and LatCrit place the marginalized participant at the center of analysis (Valdes, 1998). Methodologically, they direct us to capture the stories, counter-stories, and narratives of marginalized people. They suggest that we must recognize and address the lives of students of color who are often the objects of our educational research and yet are often absent from or silenced within this discourse.

This article aims to capture one such story to get a better sense of how contemporary urban public schooling fails Latina/Latino students. This story comes from Pablo,<sup>4</sup> a Latino college student who reflects on his educational experience in a Chicago public high school. My interviews with Pablo are informed by CRT and LatCrit as interdisciplinary, race-based interpretive theoretical frameworks as well as methodological tools with which to explore issues in Latina/Latino education. By exploring this student's narrative, we gain insight into how he understood his own personal educational experience as well as that of his fellow Latina/Latino classmates. Moreover, this narrative gives us insight into how he and his classmates resisted inadequate schooling by sometimes choosing alternative activities or practices over attending school.

## OVERVIEW OF LATINA/LATINO EDUCATION

Although there has been a growing interest in Latina/Latino education, the areas that we are today identifying as problems are not new. An important body of scholarship documents the educational inequities that have historically affected the Mexican American community since the early 20th century, specifically in the Southwest (Donato, 1997; Sanchez, 1940; San Miguel, 1987; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Chicano student activism of the 1960s, including the 1968 East Los Angeles school walkouts, which protested the inferior and inadequate conditions of Mexican schools, provides additional evidence that these problems have been plaguing Latina/Latino communities for decades.<sup>5</sup> This was not the first such response to inferior schooling, however:

Mexican Americans had walked out of schools in San Angelo, Texas, as early as 1910. Equally significant are the numerous legal challenges that Mexican Americans have waged against racially segregated schooling for Mexican American children long before African Americans succeeded in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).<sup>6</sup> The legal cases of *Independent School District v. Salvatierra* (1930, 1931), *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove* (1931), *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946, 1947), and *Delgado, et al. v. Bastrop Independent School District* (1948) are some early examples.<sup>7</sup>

Educational research on Latinas/Latinos has often focused on low academic achievement. Among issues affecting Latina/Latino students are segregated schools, inequities in school finance, lack of bilingual education programs, and tracking into vocational and special education classes, to name just a few. At federal and state levels, policy bodies have expressed concern over what has been labeled a *crisis of Hispanic*<sup>8</sup> *education*.<sup>9</sup> Although such research and policy reports may document educational conditions that affect Latina/Latino students, they seldom incorporate students' own perspectives on their education. Moreover, they do not acknowledge how these students cope with or respond to these educational conditions.

## CRT AND LATCRIT IN EDUCATION

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have adopted CRT methods and theoretical frameworks in educational research (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Parker, 1998; Solórzano, 1997; Tate, 1997).<sup>10</sup> Solórzano (1998) outlines five tenets of CRT in education as follows: (a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the interdisciplinary perspective. Villenas, Deyhle, and Parker (1999) point out that "a CRT analysis of local schooling practice can reveal the racism undergirding typical schooling practices related to tracking or ability grouping, disciplinary procedures, testing, and curriculum and instruction" (p. 33).

LatCrit also offers epistemological, methodological, and theoretical contributions to educational research but has not yet been adopted as widely as CRT in the educational field. LatCrit has been defined as "the emerging field of legal scholarship that examines critically the social and legal positioning of Latinas/Latinos, especially Latinas/Latinos within the United States, to help rectify the shortcomings of existing social and legal conditions" (Valdes, 1998, p. 3). According to Valdes, LatCrit incorporates the following four functions: (a) the production of knowledge, (b) the advancement of transformation, (c) the expansion and connection of struggle(s), and (d) the cultivation of community and coalition. Carrying out educational research through a CRT and

LatCrit lens makes sense when we consider that “the classroom—where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed—is a central site for the construction of social and racial power” (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 5).

## METHOD

CRT and LatCrit identify storytelling, giving voice, or naming one’s own reality as key elements of legal scholarship and important tools for achieving racial emancipation (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Montoya, 1995). Epistemologically, CRT and LatCrit privilege the experiential knowledge of people of color as critical ways of knowing and naming racism and other forms of oppression. Moreover, CRT and LatCrit offer an important analytical intervention—they place race and other socially constructed categories at the center of analysis. CRT and LatCrit do not view race as peripheral or incidental to the experiences of people of color. Rather, race, racialization, and racism are central to such narratives.

For CRT and LatCrit scholars, storytelling or narrative serves several important methodological functions and benefits the person of color in a number of ways. First, it allows the participant to reflect on his or her lived experience. In this case, storytelling allowed my informant Pablo to reflect on his experience within a public educational institution. Second, narrative allows the marginalized participant to speak or make public his or her story. This of course happens within a mediated setting and usually within, although not limited to, a particular arena—the academy. Third, storytelling or counter-storytelling also subverts the dominant story or the reality that is socially constructed by Whites (Delgado, 1995). By offering an alternative to the master narrative (Ladson-Billings, 1998), it places the truthfulness and “objectivity” of that narrative in question. Finally, storytelling can also be transformative and empowering. Sharing one’s stories with others raises the individual’s consciousness of common experiences and opens up the possibility for social action. For researchers and educators, studying the experiences of marginalized Latina/Latino students is especially instructive. By looking to the marginal (and often misunderstood) sociocultural practices of Latina/Latino youth, we get a deeper understanding of how they are oppressed but, at the same time, use their personal agency to resist their social conditions.

Critics of CRT and a related form of storytelling, *testimonio*, often charge that such narratives may not always be “true” or “objective” (Farber & Sherry, 1995; Stoll, as cited in Beverly, 2000). They claim that such stories may have a political agenda beneath them or that they may not be typical or accurate. Tied up in these critiques are questions of objectivity. Yet, most qualitative researchers have agreed that objectivity is not a tenable or useful principle in such work. Who is to say what is objective? How exactly is data “objective”?

What type of methods will ensure objectivity? Most qualitative researchers agree that such questions are irrelevant and counterproductive and recognize instead that all research is subjective and that the researcher's subjectivity enters any research endeavor.

Education scholars who use CRT and LatCrit should be aware that stories or narratives are mediated communicative events. The stories I have gathered through my research are mediated by me as the researcher and as a Latina doctoral student. These narratives are also produced under conditions dictated by academic research norms. In other words, these stories are constructed; there is no pure, complete story out there waiting to be recorded. Such a story can never be captured nor does it exist. Whatever story we do record is necessarily constructed by the individuals engaged in the interview process. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the value of such stories as testimonies to racism and other forms of oppression.

The story I analyze in this article is part of a larger research project on Latina/Latino youth culture and schooling. This project explores how Latina/Latino youth culture in the city of Chicago both reflects and is constitutive of Latina/Latino ethno-racial identity. It also analyzes how Latina/Latino teenagers take active roles not only as consumers but also as producers of a unique local youth subculture. I began this study in the spring of 1999, interviewing four Latina/Latino high school students (three young men and one young woman). In the fall of 1999, I interviewed two Latino college students and one Latina high school student. Since then, I have continued interviewing Latina/Latino high school and college students.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative I explore here comes from my meetings with Pablo, a Latino student at a Midwestern university. Pablo and I met twice, and our conversations lasted about an hour and a half each. This is the same format I followed with the other college student I interviewed at this university. Prior to our meeting, I e-mailed the participants with a general description of the purpose of my study to familiarize them with my topic and my personal interest in conducting this research. At the beginning of our meeting, I reiterated the focus of my study. Thus, the participants had a point of reference for our conversation. The interviews were unstructured and did not have a formal set of questions (although in the second interviews, I did follow up on issues and/or questions raised in our first meetings). I began the initial interviews by asking each student to tell me about growing up in Chicago and the schools they attended. Having grown up in Chicago as well, I felt there were an affinity and a sense of familiarity between me and the participants as they made references to local institutions, cultural practices, and places I was able to recognize. The interviews went into their own (and markedly different) directions, guided only by the topics my interviewees brought up and by my further probing into some of those topics.

The interviews with Pablo proved very useful, as he raised some very important issues about his educational experience that I was not expecting.

Although we began by talking generally about his high school experience, he offered tremendous insight into how his experience was shaped as an immigrant, as someone whose native language is Spanish, and as a Latino student in the classroom with predominantly White teachers. Thus, he established an important context within which to examine the youth cultural practices that are central to my study.

Gathering experiential knowledge about public education in Chicago from a student who actually went through the system is invaluable. It not only provides firsthand testimony but also serves as a counter-story to the dominant school narrative. I supplement Pablo's narrative with quantitative data on the school as well. But Pablo's story makes that data so much more meaningful by offering a real, firsthand account of the phenomenon that such statistics try to capture.

Although storytelling can often record the violence of racial and other oppressions, CRT and LatCrit also suggest that the narrator's experiences can be potentially liberating. As Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) point out, CRT

views race, gender, or class marginality as important social locations and processes, with many positive strengths, and as rich sources of information used to empower or transform those at the social margins. . . . the margins can and should be viewed as both sites of oppression and sites of resistance, empowerment, and transformation. (p. 215)

Thus, although much of Pablo's narrative emphasizes the degradation of racist school practices toward Latina/Latino students, it also highlights the ways in which students resisted those practices.

CRT also serves as an interpretive tool by guiding what we listen to in other's stories. I organize Pablo's narrative along the themes he raised in our interviews—race, students, and teacher expectations; vocational training; resisting and/or rejecting school; failing students; and students' lack of awareness about how the educational system operates against them.

## **SUCCESSFUL LATINA/ LATINO STUDENTS: PABLO'S STORY**

By many accounts, Pablo is a "success story": He came to the United States from Central America at the age of 11, quickly learned English in an effective bilingual education program, mainstreamed into regular English classes by 10th grade, graduated from high school, and finished his bachelor's degree. Considering that only 2.7% of all Latinas/Latinos in the city of Chicago hold a bachelor's degree or higher and that foreign-born Latinas/Latinos in particular have extremely low educational attainment levels (U.S. Bureau of the Cen-

sus, 1991), his is an exceptional accomplishment. Despite his success, Pablo was quite critical of his educational preparation in high school.

Pablo attended Metro High School,<sup>12</sup> a public school in Chicago, from the fall of 1991 through the spring of 1995. Metro does not have any magnet or other special career or academic programs and is therefore considered a regular neighborhood school with a fairly diverse racial/ethnic composition. In 1995 (the year Pablo graduated), Metro's student body was 65% Hispanic, 17% Black, 13% White, 4% Asian American, and 1% Native American. Of these students, 17% were labeled *limited English proficiency* and 65% were considered low income. (In the 2 years prior, however, these figures were much higher: In 1994, 78% of all students were identified as low income, and in 1993, 92% were.)<sup>13</sup>

There were many issues raised in Pablo's narrative. He explained that he had a positive experience in a good bilingual education program in grammar school and was able to learn English fairly quickly. Once he got to high school, however, things changed. The English as a second language (ESL) classes at Metro were not very challenging, and he felt that academic learning was not stressed enough. Pablo explained:

My first 2 years [were] pretty bad because I was in ESL actually . . . I was learning English . . . Being in the ESL class, it kind of isolates you a little bit . . . [In] a certain way, they lower your level, or expectations, the teacher does.

Pablo felt that teachers often underestimated the abilities of Spanish-speaking students who were not yet fluent in English. He was quite talented in math, however. Had it not been for a teacher taking notice of his exceptional math abilities, Pablo may not have taken the courses that helped him get to college. He explained, "It used to be 3 years [required] for math [in high school] . . . and I took 5 years . . . algebra, geometry, trigonometry, precalculus, and then calculus." He was able to do this by taking summer school classes and with the encouragement of several supportive teachers who helped move him out of the low-level ESL curriculum. After ninth grade in an ESL algebra class, he was placed into regular math classes. By the 10th grade, Pablo was mainstreamed out of ESL classes altogether.

## RACE, STUDENTS, AND TEACHER EXPECTATIONS

Pablo described a school in which most of the predominantly White teachers were out of touch with their students and did not seem to enjoy their jobs: "A lot of the teachers were old . . . not old like old people, but they were old in their thinking." In Pablo's eyes, teachers held patronizing (racist) beliefs and attitudes about their students. Moreover, they did not seem committed to

their profession as teachers. Pablo thought many of them behaved as if “they got stuck with the job.” They seemed to care little about students’ learning, and students in turn cared even less. They did not motivate or encourage students who, as a result, saw little reason to stay in class:

I know for a fact those teachers . . . saw the kids and [thought], “Poor kids, they don’t know anything.” So, their level of expectations were . . . on the ground. So nobody would do anything. . . . The teachers wouldn’t push you and . . . there wasn’t a future goal or anything . . . you know, “OK, well finish high school and then cool” . . . So, yeah, we cut classes a lot.

Pablo does mention that among the predominantly White faculty, there were some “liberal” or “progressive” teachers who did care about their students and tried to challenge them.

There was a small group of teachers, and everybody used to say those are the real hard teachers or whatever. But I think that was the group of teachers who probably had the best intentions throughout the whole group because they would try to push you harder and set those higher levels of expectations for you and push you in front of the rest of other classes because they were basically dragging you down. And so, you know, they would come down on you harder for missing their class on them. They would go out of their way . . . not to punish you, but to give you extra work or something . . . And those were probably the people that were against that whole [disciplinary] system where . . . after three tardies, you’d get a detention; for every cut you’d get a detention . . . They were really against that. They were more for “OK, well you missed my class and you have to make up the work.” And then you have to do that. Or they would use intimidation with us and [say], “You have to come to class.” I mean, I think their intentions weren’t that they wanted to be mean, but you know . . . they wanted the kids to be in class and learn what they had to do.

Pablo understood that not all teachers at his school were bad. Some did in fact challenge their students and took their teaching seriously. Among those, Pablo included the math teachers who motivated him and encouraged him to take higher level math classes. But his portrayal of these teachers as good also raises some questions about the school’s practices and treatment of a predominantly minority student population.

Even “good” teachers struggled within the school system.

There’s some teachers that are bad, like my algebra teacher . . . But there’s other teachers that have the good intentions. Like my English teacher, she had good intention[s], but . . . I think she had been there so long and . . . the department, the curricul[a] are so set sometimes that they can’t really do anything to change it. And then if they start pushing everybody so hard, then they get the rep[utation] of being the bad teacher, more people cut from their class. . . . So, it’s kind of like an endless cycle for them. As long as nobody gives them help from the outside, then the teachers are kind of caught in this cycle, like, do you make the class easier so more kids come? Or do you make it hard so that everybody starts cutting? How do you serve your purpose?

He also acknowledged these issues are quite complicated and that there are no easy answers. Even those teachers who were committed to their work as educators found themselves in a difficult position.

### DEVELOPING “VOCATIONAL TRAITS” RATHER THAN COLLEGE SKILLS

This difficult position teachers had to negotiate often led them to target the lowest common denominator among the student body. The school did not offer a rigorous academic curriculum. Rather, the school’s policies reflected a focus on discipline. According to Pablo, academics were not a priority. He explained,

A lot of the focus of that school was on timing and attendance . . . everything had to be on time . . . people had to show up, you know. . . . So they focused on that a lot. It focused more [on] the vocational traits . . . to get ‘em ready to be [at] work on time and you know, to go to work everyday kind of thing.

Pablo felt that the school placed little emphasis on content material in the classroom and instead emphasized discipline and what he called *vocational traits*. This attitude toward students of color—emphasis on discipline, focus on vocational training—has been well documented by other scholars (see Deyhle, 1995; Miron & Lauria, 1998). Deyhle (1995) found very racist practices by schoolteachers, counselors, and administrators in two high schools on a Navajo reservation where Navajo students were tracked into vocational classes and given false promises of future employment if they completed the vocational-technical curriculum. As these students discovered, however, they rarely had technical jobs waiting for them after graduation.

Interestingly enough, however, Pablo was not one of those students being tracked into a vocation: He was actually college bound. Even so, the rigor of his academic preparation was questionable. Such lack of academic rigor in curricula at schools that serve predominantly students of color has been addressed in literature on CRT and education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Pablo discussed what were considered “advanced” classes at Metro,

Advanced English was writing two papers the whole year . . . We didn’t read. We read . . . *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* . . . and little exercises here and there. . . . You know, where I come here [the university] and you write a paper every week if not more. I mean, in your freshman year. And that kills! For me, freshman year, a three-page paper was like a 20-page paper! . . . A 2- or 3-day project for me, ‘cuz three pages was a lot to write even in one week. I was like, “Oh my God! I’ve never done that.” I . . . probably wrote 10 pages in 2 years [in high school] . . . and that was the advanced class. So, you know, it gets me thinking, man . . . how much did the other classes do?

Pablo realized that what was considered an advanced English class did not prepare him adequately for college freshman writing assignments. He also recognized that if he wasn't well prepared in the higher track, then his peers in lower level classes were even less prepared.

The weak curriculum was also reflected in a grading system in which students could get away with quite a bit and still manage to get good grades. He attributed this to the fact that classes did not really cover much material and so, if one missed class, one did not really miss much content:

No, I don't think it [cutting class] really affected anything. It wasn't like we were moving fast in the class and I was gonna miss out . . . I remember . . . one year, I think it was my junior year. I had like 70 tardies or something, and that was a lot . . . and then I had 10 or 15 cuts. But even still, I had a B average grade. So it just shows you how much you can get away with and still be what they would call a good [student] . . . [get] good grades or whatever. I don't know, it wasn't too good.

Because Pablo was a very bright student, he was able to get decent grades although he missed so much class time. This would suggest that either the classes were not very challenging for an advanced student (and thus were not serving him well) or that they really were not serving any students well at all.

#### **"RESISTING FROM THE MARGINS"<sup>14</sup>**

As Pablo explained, cutting class was fairly widespread and commonplace among his classmates. From what he describes, this was students' response to an educational system that was failing them miserably.

Everybody did it. It was the normal thing . . . I mean it wasn't the whole school, but it was . . . probably, I'd say, 50% of the people in school would cut at one time or another and not really be like, "Oh, you know, it's bad."

Although his estimate of how many students cut class may not be accurate, what is important is the attitude students had toward cutting. Students did not seem to think that they would miss much by not being in school. As Pablo's example shows, in some respects, they were right.

In 1995, Metro officially reported an 80% attendance rate and a 23% chronic truancy rate (257 out of 1,117 students were considered chronic truants).<sup>15</sup> But according to Pablo, the school dealt with truancy in a peculiar way. He believes the school was motivated by financial incentives to count its students, specifically during the first two periods of the day and homeroom. If students cut school after they were accounted for in attendance rolls, there were fewer repercussions.

A lot of people would get away with coming the first two periods, to homeroom, and then leave because at homeroom, you get marked down for attendance for

the school . . . which I think, I'm not sure, I think in turn gives them money at the end. Like, this is the number of kids we had . . . So they focused on that a lot . . . if you missed homeroom, then that was a big deal. Then, after that, they would start sending the . . . truant officer? And you know, all that stuff. If you missed homeroom, that was like an absent day. But, if you . . . did not miss homeroom, but then you cut three other classes, you might get a detention if the teacher sends a slip.

So, the figures the school reports may not accurately reflect the actual number of students who were absent from class at one time or another. Following this pattern of checking in for morning attendance, students would often leave school during or after lunch. Some would go to "daytimes"—parties held during school hours at people's homes while parents are away at work—or hang out in other public or private spaces around the city.

We would go to the daytime parties or go to the lake and drive around or something . . . even cut classes and stay in school . . . go hang out at the gym . . . It wasn't like big numbers . . . maybe 200 people would go or something, 100 people, 150 . . . There was a lot of little get-togethers too. You would always find someone who's leaving after lunch to go with their friends to their house . . . like 10 people or something.

Again, although these may not be accurate estimates, it suggests widespread truancy among Metro students.

But cutting wasn't simply indicative of teenagers gone bad, refusing to stay in class either because they simply didn't care or because they had an oppositional stance toward education (Ogbu, 1998). Some students were also leaving school for other reasons such as to support the family in various ways, including working a job and bringing in an income.

Some people wouldn't do it just to go have fun . . . They'd be like, "Well, I guess I gotta go" or "I have to go to work" or something . . . They had to go back home to take care of the kids . . . (not their kids but the family) . . . Or they had to go with their parents and translate for them . . . I know two guys [who were brothers] who used to be on the wrestling team . . . and they would work! I mean, those guys worked like about 10 hours after school. I mean, we wrestled 'til 3 or 4, then they worked 'til . . . midnight or 1 at a restaurant. But sometimes they would get the day shift. So they would leave . . . They would come to the first two classes, and then we'd have our division or homeroom . . . and then after that, they would have to go to work and then come back for wrestling practices, or not come back . . . And I heard a lot of people talking, saying, "I gotta go take care of my little brothers, 'cuz, you know, both of my parents are working this week" . . . I left a couple times too 'cuz I had to do things like that.

Students then weren't simply leaving school just for leisure; some of them had family or work obligations they prioritized over inadequate schooling.

It is important to recognize students' agency within this practice of cutting school. After all, they chose to do this, succumbing to peer pressure, responding to family needs, or just simply being fed up with school. But in contrast to Ogbu's (1998) oversimplified theory of "educational opposition" by involun-

tary minorities, I would argue that these young people were practicing what Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) call *critical resistant navigational skills*. They did not merely exhibit an oppositional stance to education based on innate cultural characteristics. They chose to resist an educational process they recognized as little more than a holding pen before releasing them into a lifetime of low-skilled, low-wage labor (Deyhle, 1995; Willis, 1998). In contrast to students in Miron and Lauria's (1998) study, however, who did "whatever it took to graduate" as a form of resistance, these students left school to engage in more meaningful activities, whatever those activities were. But this wasn't necessarily transformative resistance with social justice in mind.<sup>16</sup> Some of these young people saw more value in helping provide much needed income to their impoverished families in the present rather than staying in a school that was preparing them for little more than the low-wage work they were already performing. (Again, during the years Pablo attended Metro, between 65% and 92% of all students came from low-income families.) This might be more accurately characterized as what Robinson and Ward (1991) call *resistance for survival*, although this term identifies some negative or self-defeating practices in Robinson and Ward's study. I believe the Metro students' behavior is somewhat more empowering in that some are actually engaging in practices (work) that provide them and their families with real material necessities.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, although the school aimed to train and prepare these students for low-skilled vocations, these students circumvented the school by seeking out employment experience on their own. Their work practices, although in conflict with the school's policy of keeping students within its walls during school hours, might be more helpful in securing them future employment than the lessons that they were missing in class.

For those who cut school to go to parties, however, the parties and socializing provided an alternative community or what Sola and Bennett (1991) describe as an alternative discourse.<sup>18</sup> Even choosing "leisure" activities instead of being in school might be interpreted as a form of resistance.<sup>19</sup> The "daytime" scene is not only a site for youthful pleasure but also a space in which to both find and assert a sense of identity and community. This is especially true for teens who did not see their own ethnic, racial, and cultural identities reflected within school walls, in the curriculum, or among the faculty. The music, style, and cultural practices of these young people were indeed visibly marked as racialized and urbanized forms. The clothing, cars, and music that these young people value mark them as distinctively different from mainstream suburban White teens. Consuming and producing these cultural forms is also an emancipatory exercise and a meaning-making practice for young people who feel not only marginalized but indeed abandoned by the public school system.

**TABLE 1: Metro High School Total Enrollment, 1998-1999**

<i>Grade</i>	N
9	347
10	292
11	232
12	167
Total	1,038

Source: Chicago public schools Web site, <http://www.cps.edu>

## FAILING STUDENTS

Chicago public school graduation rates reflect this failure to educate young people not only at Metro but also citywide. In 1995, Metro had a 23% drop-out rate and an abysmally low graduation rate—56%.<sup>20</sup> This statistic might best be articulated as what some educators call the school's *holding power*—a school's ability to retain and graduate students. Indeed, the school's enrollment figures for 1998-1999 are listed in Table 1.

The school loses more than half of its freshman class by the time those students get to senior year. Although we cannot be certain that these numbers necessarily reflect students dropping out all together (some students may be transferring to other schools or districts), they illustrate a dramatic attrition rate that should be cause for concern. Metro's graduation rate in the 1997-1998 school year continued to be low—58%—compared with a systemwide graduation rate of 65%, which is not much better.

By carefully examining Pablo's story, we also get a sense that students internalize what they rightfully perceive to be a racialized discourse in the school. Pablo remembered the student composition at Metro as 3% White, 7% Black, and 90% Latino. This is significantly different than the actual racial composition his senior year—65% Hispanic, 17% Black, 13% White, 4% Asian American, and 1% Native American. But rather than simply dismissing this as an inaccurate or unreliable observation (Farber & Sherry, 1995, make this critique of CRT storytelling), I argue that this perception of the student body reinforces his perception of White teachers' racialized practices against a predominantly minority population. In his experience, Pablo saw White teachers who for the most part had low expectations and little hope for Latina/Latino and African American students. Whether he accurately accounted for the racial composition of the student body is less important. What is important in his experience is that the majority of students in his high school were students of color and that those students were receiving an inadequate education and resisting and responding in their own ways.

Metro continues to have a student population that is overwhelmingly non-white (88%) but where the majority of teachers are White.<sup>21</sup> Systemwide, students of color<sup>22</sup> make up 90% of the student enrollment in Chicago public schools but are taught by a faculty that is 45% White.<sup>23</sup> Pablo's narrative and school statistics point to a particular racial logic that seems to operate not only in schools but also across American society. Students of color seem to be racialized (on a broad societal level) as a low-wage labor force. This racialized identity persists when students walk through school doors or into classrooms. Teachers and administrators may not be aware of their own "dysconscious" or "unconscious" racism (King, 1991; Lawrence, 1995). They may hold certain racialized perceptions about students and their abilities and promise for the future that are continuously influenced by broader societal racism.<sup>24</sup> Teachers' assumptions about minority students and their families are shaped or reinforced by the portrayals of minorities in the evening news (as criminals), in legislative and political debates (as undeserving welfare recipients or unqualified affirmative action beneficiaries), in discussions about social services (as irresponsible young men and unwed pregnant teen girls), and in the political economy (as low-skilled, low-wage workers—janitors, housekeepers, fast food workers—or worse yet, as unemployed and unemployable). Thus, students are not expected, encouraged, or enabled to attend college.

### "A CIRCLE YOU CAN'T SEE"

Pablo's narrative reveals that although his classmates may not have consciously realized the racist practices that victimized them, they understood to some extent that the school was not serving them adequately or equitably:

*Pablo:* No, in high school I never even thought about it [the school's tracking and vocational curriculum]. And then, the thing is, I never had anything else to compare it to. So, I didn't know how different a suburban school was or another high school in the city but with different purposes.

*Author:* Do you think other students realized that in high school?

*Pablo:* From my high school? Probably not a lot. A couple. . . . Not that it's hard to figure out, but if you never get out of the situation, it's hard to analyze it. . . . It's like a circle you can't see. But a couple of people that I talked to, they didn't realize it, but they're like, "Yeah, it was a shitty school." They realized that much.

He explains, however, that now, after struggling through college and seeing the types of schools other students come from, he understands much more. He has also witnessed his Metro classmates who came to college with him and struggled as well.

Three of us came here [from Metro], and one girl left. And the other guy stayed because they switched him to ESL. He couldn't handle the regular [freshman writing] classes.

Now, see . . . back then, I didn't know. I didn't know stuff. . . . But I guess now, being here, I've analyzed the way the school was [run], the way things were done, and why. And so, you read and you've learned, "Damn! That was tracking!" or "That was vocational!" . . . and back then, I just thought everybody was lazy and didn't wanna go to class.

Pablo's narrative suggests that he has thoughtfully reflected on his high school experiences and that he recognizes many challenges in public schools. Despite his poor high school experience, Pablo is a sharp, critical thinker. He is a talented, ambitious young man who has aspirations of becoming a teacher. It is especially gratifying to know that someone as thoughtful and reflective as Pablo might step into the classroom himself and hopefully shape his teaching practices and methods with an eye toward countering the negative experiences of his own schooling. Although Pablo had probably reflected on his high school experience before I interviewed him, my hope is that our intensive conversations prompted him to further examine and question his future role as a teacher. Indeed, this is the space in critical race research that allows for transformation. Telling one's narrative or counter-story can have a liberating or emancipatory element to it. Pablo, I am certain, will be an incredibly gifted, transformative teacher.

## CONCLUSION

By placing Latina/Latino educational experiences at the center of educational research about them, we gain a richer understanding of urban public schooling. This narrative provides a story of one particular high school, specifically from a student's perspective. Teachers' and administrators' stories would perhaps be different. The school's faculty might defend their intentions and practices as good. These teachers might not recognize their dysconscious or unconscious racism.<sup>25</sup> They may have cultural deficit models to explain their students' failures. And they may cling tenaciously to their few successes, such as Pablo (see Moncada-Davidson, 1996, or Suarez-Orozco, 1987, for stories of successful Central American students). Indeed, definitions of success may vary widely and are contingent upon people's expectations of what they see as realistic. Metro High School teachers and administrators might see the numbers they do graduate as a success. And they may see a high school diploma for some of these students as the best they can expect of them.

In hearing Pablo's story, we feel the need to hear the stories of others at Metro High School as well. Stories such as this one barely begin to scratch the surface of a potentially rich field of research. There are so many directions that

such work could take within high schools, and there is much more that LatCrit could potentially offer to Latina/Latino educational research. For example, we could explore a comparison between White teachers and teachers of color in educating Latina/Latino students, tracking and curriculum, English-language instruction for limited English proficiency students, and college and vocational preparation. We could also carefully study issues in higher education such as how public schools are preparing inner-city Latina/Latino students to enter 4-year colleges. We could explore a broad array of issues regarding the quality of education of these young people.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on CRT and LatCrit methods and theoretical frameworks is critical to our understanding of Latina/Latino education as researchers. We are prompted to consider the lives of Latina/Latino students more seriously and to question what bearing the quality of their education actually has on their life chances. What of those young people who didn't "succeed"? The ones who didn't go to college or who didn't even graduate, or the ones who did graduate but are barely literate? Where are they and what have their lives been like since they left high school? What are their prospects for the future? Such questions are often left unanswered in educational research.

Narratives, storytelling, and counter-stories can be transformative and empowering for educators, students, and community members. These methods can make public what many already know but have not spoken out loud: There are futures and lives at stake in the process we call *education*. Using experiential knowledge, challenging dominant ideologies, and acknowledging the centrality of race in American life help us uncover and understand school practices and students' responses to those practices, which we might not otherwise discover.

## NOTES

1. The publication of the *Latinos and Education* anthology (Darder, Torres, & Gutiérrez, 1997) as well as special issues on Latina/Latino education in scholarly journals attest to this increased interest in Latina/Latino education. The *Harvard Educational Review* (Volume 68, Issue 2) devoted its summer of 1998 issue to Puerto Rican education, whereas *Urban Education* (Volume 29, Issue 4) devoted its January 1995 issue to Hispanics and urban education.

2. The U.S. Department of Education cites a 9.3% increase in the number of Latina/Latino students as a proportion of total public school enrollment in Grades 1 through 12. In 1972, Latina/Latino students represented 5.8% of total public school enrollment in these grades. In 1998, Latino students have become 15.1% of that student population. It should be noted that these statistics do not include Latina/Latino students in parochial or private schools, which increases the total numbers of Latina/Latino students in all elementary and secondary U.S. schools. (Department of Education's *The Condition of Education 2000*, available online at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/coe2000>).

3. In fact, the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (Volume 11, Issue 1) dedicated an entire volume to critical race theory (CRT) in educational research.

4. This is a pseudonym.

5. For an excellent analysis of Chicana/Chicano student resistance in the 1968 East Los Angeles school walkouts, see Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001).

6. Indeed, one criticism I would make of CRT writing (and an intervention that Latino critical theory [LatCrit] offers by breaking out of the Black-White binary) is its almost exclusive focus on the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as the key historical moment for desegregation. Although indeed *Brown* set the legal precedent for desegregation orders as the first Supreme Court ruling on the issue, several other lower courts had ruled that segregation was unconstitutional prior to *Brown*. Here, I am less concerned with the power of the courts to set legal precedent than I am with the fact that these legal battles are a critical part of the Mexican American historical narrative. Those cases were important in Mexican American collective history and symbolize the long and ardent battles Mexican Americans have fought for equitable education. For an interesting discussion of how racial dualism works against Latinos in the United States by not protecting them from discrimination and segregation within a Black-White paradigm, see Delgado (1997).

7. See San Miguel and Valencia (1998) for a discussion of these cases.

8. Although I prefer the term *Latina/Latino* and use it throughout the article, I use the term *Hispanic* in the cases where it is the official term used for statistical reporting or by educational agencies.

9. I discuss how federal educational policy discourse has characterized Latina/Latino education in further detail in an unpublished paper (Fernández, 2000).

10. Understandably, there has not been as much emphasis on incorporating LatCrit and methods in educational research on Latino students as LatCrit is a nascent field in legal studies and has not been around as long as CRT.

11. I dislike using the term *interview*, as it suggests a much more formal and structured process than what I try to accomplish with my informants. Such formal language can also make my informants feel uncomfortable or intimidated, as many of them are unfamiliar with the nature of academic research and have rarely interacted with a university researcher. But because we have not created any new language to describe our research methods, I am limited to this current vocabulary.

12. This is a pseudonym.

13. All data are taken from the Chicago public schools Web site, <http://www.cps.edu>. I do not give any further citation for this Web site to maintain the anonymity of the school.

14. This term is borrowed from Solórzano and Villalpando's (1998) work on students of color and resistance in higher education.

15. Data are taken from the Chicago public schools Web site, <http://www.cps.edu>.

16. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) provide a typology of four different forms of resistance—reactionary behavior, self-defeating resistance, conformist resistance, and transformative resistance. Within Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's typology, transformative resistance is oppositional behavior that both includes a critique of social oppression and is motivated by social justice.

17. See note 16 and preceding text.

18. Sola and Bennett (1991) discuss this alternative or "sub rosa discourse" within the classroom. My use of this term, however, extends beyond the classroom to other parts of the school such as the gym and hallways and outside the school.

19. This practice, however, would probably be characterized as "self-defeating resistance" within Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) typology in that it includes a critique of social oppression but is not motivated by social justice.

20. Data are taken from the Chicago public schools Web site, <http://www.cps.edu>.

21. Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain an exact racial breakdown of the school's faculty.

22. This includes Latino, African American, Asian American, and Native American students.

23. Data are for the 1998-1999 school year; <http://www.cps.edu>.

24. This would include both White teachers and teachers of color, as they are all socialized in an environment that racializes non-Whites in denigrating ways. In other words, teachers of color may also hold racist beliefs about students of color from their own racial groups.

25. Again, here I am referring not only to White teachers but also to teachers of color. See note 24 and preceding text.

26. These questions are important particularly given that much of the city of Chicago is undergoing urban renewal under the current mayor, Richard J. Daley. The neighborhood in which Metro High School is located has seen a dramatic shift in its local population as wealthier residents have moved into the neighborhood and increased property values dramatically. Although most of these young professionals are either childless or have young children at present, we must wonder how Metro will change as their children reach high school age. Closely related to this are the reform efforts of Chicago public school's C.E.O. Paul Vallas (again under Mayor Daley's direction). Many schools are becoming magnet schools or "academic" or "career" academies. Metro High School recently acquired a foreign language program, changing its designation to an academy in the city's school choice program.

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*Lilia Fernández is a doctoral student in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego. She currently holds a Ford Foundation predoctoral fellowship. Her research focuses on Latino youth culture, popular music, and education in Chicago.*