Rewriting Race and Gender High School Lessons: Second-Generation Dominicans in New York City

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At high school graduation ceremonies across the country, a curious gender gap has emerged—more women graduate than men, particularly in Latino and Black communities. This trend begs several questions: How do formal and informal institutional practices within high schools "race" and "gender" students? How do racializ(ing) and gender(ing) processes intersect in the classroom setting? How can principals, school administrators, and teachers work toward dismantling race, gender, and class oppression in their schools? Drawing on 5 months of participant observation in a New York City public high school that is 90% Latino, mostly second-generation Dominicans, I found that both formal and informal institutional practices within schools, "race" and "gender" students in ways that significantly affect their outlooks on education. Young men are viewed as threatening and potential problem students, whereas young women are treated in a more sympathetic fashion. If our goal is to improve the education attainment of all students, we must become aware of the invisible race(ing) and gender(ing) that takes place in the classroom, as well as in the everyday institutional practices of schools.

At high school graduation ceremonies across the country, a curious gender gap has emerged—more women graduate than men, particularly in Latino and Black communities. It is predicted that by 2007 the gender gap will reach 2.3 million, with 9.2 million women enrolled in college, compared with 6.9 million men (Lewin, 1998). It is significant that although the gender gap occurs across all racial and ethnic groups, it is most pronounced in Latino and Black communities (Dunn, 1988). In the Boston public high school graduating class of 1998, it was estimated that there were 100 Black and Hispanic males for every 180 Black and Hispanic females attending a 4-year college (Sum, Kroshko, Fogg, & Palma, 2000). In New York City public high schools, where the majority of the student population is nonwhite (86%), more women graduate than men (Board of Education, 2000). Even at the City University of New York City (CUNY) women also
comprise the majority of enrolled Black and Latino undergraduates—up to 70% in graduate programs.

Despite the social, cultural, and political significance of this trend, there is little research on the race-gender gap in education (Kleinfeld, 1998; López, in press; Sum, Kroshko, Fogg, & Palma, 2000; Washington & Newman, 1991). This trend begs several questions: Why do more women graduate than men? How do formal and informal institutional practices within high schools “race” and “gender” students? How do racializ(ing) and gender(ing) processes intersect in the classroom setting? Finally, how can teachers work toward dismantling race, gender, and class oppression in their classrooms? A guiding premise of the study is that race and gender are socially constructed processes that are overlapping, intertwined, and inseparable. This understanding of race differs in fundamental ways from the essentialist perspective, which assumes that race is an innate and static biological essence (Omi & Winant, 1994).

To understand why women attain higher levels of education than men, I investigated race(ing) and gender(ing) processes in the high school setting. High school is a crucial site for exploring the origins of the gender gap because it is in this institution where it begins to become most pronounced. I therefore focus on how ordinary day-to-day school practices and classroom dynamics are racial(ized) and gender(ed), and in turn shape men’s and women’s views about the role of education in their lives. My primary data come from 5 months of participant observation at Urban High School, a New York City public high school that is 90% Latino; most of the students are second-generation Dominicans who were born in the United States or had most of their schooling in the United States.

During the spring of 1998, for 3 days a week, I regularly observed four mainstream classes in the social studies department: two economic classes for seniors, one American history class for juniors, and one global studies class for sophomores. The two economics courses were taught by Mr. Green, a self-described biracial man in his early 20s, who could “pass” for white in terms of phenotype. Ms. Gutierrez, a Latina teacher in her early 20s, who was from South America but could not “pass” for white, taught the American history course. And Mr. Hunter, a white man also in his mid-20s, taught the global studies class for sophomores. Each of these classes had between 25 and 30 students. Only Mr. Green’s classes had unequal gender proportions. In his first class, less than a third of the students were female. Conversely, in the second class, only a third of the class was male. This skewed gender balance in the classroom proved quite useful for examining how race and gender intersect in the school setting.

Reactions to my presence in the field were varied. Depending on my attire, despite the fact that I was in my late 20s, students and teachers alike often mistook me for an older high school student. One morning, a white
male, middle-aged teacher came to Mr. Hunter's class to conduct a teacher evaluation. Because I was wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, he assumed that I was a student and asked me if he could see yesterday's class notes. Students, on the other hand, saw me as a fellow Dominican; they usually approached me in Spanish, sometimes inquiring about what part of "the DR" my family was from. Sometimes, if I were dressed in more professional clothing, students whom I would meet in the hallways and lunchroom asked me in Spanish if I was a psychologist reporting on students who were "bad." Other students simply saw me as a college student and asked me about getting into college.

Before beginning my analysis of how race and gender processes intersect in the classroom setting, I describe the neighborhood and institutional context in which Urban High School is embedded. Next, I bring into focus some of the invisible race(ing) and gender(ing) processes that transpire in high school classrooms as well as through school policies. And, finally, I outline some of the ways in which teachers and school administrators can interrupt the cycle of race, class, and gender oppression of racially stigmatized and language minority students.

BACKDROP FOR URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

Urban High School is emblematic of what Anyon (1997) refers to as "ghetto schooling"—the grossly inferior education available to racially stigmatized low-income immigrant youth. Scaffolding enveloped the entire four-story, turn-of-the-century building. Sections of the roof regularly collapsed and pigeons could be found flying around in the auditorium and hallways, sometimes making their nests in the stairwells. Both inside and outside, the building appeared to be falling apart and bursting at the seams (New York Immigration Coalition, 1999).

Originally intended to accommodate approximately 2,500 students, in the late 1990s Urban High School had a student population of about 3,000. To accommodate the overflow of students, 28 makeshift orange trailer classrooms have been squeezed into the crumbling baseball field located behind the main school building. Ironically, despite the trailer classrooms having only one toilet for about 40 students, their facilities appeared more hygienic than those in the main building. Even the bathrooms for faculty and staff located in the main building were missing doors, did not flush, and lacked toilet paper and working faucets. During the course of my study, I always brought a water bottle with me because I could not locate a single working water fountain in the entire building. When queried about the possibility of moving to a habitable school building, Mr. Perez, the middle-age Latino school principal lamented, "There is no public willing to build new schools."
As a de facto hypersegregated school, Urban High School is representative of the schools attended by most racially stigmatized groups, such as Latinos and African Americans. It is located in a neighborhood that experienced intensive Dominican immigration from the 1970s through the 1990s. Most of the students who attend Urban High School are zoned to attend this school. Although most of teachers are white, the student population is overwhelmingly Latino (91%), mostly from the Dominican Republic. The remaining student population, which is categorized as Black, includes second-generation youth from Haiti, the Anglophone West Indies, and Africa. The enrollment of Asian and white students is negligible (1%). Because the majority of students were from low-income families, three fourths were eligible for free school lunch.

Only a quarter of students graduate within the traditional 4-year time frame, and about a quarter drop out, with the rest of the students remaining beyond the traditional 4 years of high school. Over half of 9th and 10th graders were older than is designated for their grade, and 7% of the students were classified as special education. In the hallways and in the lunchrooms, I often overheard students, particularly young men, remarking that they had been at Urban High School for more than 5 or 6 years but had not been able to graduate. Ironically, then, in part because more women graduate than men, it was men who were more likely to remain enrolled beyond the 4th year, making Urban High Schools' enrollment slightly more male than female (55%).

At our first meeting, Mr. Perez, the school principal, expressed enthusiasm about my research project because during his 8-year tenure as principal, he had been observing the race-gender gap and was curious to learn what I would find. Mr. Perez introduced me to Ms. Rivera, who was an assistant principal and the chair of the social studies department. Both Mr. Perez and Ms. Rivera were pleased that I was a Dominican graduate student who was born and raised in the United States because they hoped that I could serve as a role model for their student body.

Ms. Rivera, a veteran teacher of 20 years, promptly took me under her wing, introducing me to the different department faculty in the school. While giving me a whirlwind tour of the school, Ms. Rivera tried to reassure me that Urban High School was not as dangerous as everyone thought it was. Indeed, media representations of the Urban High School neighborhood included very negative images of drug wars, gang fights, and criminality. However, far from the depictions of Urban High School as a violent school, I noted that students were quite cordial toward each other. While exchanging classes and the latest gossip, student conversations peppered the hallway in a mixture of English and Spanish. Young men walking in the hallways usually greeted each other in Spanish by touching, not shaking hands, and young women embraced and kissed each other on the cheek.
As we walked down the hallways, Ms. Rivera greeted students in both Spanish and English. Although I chatted freely with Ms. Rivera in both Spanish and English, at a daylong teacher workshop I attended at Urban High School, several teachers openly expressed their belief that students should only speak English while they were in school. In another instance, a white middle-age teacher overheard one of her students speaking Spanish in the hallway and stopped him to say, "Pedro, I know you know how to speak English. Speak English!" The entire time, Pedro, understandably dejected about the prohibition of his native language in the school setting, just stared down at the floor while he was being scolded. During the course of my fieldwork, like Pedro, I received a number of frowns and disapproving glances from some white teachers because I was speaking in Spanish with other students and teachers.

As Ms. Rivera and I made our way to the department office, I queried her about why there were classrooms filled with students, but no teachers. Ms. Rivera lamented that at the beginning of every semester there was always a shortage of teachers (Calderone & Buettner, 1999). Urban High School has a high teacher turnover rate, with close to half of the teachers leaving after 2 years. Some of the veteran teachers remarked that in the fall of 1997, the figure was closer to 70%. Close to one third of the social studies teachers that spring were new recruits. Indeed, Ms. Rivera later admitted that she had only recently joined the staff after teaching for more than 20 years in another high school. The need for teachers was so great that during the middle of the semester, Ms. Rivera tried to entice me to consider teaching at Urban High School, even though I had no prior experience with high school students and was not certified.

Despite being an assistant principal and the head of social studies department, due to lack of office space, Ms. Rivera's office had been transformed into the headquarters for the 24 teachers she supervised. During their free periods, these teachers huddled elbow-to-elbow, cramped into a space designed to comfortably accommodate perhaps two to four people. Without access to a computer, they bubbled in attendance sheets, planned lessons, organized school trips, graded tests, advised students and, in the few minutes that remained, tried to eat their lunches. Teachers often sat in each other's classes, just so they could have a space in which to prepare their next lesson.

Every time I entered the makeshift social studies headquarters I was struck by how dedicated the teachers were, despite not being treated—or compensated—as professionals. I marveled over how they were able to perform their duties when they were lacking even the most basic supplies, such as books, chalk, or even a desk. Working under such dreadful conditions, even the most student-centered teachers received the message that their job was not important. Likewise, even the most school-oriented stu-
dents invariably learned that the education of low income, Latino, immigrant students was not important, as they were not expected to amount to much.

ON THE INTERSECTION OF OVERCROWDING, POLICING, RACE(ING) AND GENDER(ING)

Beyond the decrepit conditions of the school building, one of the most striking aspects of Urban High School was the ubiquitous security presence. All students had to enter the main building through a smaller side door because the main entrance was boarded up. Upon entering, students had to present their picture identification cards and pass through state-of-the-art full-body metal detectors, filmed by video cameras that were staffed by half a dozen security personnel, including guards, peace officers, and armed New York City police officers. I queried the head of security about why they had begun using metal detectors and why they had requested a police officer on campus, years before it became a city-wide policy. Mr. Castellanos explained that it was not because Urban High School was among the most violent in the system but rather because it was among the most overcrowded in the city. Seemingly, crowd control was one of the major functions of the security personnel. During the 5 minutes that students were given to change their 40-minute period classes, security guards with bullhorns were positioned at the corners of the hallways, yelling, "Move it!" Long after students were quietly seated in their classrooms, teachers often had to compete with the noise emanating from security guards' walkie-talkies, as they patrolled the corridors and stairwells.

When asked about the interactions between young men and women, security guards, most of whom were Latino and Black men, admitted that they seldom dealt with altercations involving young women. They even joked that male security guards were not allowed to make physical contact with female students who had been involved in fights. According to school policy, only female security guards were allowed to do that. However, only two of the more than two dozen security personnel were women. In contrast, male security guards were allowed to chase, manhandle, and apprehend male students. Therefore, although officially security guards were supposed to protect and supervise all students, in practice they were only patrolling the young men. In due course, the problematic student was profiled as a male.

Security measures in the trailer classrooms were even more extreme. Ninth graders, all of whom were housed in the trailers, were required to wear school uniforms—a blue shirt and beige pants—or face penalties, including having their identification card confiscated and losing their lunchroom privileges. Only students with swipeable identification cards were
permitted access to the overcrowded lunchroom located in the main building. Not surprisingly, school administrators, students, and teachers colloquially referred to the trailer park as “Riker’s Island,” a jail located in New York City.

The racialization of Black and Latino youth as a stigmatized group that was prone to crime manifested during 1990s controversy spearheaded by New York City Mayor Giuliani (Van Gelder, 1997). The mayor insisted that crime could be reduced in the city if police officers had access to high school yearbooks in an effort to apprehend wanted criminals. Given that the New York City public school system is predominantly Latino and Black, this demand can be interpreted as what Omi and Winant (1994) define as a racial project. Regardless of intention, this discourse links dark-skinned male bodies to crime and simultaneously attempts to reallocate resources based on that definition. To be sure, in September of 1998, police officers finally gained complete control of the security personnel at all New York City public schools.

Overcrowding and the subsequent increased security is turning many public urban high schools, which are supposed to be institutions of learning, into spaces in which urban Latino and Black youth, particularly young men, are humiliated and criminalized through searches and other demeaning encounters (Pastor, McCormick, & Fine, 1996; Rosenbaum & Binder, 1997). While doing fieldwork at Urban High School, I witnessed violence directed toward young men. In one such instance, Ms. Rivera asked a security guard to chase a young man who ignored her request to remove his hat. School rules stipulated that no student could wear a hat on the school premises. This rule was never enforced with young women but was often a source of problems for young men.

Another worrisome institutional practice was the forging of a pipeline between low-income, racially stigmatized schools and prisons. When I was a New York City public high school student during the 1980s, students who had been engaged in scuffles were sent to the dean’s office. However, I was alarmed to see that at Urban High Schools such students were quickly whisked away in handcuffs by the white police officer permanently assigned to the school. The prevailing assumption that low-income and working-class Latino and Black youth, especially young men, are prone to aggression has resulted in the normalization of physical violence against them in urban schools nation-wide (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

One morning while sitting in Mr. Green’s class I heard a commotion in the hallway. Immediately after class I went to the security office and learned that the fight involved young men in the special education program. Although there had been no weapons used and no one had been seriously injured, the school’s police officer arrested the young men involved in the fight. The Latino security guards who were involved in stopping the incident
spoke angrily about pressing charges against the students. Again although no weapons were involved, these young men were arrested and processed in the prison industrial complex. Given the growing link between urban, low-income, overcrowded and racially stigmatized public schools and the prison industrial complex, it is not surprisingly that Black and Latino men continue to be disproportionately arrested and convicted (Davis, 1997).

UNEARTHING RACE-GENDER LESSONS IN THE CLASSROOM
Regrettably, classrooms are not impervious to the social narratives that frame Latino and Black students, particularly young men, as “problems” (Fine, 1991). The following analysis of Mr. Green’s third- and fourth-period economics class for seniors provides a window to the invisible ways in which race(ing) and gender(ing) transpire in many high school classrooms across the United States. Mr. Green was a well-intentioned and hardworking teacher I often bumped into during my morning commute. To compensate for the lack of books in his classroom, Mr. Green used his own money to purchase newspapers and make photocopies. In an effort to prepare his class for the statewide Regents examinations, Mr. Green assigned journal writing at the beginning of each class. Because he did not have a space in which to leave his students’ work, at the end of every semester, Mr. Green could be seen lugging a green duffel bag filled with student journals. Mr. Green was emblematic of the hardworking teachers that sacrifice for our students. However, despite his good intentions (Fine, 1991), Mr. Green, like other dedicated teachers across the country, was unaware of the ways in which his pedagogical style and demeanor inadvertently contributed to the growing race-gender gap in education.

One morning, Mr. Green, who always wore a shirt and tie to class, locked the door shut after the bell rang and announced, “You will have exactly seven minutes to complete this quiz. Please take off your hats.” Because the doors were locked shut from the outside, all latecomers had to knock to be let in, and they were required to sign the late book. While students were completing the quiz, Mr. Green inched his way down the crowded aisle checking for homework, often walking over desks to get to the next row. Disappointed at the number of students who did not hand in their homework, Mr. Green remarked, “Students, this is unacceptable; only a handful of you have submitted your homework. Many of you will lose points for not handing in homework.”

One young man in the class called out, “How come you didn’t used to give us homework last year?” Mr. Green retorted, “You guys quiet down! Do you want to be here? I suggest that you follow the rules,” pointing to the blackboard. A large piece of cardboard stapled over the blackboard listed “Mr. Green’s rules for success”: 
1. Be present every day.

2. Be in your seat when the bell rings.

3. Homework is due at the beginning of class.

4. Do not wear hats, walkmans, or beepers.

5. Be quiet and attentive when some one is speaking.

6. Do not bring food or drinks to the classroom.

7. Raise your hand and wait to be recognized before speaking.

8. Be prepared for school.

9. Treat faculty and other students with respect.

Another informal rule in Mr. Green's class was "English only." Sometimes during classroom discussions, students replied in Spanish but were completely ignored by Mr. Green.

Exactly 6 minutes after the quiz began, Mr. Green warned, "Okay students, you have one minute," and seconds later added, "Okay students, time is up. Put your pens down. Put your names and pass them forward. If I see you writing I will take points off." Mr. Green's classroom often felt like a very controlled environment that had a definite inviolable time schedule.

During classroom discussions, Mr. Green inadvertently framed Latino young men as potential drug and crime statistics (Fine, 1991). Another morning, Mr. Green began class by asking students to talk about the problems that existed in contemporary society. Students called out, "Crime, drugs, pollution." Mr. Green continued, "Is crime directly or indirectly caused by poverty?" Leo, a male student replied, "Drugs are a way to escape from reality; therefore we have a drug problem. But poverty doesn't necessarily cause crime. People come from New Jersey, buy their drugs and what kind of life do they lead?" Leo argued that white suburban youth come to Latino neighborhoods in New York City to purchase drugs, but they are not low income. Likewise, José chided, "I read about a study in the newspaper that states that 40% of 'weedheads' are in the 'inner city,' but 60% are from the suburbs!" The rest of the young men clapped, made remarks in Spanish, and cheered Leo's and José's social critique of the racialization of low-income Black and Latino communities as the only space where criminal activity takes place. Noticeably upset, Mr. Green responded, "Students, I don't need the heckles. You need to raise your hands."

Due in part to the fact that Mr. Green had to cover a given amount of material within the 40-minute time block, the time allowed for substantive dialogue was constrained. Mr. Green responded in a textbook fashion, "In an indirect way poverty can lead to drugs." Flustered by the symbolic taint
that was cast on his community, one young man muttered under his breath, "Just because you're poor doesn't mean that you use drugs." Given that the majority of the students at Urban High School are from low-income and working-class Dominican families, and that the media has stigmatized Latino and Black men as drug lords, the young men in Mr. Green's class were understandably upset by his comments.

In an effort to contribute to the classroom discussion, José continued the debate by saying, "Many of the people who engage in crime do not have drugs." Again the rest of the class applauded and made remarks in Spanish. Oblivious to his students' social critique, Mr. Green continued to press them to agree with his prescriptions: "What is the broad social goal of the minimum wage? Come up with alternative methods."

After a deafening silence, which can be interpreted as form of resistance to the racialization processes that had taken place in the class thus far, Mr. Green offered another textbook solution: "Tax breaks to employers who create jobs." After another pause, Viscaino, a young man, offered, "train people for higher skilled jobs." Other students clapped, and from his seat Viscaino took a bow and smiled at his friends. But, Jose chided, "What good is job training if the jobs are not there?" Mr. Green reproached, "There is a demand for skilled workers, such as actuaries. They make over hundred thousand dollars a year." Lionel rejoined, "You have to understand that there are people out there who have an education but who still sell drugs because the jobs are already taken by people out there who have experience."

Time and again Mr. Green's laudable attempts to encourage classroom discussion were undermined by his authoritarian pedagogy. Although Mr. Green was a hard-working, teacher his pedagogical style was quite authoritarian and alienating. Mr. Green appeared to promote participation only if students agreed with the official responses. The young men in Mr. Green's economics class were participating in classroom discussion by making biting references to job ceilings, racism, and police brutality, but their social critique was often muffled by an oppressive pedagogy fixated on maintaining order and producing "correct" answers. More important, once again young men who wanted to participate in a classroom dialogue were defined as disruptive and as problems.

The gender balance of the class had a visible effect on Mr. Green's social interactions with students. While Mr. Green was always on guard for his third-period class, which consisted mostly of men, his demeanor changed almost instantaneously during his fourth-period class, in which the majority of the students were women. Mr. Green described these two classes as being like night and day.

One morning, just as Mr. Green began to take attendance in his fourth-period class, Juan, who arrived a few minutes late, knocked on the door to
be let in. While Juan was signing the late book, Mr. Green demanded that he remove his hat. Juan refused and asked why Mr. Green had not asked the women in the class to remove their hats. (Indeed four women were wearing hats.) At Urban High School, school rules stated that no student could wear a hat inside the school building. However, although this rule was strictly enforced for young men, it was never enforced for young women.

Angrily, Mr. Green replied, "Ladies can wear it because it's fashion!" Unscathed by Mr. Green's insistence, Juan who was dressed in designer sportswear rejoined, "I'm fashion too Mr. Green." At that point, Mr. Green was noticeably irate and threatened to send Juan to the principal's office, but Juan would not budge. After an uncomfortable silence, Mr. Green glanced at me, then back at Juan, and reluctantly asked the women to remove their hats. Juan then finally obliged. Before the end of the class, however, the "ladies" (but not Juan) had their hats back on; without a word from Mr. Green. Shortly thereafter, Juan stopped coming to class. Later that month I found Juan in the college office. When asked why he had stopped attending class, Juan said he left because he had "problems" with Mr. Green.

The next month in the same fourth-period class, Ani, another class clown who, like Juan, sometimes came in late wearing a baseball cap, joked about Mr. Green's resemblance to television personality Pee Wee Herman. In part because of Mr. Green's likeness to the comedian, of course, the entire class burst out laughing, including Mr. Green. In disbelief, a young man turned to another young man sitting behind him and whispered, "Imagine if we had said that, he would have kicked us out of the class!"

While I did note that young women misbehaved less often than men, teachers, regardless of gender and race, were generally more lenient with young women who transgressed school rules. In part because some teachers did not feel physically threatened by female students, but they may have felt intimidated by their male counterparts, they tended to be more understanding of young women who were absent from class, came in late, or did not hand in homework. Moreover, in many overcrowded urban schools, so-called feminine traits, such as silence and passivity, are valued and rewarded. Therefore, the "good" student is profiled as a "young lady," whereas the "bad" student is constructed as a male troublemaker.

**REWIRTING RACE-GENDER HIGH SCHOOL LESSONS**

How can we erase the race-gender gap in education? How can we begin rewriting some of the race and gender lessons students learn in high schools about who they are and who they can be? There is ample evidence pointing to how large public institutions can be successfully recreated into alternative spaces in which students who were previously defined as "at risk" are
turned into scholars, citizens, and activists (Fine & Sommerville, 1998; Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997; Hartocollis, 1999; Meier, 1995).

Ms. Gutierrez was emblematic of a transformative teacher who nurtured social critique and critical consciousness among her students (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). In her American history class, Ms. Gutierrez created a safe space for student social critique, empowerment, and social change. A key aspect of Ms. Gutierrez's success was due in large part to her willingness to be innovative and take risks with pedagogical strategies (Hooks, 1994). Instead of employing traditional pedagogical practices, which constitute students as empty receptacles that should be ready for the educational “deposits” made by an authoritative teacher, Ms. Gutierrez worked toward teaching students how to transgress the illusion that teachers are omniscient (Freire, 1985; Hooks, 1995).4 Her classes were often structured as semicircles and students worked on small-group and multiple-group projects. Students cotaught lessons, wrote and performed plays depicting historical events, and conducted research on their immigrant neighborhood and family experiences. During one of Ms. Gutierrez's classes, the Industrial Revolution was brought to life as students simulated a 19th century sweatshop in Lower Manhattan.

In terms of content, Ms. Gutierrez tried to make sure that topics that were not deemed important for inclusion in the standardized statewide Regents exams, such as the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean, were covered in her class. In a deviation from the official curriculum, Ms. Gutierrez took her juniors on a class trip to the Native American Museum. “Although you will not be tested on this in the Regents, I still think this history is important for you to know.” Of course, because Urban High School had limited funding for extracurricular activities, Ms. Gutierrez paid for the lunch of the 60 students who attended. As a chaperone for this trip, I accompanied the group to a special lecture and film presented by one of the staff members at the museum. Here students linked the decimation of the Tainos, the indigenous peoples of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, with the current experiences of the indigenous peoples of South America. By weaving her students’ experiences, history, and culture into her course on American history, Ms. Gutierrez successfully inspired students to become lifelong learners.

Ms. Gutierrez's success with students stemmed from her efforts to make their culture and language an integral part of the class; students did not have to leave their culture outside the classroom door (Delgado, 1992; Lopez, 1997; Nieto, 1992, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Ybarra, 2000). Unlike teachers who often viewed the use of any language other than English as a deficit and an impediment to “real” learning, Ms. Gutierrez welcomed the use of different languages in the classroom, including languages she did not know, such as Haitian Creole. Moreover, Ms. Gutierrez was not fixated
on maintaining an artificial order in the classroom. For instance, with the exception of the day that state inspectors were visiting the school, Ms. Gutierrez generally allowed men to wear their hats in class. Young men felt accepted and welcomed in her classroom and therefore were not experienced as “problems.” In turn, young men volunteered to come early to rearrange desks, decorate the classroom, erase the chalkboard, and clean up the classroom. In short, young men felt that they were genuinely appreciated for who they were in the classroom.

Both young men and women respected and admired Ms. Gutierrez because she truly admired and respected her students. Although she was from South America, Ms. Gutierrez practiced a sense of solidarity with her predominantly Caribbean Latino students. Of course, part of the reason Ms. Gutierrez was successful with her students was that she was a second-generation Latina herself, who spoke Spanish fluently. However it was her pedagogical praxis and genuine respect for her students that made her so successful with both her male and female students. For instance, my own high school experience with some Latino teachers in a New York City public school throughout the 1970s and 1980s was completely different from what I witnessed in Ms. Gutierrez’s classroom. A couple of my Latina teachers held disdain for Dominican culture and ridiculed Dominican Spanish. To be sure some of the teachers who early on took an interest in me and proclaimed that I was “college material” were Jewish, Italian, and African American teachers who did not speak a word of Spanish. However, these teachers practiced a politics of caring and genuinely respected my language and cultural heritage (Valenzuela, 1999). In short, that a teacher’s racial and ethnic background is different from that of her students should not necessarily pose an impediment to creating a classroom environment where her students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences are validated and affirmed. In an environment where the culture and history of students are an integral part of the learning process, the race-gender gap in education will be eradicated.

CONCLUSION

In examining the race-gender gap in educational attainment among Dominicans, I found that both institutional practices and classroom pedagogy are important spaces in which to work toward reversing the race-gender gap in education. At Urban High School, like at other low-income public urban schools, young men from racially stigmatized groups are viewed as threatening and potential problem students, whereas young women are treated in a more sympathetic fashion. In effect, although males and females attend the same high schools and come from the same socioeconomic backgrounds, they have fundamentally different cumulative experiences with
the intersection of race and gender processes in the school setting. In turn, these experiences shape men’s and women’s views about the role of education in their lives in fundamentally different ways (López, 2002). Given the rac(ed) and gender(ed) ways in which school rules and policies are implemented at many urban schools, it is not a surprise that Latino and Black men comprise a disproportionate number of students who drop out, are discharged, expelled, and tracked into low-level curriculum tracks, including special education.

What would a school that seeks to eliminate the race-gender gap in education look like? There are many changes, both institutional and pedagogical, that can be made in an effort to dismantle the race-gender gap in education. At the institutional level, principals and other school administrators must pay close attention to the ways in which overcrowding translates into increased authoritarian practices informally directed toward young men, particularly those from racially stigmatized groups. Are security guards only patrolling young men? Are school rules applied in an excessive fashion toward young men? Is there a bridge between low-income public schools and the prison industrial complex? Zero tolerance regulations in school and the presence of metal detectors and armed police officers in the schools may be creating an inhospitable school environment for racially stigmatized young men, especially Latinos and Blacks.

As the heads of their schools, principals can work toward ending race, gender, and class oppression by actively seeking to create a school climate that provides a space for the democratic discussion of racial, class, and gender inequality (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Ayvazian, 1995; Cummins, 1993; Freire, 1993). Instead of ignoring issues of race, class, and gender oppression, principals can counteract power relations between Latino students and the dominant society by opening a dialogue on these issues. In this environment, issues of diversity are not relegated to particular “ethnic” days, months, or festivals but rather are constitutive of the curriculum, institutional practices, and the relationship between the school and the surrounding community.

At the classroom level, teachers can be attentive to they ways in which they are interacting with students. Are authoritarian pedagogical practices undermining the education of Latinos? Are young men perceived as disruptive and punished disproportionately when compared with their female counterparts? Is the history and experience of students reflected in the curriculum? The omission and repression of Latino students’ culture, language, and experience is a form of academic violence, which seriously undermines their learning, as well as their democratic right to express themselves in any language.

If our goal is to eliminate the race-gender gap in education, it is extremely important that we examine the processes through which students are racial-
ized and gendered in schools through school policies and through classroom pedagogy. Once we become aware of the invisible ways in which gender(ing) and race(ing) processes take place at both the macro and micro levels in schools, we can begin to rewrite the race and gender lessons many students, particularly Black and Latino students, learn about who they are and who they can be (Meier, 1995). It is my hope that by paying attention to the race(ing) and gender(ing) in the classroom and school policies we will be on our way to eradicating the race-gender gap in education.

Notes


2 Omi and Winant (1994, p. 56) define a racial project as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning."

3 As previously mentioned, Mr. Green kept the door locked after the bell rang.

4 As explained by Freire (1985) "banking education," where a student records, memorizes, and repeats information, without perceiving issues of relative power and contradictions, serves as an instrument of oppression.

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