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Restorative Schooling: The Healing Power of Counternarrative

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Restorative Schooling: The Healing Power of Counternarrative

Veronica Benavides

*A question Chicanitas sometimes ask
while others wonder: Why is the sky blue?
or the grass so green?*

Why am I so brown?

*God made you brown, mi'ja,
color bronce—color of your raza
connecting you to your raíces,
your story/historia
as you begin moving towards your future.*

*God made you brown, mi'ja,
color bronce, beautiful/strong,
reminding you of the goodness
de tu mamá, de tus abuelas
y tus antepasados.*

—Trinidad Sanchez Jr., *Why Am I So Brown?*

I stared at these words by Trinidad Sanchez (1991) with tears running down my face. I had been asking myself that same question, among others, earlier in the day: Why am I so brown? Why am I so stupid? Why am I so poor? Why am I so different? It was my first semester of college at the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) and I had just received my first failing grade on an exam. Accustomed to being at the top of my class, I was devastated. My boyfriend used the opportunity to make a point about the failures of affirmative action, while assuring me that he would be able to provide for us, no matter what happened.

For a moment, I believed him and hated myself. I was just a Chicana from a low-income, low-performing school district. What made me think that I could keep up with the academics and intellectuals of the world? I opened up my well-worn, favorite book, seeking solace. I saw the words of Trinidad Sanchez. I said them out loud. I believed them. I realized that I have beauty, strength, history, and a future because of my brownness, not in spite of it.

I broke up with the naysaying boyfriend, graduated with honors from UT Austin, earned my Master's of Science in Teaching from Fordham University, and received my doctorate in education leadership from Harvard University. Throughout my journey, I was often faced with deficit-based, dominant narratives of minoritized communities. We all know the story: higher levels of suspension, lower levels of college matriculation, disproportionate representation in special education. Research proves again and again that teacher expectations and perceptions of students impact academic performance (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Because of the deficit-based, dominant narratives of minoritized communities, these low and negative expectations are often reserved for students of color.

The presence of stereotypes and deficit-based thinking impact students' perceptions of self and their academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). They also impact the design of schooling. When educators and policymakers see no value in the cultural assets of students, they design the deliberate removal of such assets. This can be seen in the "no Spanish" or "English only" laws of Texas that allowed educators, until 1973, to punish students who spoke Spanish on school grounds (Rodríguez, 2016). It can also be seen in our current classroom textbooks, which minimize, ignore, and erase the history of minoritized groups (Fernandez & Hauser, 2015). This type of schooling is known as subtractive schooling.

The concept of subtractive schooling was coined by Angela Valenzuela in her 1999 book, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. According to Valenzuela, "Subtractive schooling encompasses subtractively assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language" (p. 20). Valenzuela's assessment of the subtractive nature of schooling encapsulates my own experience of the K–12 system in Texas. All of my cultural resources were deemed barriers to professional and academic success, and they were treated accordingly.

Restorative Schooling: A Response to Subtractive Schooling

Despite systemic efforts to bury my language, traditions, and history, my cultural assets survived the

subtractive schooling process. Though they were left weakened and more vulnerable, I drew from these resources to persist through the difficulties of college. Where my K–12 schooling failed me, my cultural resources rescued me. I’ve realized that these resources survived not by coincidence, but through a process I call restorative schooling.

I define restorative schooling as a family’s response to subtractive schooling. It is the pushback, both big and small, of parents and families against the traditional schooling system. Restorative schooling looks like traditional foods for lunch and dinner, native languages spoken in the home, oral histories passed on from elders to youth, celebrations, and resistance. Restorative schooling often teaches us another way of being, seeing, and knowing in the world. It taps into the collective memory and historical strength of marginalized people who have survived generations of oppression. It restores what has been lost or taken away.

Tamales and Chisme: Restoration Through Counternarrative

For me, restorative schooling happened most often through counternarrative, and women were the storytellers, stars, and villains. Storytelling could happen anywhere at any moment, but the juiciest stories always came in December, during tamale-making season. With three different generations, four different family names, and hours upon hours of time, the stories flowed like honey.

I learned some of my most important lessons while spreading masa on a dry corn husk. I learned that my great-grandmother loved to sing and stomp her foot while playing *curandera*. I learned that my grandmother fell in love with a married man. I learned that my *tía*’s common-law husband hit her, and that she hit him back. I learned that my mother wore short shorts to the beach, and paid her brothers to do her chores. I learned that the women in my family did, when no one else was there to do. They made the most of dark situations, and brought light to their families.

The women in my family led my restorative schooling process, rebuking stereotypes and low expectations through their mere existence. They reminded me that Mexicanas and Chicanas are feminists, breadwinners, healers, and lovers. We are dynamic human beings with unlimited potential.

A Different Way: Educators and Restorative Schooling

Restorative schooling doesn’t just happen in the home; it can happen in the classroom as well. Educators

can eliminate the subtractive nature of schooling and create spaces for restoration by integrating a student's culture into the fabric of schooling. Research shows that the use of restorative practices—like ethnic studies curricula, and curricula that elevate the narratives of traditionally marginalized groups—promotes academic achievement for students from those groups. There is a clear body of research documenting the relationship between the racial/ethnic identity of students of color and academic achievement (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Carter, 2008; Chavous et al., 2003; Sleeter, 2011).

Through culturally relevant curriculum, books that are representative of the students in the classroom, and authentic family engagement, educators can transform schools into spaces where students' cultural selves are not seen as harmful to or separate from their academic selves. Infusing students' culture into the curriculum is most impactful when paired with educators who are equipped to build authentic relationships with their students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). For that reason, it is imperative that teachers know and honor their students' strengths, interests, and cultures. It was my favorite teacher, after all, who gave me my well-worn book with the restorative words of Trinidad Sanchez.

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