Racialized Space: Framing Latino and Latina Experience in Public Schools

by Heidi Lasley Barajas & Amy Ronnkvist — 2007

**Background:** Educational research shows differences in experience, access, and outcomes across racial groups with some groups advantaged and others disadvantaged. One of the concepts used to explain racial differences, racialization, is a taken-for-granted term that is yet to be fully defined in the context of the school. We differentiate the term from racism and show how the organizational space of a school is racialized. Taking a cue from feminist research on gendered organizational space (Acker, 1989; Pierce, 1995) and research on white space (Feagin, 1996; Lipsitz, 1998), we define space as physical space and the implicit and explicit dialogue, processes, and practices that define relationships between structures and agents. Thus, space includes not only physical space but also the meanings and ideologies that mediate the relationship between social structures and agents.

**Purpose of Study:** We suggest that school spaces are racialized; that is, taken-for-granted notions of race mediate the relationship between the school and the actors that comprise it. Furthermore, we consider how racialization determines power in these relationships, and ultimately, how that power determines how policy is practiced in a school space.

**Research Design:** Our data comes from a qualitative case study focused on evaluating what factors influenced Latino college students' success. Data was collected over a two year period through a mentor program at a large U.S. research university and includes both fieldwork and interview data.

**Findings:** We found that racialization occurred in school organizational spaces that invested in whiteness as a purportedly neutral category. In actuality, relationships and practices often delineated along racialized lines, distinguishing what it means to be white in such a space, and what it means not to be white in that space.

**Conclusions:** Conceptualizing school organizational spaces as a racialized white space allows us to examine and understand differences in the school along racial lines outside the limitations of individual prejudice or color-blind approaches—recognizing race is not the problem. The problem is being willing to recognize what we are doing, and then creating relationships that support a socially just educational organization.

...I don't remember experiencing anything really horrible, like within society. But it was within the school that was difficult (Josie, 21-year-old university junior).

In today's educational climate, the emphasis is on accountability. Accountability includes a hard look at disaggregated data that highlights a “gap” between the success of students of color and their mainstream peers. However, who is accountable for closing this gap in a time of high accountability is an interesting question. The National Education Trust (2004) states “students themselves bear significant responsibility for their own success...but a large measure of responsibility for the education of students lies with the decisions and conduct of the institution themselves” (p. 5). One of the ways in which schools have chosen to deal with institutional contributions to the gap in student achievement is the adoption of a color-blind ideology. Color-blind ideology asserts that when students enter the school doors, color (i.e., race) should not be an issue. All students, therefore, should be treated equally with the same opportunities regardless of race. In reality, we know this is not the case. There are numerous studies that show there are differences in experience, access, and outcomes across racial groups with some groups advantaged and others disadvantaged. However, one of the mechanisms used to explain racial differences, racialization, is a taken-for-granted term that has yet to be fully defined in the context of the school. One common assumption is that racialization is the same as racism, and that racism can fully account for why advantage and disadvantage exists. We argue this is not the case.

The case for why some groups are disadvantaged in the school context can be made through the existence of particular kinds of “isms” such as sexism, racism, or classism. However, understanding the existence of such oppressive constructs does not accomplish an understanding of how isms operate. In the case of sexism, feminist sociologists (Acker, 1989; Pierce, 1995) have been successful in explaining the concrete consequences and actions of sexism by examining differences in male and female experiences. They argued that organizational spaces are gendered, and used as their case,
work organizations. Sadker and Sadker (1994) also identified sexism by examining differences in male and female experiences in organizations, and used as their case schools. In both work and school organizations, these researchers found that the differences in the relationships between what is male and what is female results in different expectations for males and females and decided disadvantages for females. We pursue the same kind of argument, but examine racism. We argue that organizational spaces are racialized using schools as our case study. And, we observe how the relationship between what is white and what is not white results in different expectations for mainstream students and students of color, and in disadvantages for students of color. In this case, the data was collected on Chicano Latino students. Specifically, we observe how whiteness is built into the school organizational space through formal and informal practices and identify the implications of these practices.

Research on Latino student groups often focuses on the characteristics of students who have failed to complete their education. The data from this project was gathered from Latino students who had a successful K-16 experience; that is to say, Latino students who were making timely progress through college. They were asked to provide insight on how they successfully negotiated their educational career. In the analysis, the students’ experiences were taken seriously and considered part of the larger school context, as were other educational experts such as teachers and administrators in defining the educational process. The data reports that Latino students were aware on some level that they were negotiating race as a part of the educational experience—a constant that appeared even though no questions about race were part of the interview protocol. What was unique about the data was that race was not spoken of in terms such as prejudice attitudes or acts of discrimination. Our data indicated that Latino college students consistently referred to pre- and post-secondary educational institutions as “white,” or as a “white space.”

White space as a general concept has been discussed in other research (Feagin, 1996; Lipsitz, 1998). But to conceptualize what a white space is requires some understanding of how a physical space, such as a school, is racialized; that is, how it takes on an assigned racial dimension. However, a clear definition of a space as racialized has yet to appear in the literature. The unique contribution of this article is a frame to discuss schools as a racialized space. The advantage in such a conversation is that it moves the emphasis from the outcome of racism (institutionalized racism), to an emphasis on the process and ideology behind the outcome (racialized space). In addition, the discussion is centered in empirical evidence that, if considered outside of neutral assumptions, provides a means through which racialization becomes an important sensitizing concept. This is not to say that other frames, such as class and gender, are not valuable or do not play a role in explaining the educational experiences of students; rather, we suggest that considering what racialization explains as a taken-for-granted, but none-the-less critical concept in the educational experiences of successful Latino students will extend the discussion.

THEORETICAL FRAME

In his study of black students’ experiences at white universities, Feagin (1996) began with the following definition of racism:

Racial discrimination can be viewed as the socially organized set of practices that deny African Americans the dignity, opportunities, spaces, time, positions and rewards this nation [sic U.S.] offers to white Americans. What we call racism encompasses subtle and overt discriminatory practices, their institutional contexts and the attitudes and ideologies that shape or rationalize them (p. 7).

One interpretation of this definition is that whites knowingly and actively participate in racist acts. There are two responses to this interpretation. Some may dismiss the definition assuming this kind of racism does not exist today. Or, it would follow that if active participation in subtle and covert discriminatory practices is the problem, we need only work to eliminate prejudice and discrimination. However, studies of whiteness suggest an alternative: consider the role of privilege. The argument has been made that white privilege is largely taken for granted by whites and that many whites do not define privilege in the context of their race (Doane, 1997; Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Frankenberg, 1993; Gans, 1979; Waters, 1990). In other words, whiteness is an invisible construct that is often not acknowledged. Not acknowledging the role of ethnicity in the dominant groups’ privileges actually allows whites to keep atop of the societal hierarchy by obscuring its role in maintaining powers and privileges (Doane, 1997; Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Furthermore, Lewis (2003) argued that whiteness is a persistent link to power, resources, and the persistence of institutional racism in our schools.

Lewis’ (2003) observation points out that while it is important to understand institutional racism as an outcome, we also need to take into account the mechanisms that allow for the persistence of institutional racism. Both Doane (1997) and Lewis suggested that whiteness is a mechanism of power that allows dominant group ideologies surrounding race to be imposed on other groups, often in subtle ways. Whiteness is a link, but a more developed understanding of this link is
possible. We suggest that the link between whiteness and power may be observed in how a space is racialized, and how a racialized space serves as a mechanism to maintain power and privilege by the dominant group.

Racialization is a socio-historical process through which social structures and individual social actors take on a racial dimension (Omi & Winant, 1994). The language of racialization is useful because it raises attention not only to the ways social actors think about and practice race, but also how race influences the organization of social structures (Barajas, 2000; Barajas and Pierce, 2001; Doane, 1997; Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003). An examination of the organization of social structures is particular, one in which space as a concept is useful. We define space as physical space and the implicit and explicit dialogue, processes, and practices that define relationships between structures and agents. Thus, space includes not only physical space but also the meanings and ideologies that mediate the relationship between social structures and agents.

Space as a useful and powerful concept is not new and has been discussed in other research. Acker (1989) and Pierce (1995), for example, have defined organizational spaces as gendered. Acker argued that work organizations are not gender-neutral; instead, power exists in the relationship between what is defined as male and female. From feminist research we learn that the notion of space is not only about physical space, but also includes the meaning systems that define the space. Feagin (1996) defined space in racial terms as the notion that “social relations are physically structured in material space and human beings often view space expressively and symbolically. In most societies, those with greater power and resources ordinarily control the use and meaning of important spaces in society” (p. 49). Like Acker and Pierce, Feagin also stressed a study of space is important because space is not neutral.

The notion of space as racialized argues that organizational spaces are not race-neutral. In other words, racial ideas are embedded in and define organizational spaces. Meanings that are perceived by social actors as “common-sense” interpretations of racial meanings connect what race means in discursive practice and in the ways “social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55). Regardless of the positive or negative impact, racialization plays a part in defining school organizational spaces. The idea that a space is racialized is about power and relationships. If power provides a supportive, reflective relationship, then racialization is likely to serve as a mechanism of awareness rather than a mechanism for hiding differences in neutral assumptions. However, we know that school organizational spaces tend to be owned by those who have white, middle-class power and are likely to see their power as neutral and therefore limited. As Blau (2003) stated:

Whereas whites collectively exercise great power over others through the institutions that they dominate, other groups—struggle to achieve equal rights, dignity, and access to opportunities...To be sure, in contemporary times society is not made up simple of an assortment of distinct groups; there is dynamic overlapping of groups, owning to individuals’ involvement in work organizations, schools...Yet the imbalances of power, resources, rights, and cultural autonomy are group based (pp. 205-206).

We suggest the schools studied in our sample are racialized as a white space supported by the relational power between white group power and non-white groups. A space racialized as white creates or perpetuates symbolic meanings affecting mainstream ideology as well as real and often quite negative consequences for non-white participants. What we found is that relationships in schools’ organizational spaces tended to operate according to an investment in whiteness that sustains racist ideologies and attitudes created to maintain and rationalize white privilege and power. Because of the invisible or neutral status of whiteness, the mechanism through which this process occurred was also invisible.

In the schools studied, white space was created and reproduced through an organizational logic, a mechanism of informal practice and formal policy that rendered “difference” to disappear in order for the institution to appear race-neutral. Such an organizational logic did not necessarily support perceptions about race strictly through outward markers of race, such as skin color or surname. The organizational logic was devised through symbolic meanings of what it means to be white in a white space and what it means not to be white in a white space. Feminists, who have described the appearance of gender neutrality in large organizations, explained this process as the means by which “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (Acker, 1989, as seen in Pierce, 1995, p. 30). In addition, Acker’s definition of organizations as gendered stated that “gender is not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived of as gender neutral. Rather it is an integral part of those processes, which cannot be understood without an analysis of gender” (p. 146). This distinction is important because both Acker and Pierce’s research supported the concept of space as gendered, and as having negative consequences for women.

Considering race and organizational spaces, identifying the processes through which the organizational logic operates may shed light on how the organizational space of schools functions as white spaces. The key component is illuminating how the relationships are shaped, who shapes them, and according to what taken-for-granted symbolic meanings. In other
words, a relationship exists between what is defined as white and non-white. What constructs that relationship is the unconscious connection between white, middle-class understandings of the school organizational space, and characteristics that are highly regarded and valued in a white space and accepted as neutral, color-blind actions.

In collecting the data, the first author had two goals in mind. Initially, the larger project explored how Latino students successfully negotiated school careers. Data, then, was collected in a venue that focused on successful Latino students. A selected group of successful Latino students was created using participants from a mentor program consisting of both college and high school students. We considered the high school students successful because they were college bound. For those already in college, we defined all the students as successful because they had made the transition to college, made passing grades, and intended to graduate. As part of the successful student venue, the second goal was to collect data that allowed us to look at the multiple perspectives of the school community. For example, data was collected from students, administrators, counselors, teachers, and school resources at both the high school and college level. Through analyzing these perspectives, we discovered how race operated in a study that was not about race.

**METHODOLOGY**

The first author collected data over a two year period through a mentor program at a large U.S. research university that we call “The Bridge.” Latino college students volunteered to participate in the program and mentored Latinos in local area high schools. All 45 college student mentors and 27 high school student “mentees” who participated in the program were interviewed. Among the college students, 31 were young women and 14 were young men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25. Among the high school students, 11 were female and 16 were male. Students who participated in the study came from various Latino backgrounds, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Honduran. The majority self-identified as second or third generation coming from poor or working-class families.

For the purposes of a larger research project, data was collected through four means: questionnaire, in-depth interviews, observations at local high schools, and school resources. This paper focused on the data collected through interviews, observations at both high school and university sites, and school resources. Interview questions focused on personal goals, experiences, aspirations, and the students’ experience with the mentor program. Pseudonyms were used for individuals and locations to protect confidentiality.

Although all the high school and college students in the mentor program were interviewed, this is not a statistically representative sample of Latino students, nor was it intended to be. Given the theoretically driven objective of our project, data was analyzed using Burawoy’s (1991) extended case method. Following this method, our intention is to extend and reconstruct existing theory about the processes and mechanisms that contributed to school success among Latinos in this particular social and historical context, rather than to create generalizations about the experiences of Latinos. In addition, the examples we used for this paper are from public schools or from student accounts of public school experiences.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Our data demonstrates that issues of race often emerged in a study where there were no questions about race, but rather questions about factors leading to Latino student success in schools. Particularly striking were the ways that race defined school space through what we describe as the organizational logic of the school. The organizational logic in the schools we studied worked in ways we anticipated. For example, white students, faculty, and staff primarily populate the large university our group of Latino students attended. For simply demographic reasons, we assumed the organizational logic of the school would reflect the power, values, and beliefs of the majority of people participating in the institution. However, we also noticed an unanticipated organizational logic at work in the schools with large populations of students and staff of color, including administrators. This evidence caused us to reconsider how we draw on demographic information.

We often tend to use demographics only as tabulation. Although numbers in themselves help us reach certain conclusions about school organizational space, percentages of self-reported race and ethnic categories can tell us more than how diverse the organization is. Standing alone, numbers in many cases may not highlight the symbolic and concrete ways the organizational logic of school organizations racialize participants in the institution. Racialization occurs by classifying students according to racial categories that are “preconceived notions of what each specific racial group looks like” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 62). Demographics as discussed by Latino students were more than self-identified categories, and may explain how racialized categories were determined, and who was racialized in particular ways.

Students were often defined and experienced school space through the external markers of race. University students in this study talked about school space as “being for white people” or how “not white” they were. For example, Josie, a
21-year-old university junior discussed entering the white space of school in elementary school. At that time, Josie, who like many Puerto Ricans had dual-citizenship, moved to the United States from Puerto Rico. She explained that in Puerto Rico, there were many black-skinned people and although she was visibly brown-skinned, she was considered “white.” When she moved to the mainland, she did not understand that her racialized status changed. She reported:

For a while, I had to see myself as white because it was part of my identity, you know. But then my dad talked to me and he said, “Honey, you are not white here anymore.” But we discussed it and I didn’t understand some of the...when I moved, it was a mostly white population. I didn’t understand certain...the way people reacted to me in negative ways.

Josie’s hesitation in her comment tells us that she has experienced something about race she has difficulty putting into words. To clarify her comment, she was asked “what people?” Josie replied:

It was kids at school. People here are fairly nice people, you know, even if they aren’t nice with their heart, they’re nice with their manners. I don’t remember experiencing anything really horrible, like within society. But it was within the school that was difficult.

The necessity for Josie to redefine her social position as white, to a position as not white, was prompted by her relationship to the school as a demographically white space. Josie learned her newly defined “difference” through a process that indicated her new position as the “other.” She stated, “...[L]ook, I didn’t get negative feedback because I wore glasses, or was a skinny nerd. The negative reactions were about me thinking I was white—like them, and then making it clear I was not white like them.”

Josie’s comments reflected an interesting perspective about the demographic arrangement of race. Students, like Josie, were not talking about discrimination, but about how their racialized category draws attention to them that causes them to be treated differently. In this example, we see an instance when self-identity must shift when the institutional organizational logic relegates individuals from being white to another category. What makes this example particularly interesting is that the school in which this representative example occurred has a student population containing approximately 55 percent students of color. This could be interpreted as a commonsensical explanation of what happens to students of color in school spaces. We do notice differences in skin color the same way we notice differences in gender, or even how tall a person is. This is not the problem. The problem is not whether we see difference; the problem lies in what we are compelled to do when we see difference. In Josie’s case, others were compelled to make sure she understood that her difference in the school space had meanings, meanings that reflected the organizational logic, and privileged a particular definition of whiteness.

The organizational logic also defined expectations of Latino students based on a white norm, and was another observable element that defined school space as a racialized white space. Josie, who identified beginning her process of racialization in junior high, discussed the continuing process with this college example. In an American literature class at the university, Josie’s white teaching assistant (TA) wrote on her first paper, “your writing is coming along well,” which Josie found offensive. She talked to the teaching assistant to find her suspicions were correct—that the TA had assumed because of her surname she was not American, and therefore not English speaking. Josie stated that the TA was surprised by Josie’s response because the TA felt she “was responding to my paper in a culturally sensitive manner rather than just critiquing the writing as she would any other paper.” What the TA mistook for cultural sensitivity was, in reality, a liberal response to interpreting a situation through the lens of an organizational logic that responds to difference as less than the norm. Positive statements are helpful to any student but do not take the place of positive critique. Josie identifies this “treatment by my university TA and generally within school” as difficult. In addition, being categorized as the other did not always reflect a commonsensical understanding of racial categories, but showed an even stronger influence of racialized meanings existing in an institution’s organizational logic. Let us consider the next example.

Elaine, a 21-year-old, light-skinned, self-identified Mestiza, and university junior describes herself as one of two “minority” kids in her elementary school:

In grade school, there were no [minorities], I was like the only Latina. And sometimes they [teachers and students] expect you to be representative of your people...it kind of gives you an attitude in a way, but you’re just like, you know, you get used to the system.

Elaine’s earliest memories about school pertained to being considered the other in school settings. The definition of other was not based on her surname or skin color, but based on her dual-identity, where family traditions celebrated both her Anglo and Mexican heritage. Elaine embraced her identity but did not initially define herself as the other. This definition
was determined by school experience. Her relationship to the school as a white space was racialized as a minority, even though her light skin was not an outward marker. By her own interpretation, Elaine knew that being part of a group, and as the racialized other, was about more than outward markers such as skin color or surname. This example tells us that the organizational logic of the school did not necessarily support perceptions about race strictly through outward markers of race. The organizational logic is also devised through symbolic meanings of what it means to be white in a white space and what it means to not be white in a white space.

Elaine’s early experiences in school as the symbolic other in a white space are described in the following passage:

In high school, I don’t know. I thought that place was so white on white, it’s just like if it’s white, it’s right. And it’s like; they searched my locker and stuff after an incident. And then they tried to cover up that they did it [because I am a minority]. I could hardly wait to get out of there.

These two examples, that represent many similar stories, showed us two things. We observed instances when, regardless of self-identification, outward markers were used to racialize students in the school space. We also observed instances in which Latino students were part of a group racialized as the other without outward markers such as skin color or surname. The organizational logic operating within that demographically white space categorized them as different regardless of these markers. We argue that regardless of the school demographics, and regardless of the outward markers commonly identifying race, the experiences of people of color reflect the relationships between what is white and what is not white in that space. This is different from seeing demographics as numbers that may lead to acts of individual discrimination. As with gender, demographics are about the power in the relationships in that particular space by simply naming who is white and is not white, and the concrete consequences when this racialization occurs. Are the consequences often reflected in discrimination and a result of individual prejudice? Yes. However, the power in the relationships is different beginning with the way in which whites and people of color explain discrimination and prejudice.

What we contend is that the dominant group tends to observe an attitude of prejudice or an act of discrimination while other groups interpret and negotiate the experience of prejudice and discrimination. The fact that other groups must negotiate the experience demonstrates dominant group power. And, whites do not recognize having that power because of the tendency to define power as the ability to make someone do something against their will (Clawson, Neustadt, & Weller, 1998). However, a particular power exists in an organizational space as a dominant force because of the relationships created by that power.

When we attempt to address the nature of the relationships in a social space such as the school, a description of demographics limits our understanding because we often assume that larger numbers of one group determine the relational power in the organizational space. For example, Acker (1989), Pierce (1995), and Williams (1992) have argued that male thinking is dominant in the larger social world, and in work organizations specifically, regardless of the number of males and females in that space. Acker and Pierce acknowledged this is true even when larger numbers of females share a particular work space. In the case of gender, even if females outnumber males in a given organizational space, the power in the relationships in that space does not change. Race relations in school organizational spaces follow a similar course.

Demographically, we would expect a shift in the relational power when a school student population holds a higher number of students of color. As we saw with Josie, her relationships within a school space with a high population of students of color did not change the power in the relationships in the school space. And in the absence of students of color, as we saw in Elaine’s case, the same relational power that distinguished white categories from other categories dominated when identifying those with light skin as different from other white participants in that space. In particular, white ideologies dominate and operate through the organizational logic of the school. The mere presence of a powerful social agent in the school alters the social space for others and causes them to orient themselves toward the powerful agent. Identifying the existence of institutional racism, discrimination, or individual prejudice does not go far enough, and ultimately, hides the processes supporting these acts and attitudes. We argue that instead, we need to uncover the ways in which students of color are required to negotiate their relationship to whiteness in school spaces by identifying examples of racialization occurring in educational organizations.

VALUES, ASSUMPTIONS, AND NEUTRAL PRACTICES

Empirical evidence showed us recurring events reported by Latino students were situated in the organizational logic of the school, producing inequality that has been institutionalized over a long period of time. However, such events often go unnoticed because they occur as part of the racialized expectations of Latino students based on assumptions of a white norm. As Valdes (2001) noted in her study, the numerous forces that contributed to student success and failure indicated a complex process at work that required looking at the everyday lives of students, and the “assumptions about their needs
made by the schools they attended” (p. 4). Students in this study also described numerous assumptions about their needs made by the school. More than half of the university students and high school students interviewed related instances when teachers expressed surprise at their knowledge, writing skills, or preparation for class. Many times, teachers directed such remarks toward students with a Latino surname, as was the case with Josie and the university teaching assistant. We also observed this with Latino students’ discussions of their ESL (English as a Second Language) experience.

ESL in public schools was created to help students who enter public schools with a first language other than English. This policy attends to the real needs of many Latino students in the U.S., providing language acquisition and support for higher academic achievement. This study does not intend to examine the policy and instructional dilemmas surrounding language acquisition. Instead, we found that how ESL policy is applied uncovers differences in the way white students and students of color are tracked in public schools. School authorities made assumptions based on markers, such as dark skin or “Hispanic-looking” surnames, and assumptions that affected expectations and determined what kinds of courses into which Latino students should be placed. With the exception of one male and one female interviewed, every university student related situations in which they were placed in ESL classes or were told they needed to be held back a grade. The two exceptions, Jim and Kristen, were very light-skinned and did not have Hispanic surnames. Michelle, a 23-year-old university senior, recalled her first encounter with this situation:

This is how it went. When I moved to the mainland [from Puerto Rico] I went to school for the two months left of seventh grade here. My ESL teacher suggested I repeat seventh grade and I told her there was no way I would do that because I already had done my seventh grade, thank you very much! So she said I needed to go to summer school, no big deal. So I went to summer school and then I came back to eighth grade and tested out of ESL. I don’t know, those two months—I don’t think that made that much of a difference. And the teacher didn’t have enough to evaluate me in the first place. She went by an assumption that I needed another year of school to learn English well.

Michelle came to the Midwest with good English skills as well as an excellent academic record. She did have a Latino surname and medium brown skin, both markers of being the other. The teacher’s recommendation for Michelle to repeat an entire year was based on her subjective opinion, not test scores evaluating her skills, nor because Michelle struggled in her mainstream classes, or because she or her parents requested she repeat a year. Michelle’s judgment that eight weeks of a summer class could not compensate for repeating an entire year of school seemed sound. And in fairness, the teacher probably also felt her judgment was sound—as do other teachers who track students into ESL.

This example, as the many similar examples we heard, could be explained as individual prejudice on the part of some teachers. However, 43 out of 45 Latino university students, all from different schools, and often, different parts of the country, had been tracked into ESL, or told they needed to repeat a year because of assumptions about their language skills. Individual prejudice simply cannot explain this happening to such a high percentage of this group. However, we believe this commonly occurs not because of individual assumptions, but because the organizational logic in schools is racialized and delineates along lines of race. As many critical language acquisition scholars have argued, it is not possible to separate English from its many contexts including “maintaining existing power relationships by accepting practices without question” (Valdes, 2001, p. 155). Because of the relational power in a white space, our Latino students did not have a choice about being directed into ESL courses or being told to repeat a year of school. However, successful students like Michelle did choose to negotiate the meaning of the event as about the school rather than about their individual ability. We believe it is a fairly safe venture to assume that those students who do not have the tools to negotiate meanings in this way are probably not as successful (see Valdes, 2001).

Regardless of the intent of ESL and the many who are served well by ESL programs, the students in this study told us that ESL tracked them based on racial markers, which we interpret as racializing the other in a white space. In other words, a policy that appears to be fair and neutral is practiced in a racialized way. The impact is a further delineation of the other by placing them in ESL. Placing Michelle and the other 44 students in ESL, or holding them back a grade level keeps those students with language differences out of the mainstream, and therefore, out of the school’s white space. The consistent separation of students based on outward markers of the other is not discrimination based on individual prejudice, but practiced as a neutral policy. What we are seeing in this example is the effect of a process, a way to separate students in the name of producing higher standards by supporting student need. School personnel, then, are simply ensuring this outcome by placing any perceived differences out of the mainstream so that differences may become part of the assumed neutral space of schools, whether there is a real academic need for the students or not.

HOW POLICIES ARE PRACTICED

A closer examination of other school policies, and more importantly, how the policies are practiced, showed us that policies are not applied to all groups in the same way, nor do they have the same impact on all groups. The problem was
that school decision makers (regardless of their racial make-up) approached schooling as a process that affected everyone the same way rather than as a racialized space working through a specific kind of organizational logic. School policy makers, using commonsensical notions as the neutral way that the organizational logic of the school categorized and delineated by race, made choices under the assumption that the existing relationships were neutral, thereby making the application of policy in the organization race-neutral.

In the two K-12 organizations studied, attendance policies appeared to be race-neutral practices in the school. All attendance policies included a maximum number of unexcused absences before the student forfeited the term. The policy appeared to be the same for all groups, but the application of the policy differed because exceptions were made for particular populations. If, for example, a student’s parents wanted to take their children out of school to travel, an exception to the policy was made. However, if a student’s parents needed their son or daughter to work to fund the fall migrant season, those students lost an entire term. Both situations required parental requests for an exception, but only one parental request was awarded exempt status. The difference was about class—that is, the difference between the privilege to travel, and valuing other traditional family work systems such as the compadrazgo system practiced by many Latino families. Furthermore, these class differences were intertwined with racialized differences. The exception made for students to travel is part of a white middle class mentality that values travel as a way to experience different people and places, an ideology practiced as part of the yearly curricula in elite private schools (Cookson & Persell, 1985).

However, the same standard did not apply to Latino students who worked a migrant job, even though travel and exposure to different people and places was part of that work. Joyce, a 20-year-old sophomore stated:

I don’t really like going home [in the summer] to work anymore, but I need to. It’s hard, but the people and the places, they’re great. And my dad, he knows more about _____ crop than anyone in the state. Not just picking, but about the crop, what to do and when to do it. It isn’t what people think. He is like someone who knows, just not the college kind of know.

The difference between the value placed on a white middle class kind of travel experience by the school and Joyce’s example were assumptions about what learning is and where learning takes place. Folded into attendance policy exceptions as part of the organizational logic of the school, such assumptions fix attendance policy as neutral. The result is that middle class family traditions are part of the neutrality, and those of migrant families are not. That is, a neutral attendance policy is practiced in racialized ways.

POLICY AND RACIALIZED AUTHORITY

Although attendance policy often masks the influence of the organizational logic on school authorities’ actions, some do recognize differences in effect and application. Several staff members, along with the principal at one of the research sites, West High School, recognized attendance was a problem, particularly among the Latino students. The majority of the students at West High were students of color. One-third of West High’s students were Latino, one of the highest Latino populations in the state. The West High principal, Mr. Lopez, was a fairly new principal who often challenged issues such as classroom practices and administrative policies that disadvantaged students of color. Regarding attendance, Mr. Lopez recognized that not all attendance problems were about student decisions but also about how the attendance policy was practiced.

The traditional attendance policy in public schools appeared reasonable and neutral. Students needed to be in school in order to foster consistent learning, a part of the policy with which Mr. Lopez agreed. However, family events, as well as family emergencies, are the first priority in traditional Latino family structure. The organizational logic of this school, however, tended to view attendance policy as neutral policy even though the policy is based on a white middle class cultural norm. What Mr. Lopez challenged was the neutrality of ignoring traditional family needs for non-white families. The consequence of this practice was that when Latino students chose to miss school for family reasons, they also tended to give up on school.

Mr. Lopez, however, did challenge the attendance policy, and succeeded in significantly raising attendance over a two year period by requiring teachers to allow make-up work for students missing school for extended family concerns. According to the school counselors and one of the vice-principals, this was not a popular policy with some teachers. A group of teachers labeled the policy as discriminating against students who were meeting “normal” attendance requirements. These sentiments were a response to a new policy that uncovers “other” culture differences in what was thought to be a race-neutral policy. If viewed from an organizational logic that normalizes white middle class cultural values and neutralizes the participation of other culture members, a new policy may appear to favor “other” culture groups. In reality, “other” culture group needs were being recognized just as the assumptions hiding white middle-class needs in existing policy were recognized.
Controversy surrounded Mr. Lopez’s attendance policy, and other situations in which he uncovered racialized practices. As a result, Mr. Lopez was eventually removed from the school even though his new attendance policy and other actions did have the support of many school staff members, including the vice-principal and several school counselors. Although Mr. Lopez had a position of authority and responded to student needs supported by community requests, he still operated within a space that was racialized with distinctions between white and the “other,” determined by a relational power. In our other examples of racialized spaces, the formal authority figure had power in the relationship, and that authority was often white, operating in school organizations that were primarily white. It is generally assumed that when the majority of people in a given organizational space are people of color, the power in the relationships no longer is tied to whiteness. However, in Mr. Lopez’s case, neither authority nor a high population of people of color shifted the power in the relationships within the school organization. Demographics, then, taken as a description, cannot explain how race operates within a school organization. Instead, we must consider how racialization determines the power in the relationships, and ultimately, how policy is practiced in a white space.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the institutionalization of events such as the ones we discussed in this article, school space is racialized, which is directly determined by the relational power between what is categorized as white and not white. More importantly, the space of the school is “owned” by the distinctions about the other. In other words, race is about identity and structure, but more significantly, about the racialized relationships that create what practices own and sustain structure. As Franklin (1991) notes, “Ownership carries with it domination; its absence leads to subordination” (p. xviii). The reason this is important is that according to the students in this study, marked or unmarked, racialization took place in multiple ways and conditioned school experience through the racialized relationships in that space. We look to a race-centered explanation because people were talking about something more than identity, and something qualitatively different than prejudice or discrimination. What students identified, and what our observation of the school organization found, is that schools appropriate an organizational perspective of being a racially neutral space. Effectively, this conceals the taken-for-granted meanings of race, and focuses only on prejudice, discrimination, or the existence of institutional racism. This ignores the processes through which racially neutral actions and practices occur. Doing so has three implications: First, it diminishes the impact racialization has on the organization itself and only allows for a discussion of racialization as an abstract part of individual identity politics (see Feagin’s 2001 work); secondly, it allows claims by students of color that they experience schools as white spaces to be easily dismissed; lastly, and perhaps most important, when school organizations neutralized racialized practices, Latino students in our study had to negotiate everything mainstream students negotiated, and had the added burden of attending to the racialized practices of the school organization. Although there are those who do not see this burden as exceptional, according to Omi & Winant (1994), “[T]oday as in the past racial minorities pay a heavy price in human suffering as a result of their categorization as ‘other’ by the dominant racial ideology” (p. 68). The argument could be made that the Latino students in this study were successful, so a no-harm, no-foul attitude is appropriate. What cannot be dismissed is that the successful Latino students in this data collection were the ones who were able to negotiate their added burden, and stand in an educational system that is failing to educate almost 50 percent of the population at the K-12 level, and even less as Latinos pursue higher education.

Perhaps the crucial point in the reluctance to understand the difference between acknowledging school organizations as racialized white spaces and acknowledging school organizations as neutral spaces is the general determination to focus on individual prejudice and an aversion to identify a white racialized space as part of a racist system. Yet Feagin’s (2001) work as well as Sleeter and Grant’s (1993) work insists that we must willingly accept that racism, and particularly how white racism operates in educational organizations, in order for educational organizations to operate in more socially just ways.

Feagin’s (2001) work, focusing on an antiracist theory, finds the concept of racism absent from the vocabulary of many current critical discussions about race, and understandably so. The tendency is for racism to refer to individual behavior rather than institutional practice. We do understand discrimination to be action-based on racist definitions of the other, and that institutions participate in such discrimination. However, it is unclear that the larger society understands how this systemic process, be it through practice or policy, connects to them on an individual level and corresponds to the foundation of American society. Feagin clarifies this by defining “systemic racism” as “everyday experience...[in which] people are born, live, and die within the racist system...[that] recent empirical research has helped to unmask” (2001, p. 4). By using, rather than avoiding racism, Feagin’s framework acknowledges power delineated by race at work in the lives of individuals and systems—meaning that “core racist realities are manifested in each of society’s major parts” (2001, p. 6). In our case, we found empirical evidence that suggested this is the situation in school organizations.

Sleeter and Grant (1993) stated multicultural education (and critical pedagogy) advocates transformation of the entire process of education with the goal of “elimination of oppression of one group of people by another” (p. 209). Oppression, in the cases we have presented, concerns traditional white knowledge and experience hidden by the organizational logic
of public school spaces that disregarded the knowledge and experiences of children from disenfranchised communities. In addition, Feagin, (2001), Sleeter and McLaren (1995), and Lipsitz’s (1998) approaches are also notably concerned with whiteness, or the power and privilege that whiteness carries as a taken-for-granted, or invisible resource. Acknowledging this particular dimension of racism at work in our core systems, including the educational system, may more clearly explain how racialization becomes more than an abstract part of individual identity politics, and is tied to the system itself. The thread begins with understanding the part whiteness plays in our discussion. Illuminating ways in which the organizational logic of the school neutralizes interactions may help us understand why many participating in school organizations do not understand that color, especially whiteness, matters. And, whiteness on an organizational level is about our investment in whiteness (Lipsitz, 1998). We found that school organizational spaces encouraged investing in whiteness and that this investment was used to discriminate through assumptions of neutrality in policy and practice delineated along racialized lines.

Finally, research conducted through a lens of racialization, versus a lens of neutralization, will disrupt some of the investment in whiteness that perpetuates unchanging and unchallenged racial dimensions in school organizations. bell hooks (1994) indicated in her early school experience in a segregated school that “black children were deemed exceptional, gifted, were given special care” (p. 2). The fact that the school was segregated indicated a racialized aspect to the school space. However, instead of a concentration on the lack of material resources or other negative aspects of segregated schools, hooks described this racialized space as a space “committed to nurturing intellects so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers...a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization” (p. 2). If we were to interpret the racialized nature of this school space, power and relationships were directed by color-conscious rather than color-blind thinking. The assumptions in such a space did not hide assumptions about race, but brought attention to them. Hooks' example indicates that we can do something different in a racialized space other than attempt to ignore differences. Conceptualizing school organizational spaces as a racialized white space allows us to examine and understand differences in the school along racial lines. Recognizing race is not the problem; the problem is being willing to recognize what we are doing, and then creating relationships that support a socially just educational organization. Related to this argument are larger questions about the role of schools in addressing racial difference in a democracy and future research should take this into account.

Notes

1 The term Chicano Latino is used for a specific reason. The university office over multicultural affairs where students were interviewed had changed the identifier for students with Latin American backgrounds from Chicano-Latino, to Chicano/Latino to the current Chicano Latino. Whereas Hispanic is the commonly used term applied by the U.S. government, students were reluctant to identify in a single category—particularly Chicano students. All of the students were more likely to find the term Latino the best general identifier. And, regionally, the common term to include all groups tended to be Latino. Throughout the paper, the terms Chicano, Latino, Hispanic and Chicano-Latino are used depending on the source reporting. For example, if a study is discussed, we used the term utilized by the study.

2 Only two students in this study were first generation immigrants: One was from Mexico and another from Puerto Rico.

References


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