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**THE FLUIDITY OF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS: STUDENTS' INTERPRETATIONS
OF MENDEZ V. WESTMINSTER**

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Abstract

Using research from two eleventh-grade U.S. history classrooms in the San Francisco area, this article examines how students draw on their lived experiences to create historical meanings. Specifically, a three-day lesson on *Mendez v. Westminster* was used as part of a curricular intervention to explore the following question: How do students use their experiences with race/ethnicity and language to understand how discrimination was enacted in a different time? A grounded theory approach was used to identify patterns and codes from the data including student work, student interviews, and classroom observations. Findings reveal that students' lived experiences served as a tool for understanding racial/ethnic discrimination and reasons why 1940s Mexican Americans claimed whiteness. At the same time, students' lived experiences limited their ability to recognize language segregation in the 1940s. Having said this, students in this study view history through various lenses: 1) a racialized lens that recognizes White privilege; and 2) a language lens that reifies language discrimination. The authors conclude by presenting the complexity of students' intersectional identities in shaping their historical analysis.

Keywords: historical analysis, intersectionality, White privilege, language discrimination

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Introduction

School administrators thought that if they put Mexican Americans with the White kids that it would slow down the learning process . . . I've seen like Mexican students here, and I agree with [the school administrators] that it slows down everybody's learning process. I've seen kids who like just came from Mexico...and they do better because they stay after school to get more help. (Nancy, June 6, 2013)

In this classroom conversation, Nancy, a participant in this study, responds to a question about whether or not Mexican Americans during the 1940s should have been segregated for allegedly not speaking English. She argues that English-speaking students would benefit from language segregation. Surprisingly, Nancy is also Mexican American. This is startling because we often assume that People of Color do not condone discrimination, especially when enacted against their same racial/ethnic group. This example highlights an implicit assumption that students of color are more likely to understand the experiences of historical actors that share their same racial/ethnic identity. Such assumptions pose an educational concern, particularly educators' failure to consider the intersectional identities, experiences, and knowledge that students bring to the classroom.

Latinx¹ communities have stark differences in how they experience class, citizenship status, and gender, among others. These distinct identities intersect, creating a 'multidimensionality' in marginalized people's lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Race, gender, class, sexuality, language, and other identity markers come together as a set of "...interlocking and mutually reinforcing vectors" (Nash, 2008, p. 3), meaning that these identities function simultaneously in how Latinx communities experience discrimination. Mexican Americans, in particular, have a long-standing immigration history that changes between established generations and recent immigrants. For example, second-generation Mexican Americans and beyond have been partially assimilated into the U.S. mainstream society (Jiménez, 2010). Still, Mexican Americans are associated with immigration and thus perceived as perpetual foreigners (Devos & Banaji, 2005). This is problematic because Mexican Americans experience the world differently than Mexican immigrants. Intersectionality, then, offers a lens for understanding the identities, experiences, values, and beliefs that students bring to the classroom as significant

¹ Our use of Latinx is an attempt at inclusivity that acknowledges gender fluid identities.

factors to consider. As educators, we must apply a sociocultural approach that acknowledges the various *lenses*—such as gender, ethnic, racial, linguistic— that shape the perspectives of students. In understanding that young people possess various identities that inform their social and historical interpretations, educators can make more informed decisions about what and how to teach social studies subjects to diverse groups of students.

Given this concern, we ask: How do students use their lived experiences to understand how discrimination was enacted in a different time? Specifically, we examine how students of color use their racial/ethnic and language experiences to make sense of 1940s Mexican American segregation. We use the term discrimination to refer to “actions and/or policies that are intended to have a differential impact” (Pincus, 1996, p. 186) on historically marginalized people. Drawing on research from two eleventh grade U.S. history high school classrooms in the San Francisco area, we seek to understand how students use their experiences to make sense of racial/ethnic discrimination, White privilege, and language discrimination.

Literature Review

To better understand how students make sense of history, we draw from sociocultural theory. We use the work of James Wertsch (1998) to frame how students engage in mediated action, specifically how they draw on unofficial and official histories to understand the past (Wertsch & Rozin, 1998). People do not simply repeat what they have heard about the past; they use the official (i.e., learned in school) and unofficial (e.g., learned in community, collective memory) accounts to generate their own interpretation of historical events (Wertsch & Rozin, 1998; Wertsch, 2008). This means students are not passive consumers of history, but rather they assimilate new information into their already existing understanding of the past (Barton & Levstik, 1998, 2004; VanSledright, 2008; Wills, 2011). In this sense, students are “active agents” who play a role in constructing historical interpretations (Wertsch & Rozin, 1998; Santiago, 2017). This paper aims to document how students use their racial/ethnic and language experiences to understand how discrimination was enacted in the past.

In that effort, we use two sources of empirical research that consider what mediated action might look like in regards to race/ethnicity, language, and interpretations of discrimination. The first set of literature provides information about how students of color make sense of race/ethnicity in the past. The second set of empirical research focuses on how students use the present to make sense of the past. We argue that both students’ experiences

and their sociocultural environment play a role in developing or limiting a student's historical analysis. Collectively, these theories and empirical research help us document how students use their experiences with race/ethnicity and language to understand how discrimination was enacted in a different time.

The Role of Racial/Ethnic Identities in How Students Critique History

Students' racial/ethnic identities influence the way they ascribe meaning to history. This is true for both the school curriculum (Epstein, 2001; An, 2012; Santiago, 2017) and the informal curriculum (e.g. commemoration sites) (Burgard & Boucher Jr., 2016). For instance, Black and White students interpret historical events differently in the classroom (Epstein, 2001). On the one hand, White students assign historical significance to events that teach "everybody's history" and praise a narrative of progress in U.S. history. On the other hand, Black students are more critical. They resist historical events that both limited and expanded Black rights.

Similarly, Mexican American students are also likely to resist the historical content of the U.S. history curricula. Based on a two-week unit on "westward expansion," Almarza and Fehn (1998) found that the teacher's failure to acknowledge Mexican American students' ethnic identity resulted in resistance of the content offered. This was especially true when discussing U.S. history as being exclusively White. Altogether, this research highlights the impact of students' racialized identities in how they conceptualize what counts as significant into history. In this sense, students bring who they are and what they have experienced in the classroom as another analytic tool for critiquing history.

The Role of Present Day in How Students Interpret the Past

At the same time, while students' racial/ethnic experiences may help them scrutinize how race/ethnicity is presented in the past, it may also limit students' historical analysis. When students use their present-day experiences to interpret the past, they may be applying anachronistic values to their analysis. This is known as presentism, which refers to "the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present" (Wineburg, 2001, p. 90). This can pose a problem when students impose current day understandings about discrimination to the past. This is because students carry their own values, beliefs, and principles that may conflict with the values of the given historical event (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Wineburg, 1991; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007). For example, in the Epstein, Mayorga, and Nelson (2011) study on the

effects of a culturally responsive teacher's pedagogy, Black and Latinx high school students typically depicted Whites as the dominant racial group in U.S. history that "mistreated or used Blacks" (p. 11). This was the case even after the teacher discussed the diverse historical experiences of White immigrants. Part of this lies in students' contemporary experiences with racism. For example, several students made references to the unjust employment rate saying, "Whites get all the good jobs" (p. 13). As such, applying a present-day lens to previous events conflicted with students' ability to recognize how discrimination functioned in the past. Even though students' racial/ethnic experiences may encourage them to critique historical interpretations, it may not always foster a nuanced understanding of how discrimination has evolved over time.

We acknowledge that these are not the only types of experiences students have with discrimination. Latinx communities, in particular, can be discriminated against because of language. This can be attributed to the long-standing U.S. history of English-only beliefs. State institutions have pushed language minorities to adopt English as quickly as possible (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Schlesinger, 1998). As a result of these efforts, languages other than English, including Spanish, are stigmatized. In turn, this creates a "paradoxical relationship" between Latinxs and the Spanish language (Bedolla, 2003, p. 266). In this case, then, Spanish can serve as a source of ethnic pride, while also being a source of stigma. Theoretically, these language experiences may function as another cultural tool in how students analyze history, yet there is little empirical research that explains how students use such experiences.

What this does tell us is that students' present-day experiences, particularly those with race/ethnicity, play a role in their analysis of historical discrimination. That is, they can further complicate their analysis in that they can either foster critiques of simplistic interpretations of U.S. history or limit how they interpret discrimination in the past. The task then for educators is to find ways to encourage historical analysis that is not solely informed by students' personal experiences. This requires moving students away from presentism, and towards historical empathy. Although there are different definitions of historical empathy, we refer to it as "the ability to put yourself in 'the other's shoes' and to reconstruct historical agency in terms of mentality, context, and intentionality" (Goldberg, 2013, p. 43). In other words, analyzing historical events and actions within the context of the time and not imposing present-day standards. The tension, however, is that students' intersectional identities and present-day

experiences, such as those with race/ethnicity, do play a role in how they make sense of history and possibly interfere in the process of historical empathy. Thus, this study considers how students use their racial/ethnic and language experiences to understand how discrimination was enacted in a different time.

Methods

Positionality

Both authors are Chicana scholars committed to including complex Latinx historical narratives into K-12 classrooms with the intent to effectively depict the experiences of Latinx communities. The first author is an assistant professor and a former social studies high school educator in Los Angeles. The second author is a Ph.D. student who has worked as a community coordinator in several Chicago schools. Given our work in these K-12 settings, we come to this research not only as researchers, but also as educators. This expertise, along with our personal and professional experiences as Chicanas, offers us a unique perspective with which to analyze the data. It gives us insights into the data that perhaps others who have not worked in urban school settings or who have limited experiences with the racial complexities of *Latinidad* may not have.

Research Site and Participants

To understand how students use their experiences with race/ethnicity and language, the first author collected data in a predominantly Latinx high school. The school is 81% Latinx, 11% Black, 8% Pacific Islander, and less than 1% White, Native/Indigenous, or Asian. Although 65% of the students are first-generation high school graduates, the school consistently sends 90 to 95% of its students to a four-year or two-year college.

Specifically, the first author observed two eleventh grade classrooms over an eight-week period. In total, 29 students participated in the study, 25 of which were Latinx, 2 Black, 1 Indian American, and 1 Tongan. All of the Latinx student participants were children of immigrants or came to the U.S. between the ages of four and six. With the exception of the Black student, all the students were bilingual.

Data Collection and Analysis

Over the eight-week period, the first author collected data that included observational field notes, teacher interviews, student interviews, curricular handouts, and student work. From the full data set, three days were selected during which students discussed the segregation of

Mexican American students via a lesson on *Mendez v. Westminster*. This lesson was part of a curricular intervention that the first author developed for another study on racial/ethnic historical narratives (Santiago, 2019). For the purposes of this paper, we focus on student work, student interviews, and classroom observations.

The first author conducted fifteen 40-minute interviews with students from both classes. Students were a representative sample of the racial/ethnic and gender diversity of the class. The first author interviewed one Tongan student, one Black student, and one Indian American student. The other 12 students were of Latinx descent, including seven Mexican American students, four Mexican immigrant students, and one Peruvian student.²

During the interviews, which occurred after their lesson on *Mendez*, the first author showed the students their classwork to help them recollect what they had discussed earlier in class. The first author then followed up with a set of questions in which students were asked to explain the historical significance of *Mendez*. The purpose of the interviews was to examine how students used historical content to explain past and current Mexican American discrimination.

These interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Using ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software, the first author followed a grounded approach, where she coded patterns that emerged from the field notes first (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 1995). The result was a set of codes that documented a phenomenon that she had not originally intended to look for but emerged from the observations. It was through this initial analysis that she first identified differences in how students identified with or disassociated from the historical actors. The data analysis was a recursive process in that the field notes guided the types of patterns she looked for in the student work and interviews. Three primary themes emerged from this data: racial oppression, whiteness, and language as a proxy for race. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on White privilege and language discrimination.

***Mendez v. Westminster* Curricular Intervention**

The three-day lesson that provides the context of this study discusses the 1940s Mexican American school segregation case. In 1945, the Mendez family attempted to enroll

² When referring to these 12 students we use the encompassing term “Latinx” and only use the terms “Mexican American” or “Mexican immigrant” when referring to specific students or when that status is relevant to the findings or claims we make.

their children at their local elementary school located in the Westminster School District, Orange County, California. At the time, the school was not integrated, and as a result, denied the Mendez children admission. Instead, the Mendez children were told to register at Hoover School, the “Mexican school.” Yet, their lighter-skinned cousins, the Vidaurri children, were allowed to enroll at the White school. In response, the Mendez family filed a class action lawsuit against the Westminster School District and four other Southern California districts (Brilliant, 2010). Two years later, in 1947, the U.S. Supreme Court of Appeals in the Ninth Circuit ruled that Mexican Americans could not be segregated as there was no state law mandating the segregation of Mexican Americans.

The lesson highlighted key aspects of the court’s decision through primary documents (e.g. the judge’s ruling in the first case and appeal) and secondary sources (e.g. text written by historians adapted for grade level). The documents included the following information: 1) Mexican Americans were recognized as White, a strategy the Mendez family attorney used to gain access to White schools; 2) this allowed Mexican Americans to enroll in White schools but continued to segregate Asian Americans and Native Americans; and 3) the decision upheld language-based segregation, requiring Mexican American students to prove their “English proficiency” (Brilliant, 2010). The lesson was grounded in the historical question “Did Mendez end school segregation in California?” to encourage students to evaluate the historical evidence and make claims about how discriminatory practices function.

Findings

The purpose of this study is to examine how students’ experiences with race/ethnicity and language influence their interpretations of past events. The results of this study provided three major findings. First, students identified racial oppression as a source of disadvantages. Second, using their own experiences with race/ethnicity, students recognized White privilege. Finally, through present-day experiences with language, students reified language discrimination and supported language segregation. For the purpose of this paper, we focus on White privilege and language discrimination. Collectively, these findings explain how students’ racial/ethnic and language experiences can function as tools that encourage historical empathy while also perpetuating presentist understandings of discriminatory practices. As such, they inform how students and their identities are active agents in the construction of historical understanding in K-12 classrooms.

Using Whiteness as a “Cover”

Using their experiences with race/ethnicity students recognized the benefits of White privilege. White privilege describes the unearned benefits that “White subjects accrue... by virtue of being constructed as whites” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 137). For example, when discussing the 1940s racial categories, students were asked the following prompt: “In the 1940s, the U.S. government recognized five racial categories: Black, White, Indian, Asian, and Mongolian. If you were a Mexican American in the 1940s, which would you choose? Why?” (May 21, 2013). In response, students discussed the benefits that Mexican Americans acquired in being recognized as White. Mayra, a Mexican American student, wrote, “White because they are superior and had more opportunities than people of colored skin.” Others also identified the greater access to quality education that Whites had. Micaela, another Mexican American student, commented: “I would just be White because they could go to white schools and would have more educational opportunities.”

By analyzing the benefits of white privilege, students were able to use historical evidence as well as their racialized experiences to understand why Mexican Americans would claim whiteness in the 1940s. This is best captured during two interviews. Araceli, a Mexican American student, asserted:

I feel like [claiming to be White] gave [the Mendez family] a reason to actually fight for [school desegregation] because [Gonzalo Mendez] was like ‘we’re in the same category as White people, so we should be treated equally, but we’re not (Araceli, May 21, 2013).

Noemi, a Mexican American student, also argued that claiming whiteness was a “cover” for Mexican Americans:

I feel [claiming to be White] was just a cover for Mexicans, like you know how Ms. Casillas asked us what would we be if we could choose. I chose White. Why, because it gives you more opportunity. But it’s not like you’re really White (Noemi, May 21, 2013).

Together, these two examples demonstrate students’ ability to analyze the benefits of whiteness and understand why the Mendez attorney strategically made the move to identify as White. In this occasion, then, students developed historical empathy, as they were able to take the historical evidence and articulate why Mexican Americans during that time period attempted to classify as White. Primarily, students were able to make sense of the historical

evidence by drawing on their experiences as racialized beings. This is consistent with research that highlights the impact of students' racialized identities in how they conceptualize historical events (Almarza & Fehn, 1998; Epstein, 2001)

“Oh, you have a Mexican last name, you go here”

Although students understood the role of White privilege, they struggled to see how language discrimination played a role in the *Mendez v. Westminster* case. Linguicism or discrimination based on language describes the unfair treatment of an individual based upon the characteristics of their speech (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1986). In fact, there were only 11 instances across the three data sets where students identified language discrimination. During the second day of the *Mendez* lesson, students were asked whether Mexican American students in the 1940s should be segregated because they supposedly “did not speak English.” Jezebel, a Mexican American student, commented “they don’t have to separate them [Mexican Americans] because they’re not actually dumb! They’re just saying that, ‘oh, you have a Mexican last name, you go here.’ Some of them were born here and spoke English.” Jezebel was alluding to the point that having a Spanish surname immediately signaled for discrimination. Still, students ignored her comment and discussed whether Mexican Americans were to be segregated within the same school or different schools.

To bring the conversation back, Ms. Casillas directed the class to another example of Judge McCormick’s court decision in which he stated that the only permissible reason for segregating Mexican Americans was their “English deficiencies.” Using this example, Ms. Casillas asked whether Judge McCormick wanted integration or not. Maria, another Mexican American student, replied:

Not really. It’s like Jezebel said, they were segregated by last name, but what if they were born here, what if they were like third-generation but had a Mexican last name? They would probably just stereotype, you have a Latino last name, you have to go to a Mexican school.

Again, Maria was highlighting the argument that there were Mexican Americans who were born in the U.S. and spoke English.

Using Maria’s comment as an opportunity, the first author directed students to the instructional handout that highlighted James L. Kent’s M.A. thesis. According to James L. Kent, an Orange County school administrator, segregating Mexican American children was okay

because "...Mexican American children have a bilingual handicap when they come to the United States." Following this, the first author commented, "he's speaking about Mexican Americans as if they're all foreigners, as if they're all immigrants. Are they? Is that accurate during the 1940s?" Sandra, a Mexican American student, disagreed and reiterated Maria's earlier point by posing "What if they were third-generation?" At that moment, Ricky, another Mexican American student, interjected by adding how California was part of Mexico. Although students laughed at Ricky's comment, the first author highlighted Ricky's point by noting, "but that's true. There were some people here before it became part of the United States. If they're third-, fourth-generation, at that point they might not even know Spanish. That's what Maria was talking about."

This discussion captures the difficulty that students had understanding that there were Mexican Americans in the 1940s who were not immigrants and spoke English. Although students like Jezebel and Maria questioned the assumed foreign status of Mexican Americans, many students disregarded their comments. Instead, they continued to entertain the question about whether or not Mexican Americans in the 1940s were immigrants who did not speak English. In this instance, applying their present-day lens about English Language students deterred students' capacity to understand language discrimination within this historical context. This shows that while students draw on their racialized experiences, they simultaneously pull from other experiences that are influenced by their multifaceted identities, a new finding not identified in previous research. Although there is research that highlights the stigmatized association of language in the Latinx community (Bedolla, 2003) this finding complicates how students' identities shape their historical meanings.

The "Benefits" of Language Segregation

With the incorrect assumptions that Mexican Americans in the 1940s were English Learners and immigrants firmly established, students viewed language segregation as supportive English Language instruction. This was often influenced by their present-day views about who needs English language instruction. For instance, during an interview with Nancy, she described the language segregation process as follows:

[School administrators] thought that they would put Mexican Americans with the White kids that it would slow down the learning process . . . I've seen like Mexican students here, and at the same time I agree with [the school administrators] that it slows down

everybody's learning process. I've seen kids who like just came from Mexico...and they do better because they stay after school to get more help . . . we have like a class where it has students who need more help. (Interview, June 6, 2013)

According to Nancy, segregating students in different classrooms is beneficial for all. This was fueled by her own observations at school. Nancy wasn't the only student, however. Many students immediately labeled Mexican Americans as foreigners that did not know English. As such, having segregated schools were reasonable as they provided additional forms of "support." In this case, then, applying their present-day views and beliefs conflicted with the ability to understand language segregation in the 1940s. Therefore, students do not merely rely on the historical content presented; rather, their historical interpretations are a result of the various identities and experiences that they bring into the classroom.

"I'm not racist...but I would get irritated if you had to stop class just to talk to that person"

The students' historical empathy shifted on whether or not they categorized the historical actors as Mexican Americans or Mexican immigrants. This is best reflected in their choice of pronouns. In the 810 minutes of the *Mendez* lesson, there were three occurrences in which students used the first-person to associate themselves with Mexican Americans. In the first occasion, three students used the first pronoun when discussing what racial category Mexican Americans would fall under. For instance, Galilea commented, "Black because we're both equally discriminated against." Jezebel agreed with Galilea's point by adding, "yeah, because we're both segregated." Finally, Ricky said, "I would say Asian, Indian, or Mongoloid because we all kinda look alike." All three of these students used first pronouns such as "we" or "we're" to associate themselves with 1940s Mexican Americans because of a shared history of racial/ethnic discrimination.

In the second occasion, students used first-person pronouns to discuss language segregation. Following a historical inquiry activity that reviewed how Mexican Americans were segregated based on the assumption that they did not speak English, students were asked whether or not they agreed with the argument that Mexican Americans should be segregated because they "slow down White students." Contrary to the example above, students used first-person pronouns to dissociate themselves from Mexican Americans. For example, Leticia said, "I'm not racist or anything, but I would get irritated if you had to stop the whole class just to

talk to that person” (Field Notes, May 23, 2013). Noemi agreed with Leticia’s statement by adding, “well when I was in middle school there were students who didn’t speak in English and they would split them up into our classes and it would be like so irritating waiting for them.” (Field Notes, May 23, 2013).

In the two occasions above, various students used first-person pronouns. However, in the first occurrence, students used pronouns like “we” or “we’re” to align themselves with Mexican Americans because of shared experiences of racial discrimination. In the second occurrence, though, when discussing language segregation, students used first-person pronouns to align themselves in opposition to Mexican historical actors. This was due to their imposed misconceptions about Mexican Americans as foreigners who did not speak English and thus, they dissociated themselves from these historical actors. In other words, students brought their present-day misconceptions about Mexican immigrants into their historical interpretations of 1940s Mexican Americans. These misconceptions may be directly linked to what Bedolla (2003) tells us about the stigmatized relationship Latinxs have to Spanish.

Discussion

We often assume that Students of Color oppose discrimination because a shared racial/ethnic identity helps them identify with the group that is being discriminated. However, findings in this study reveal that Students of Color analyze history through various lenses that are influenced by their intersectional identities, sociocultural environment, and present-day worldview. Students in this study analyze history through two lenses. First, students analyze history through a racialized lens that allows them to recognize the benefits that Mexican Americans gained in claiming whiteness during the 1940s. Second, students analyze history through a language lens that, at times, relies on their present-day misconceptions of immigrants and English learners. As a result, students’ experiences were a tool in developing historical empathy. On the other hand, their experiences hindered that same type of analysis, and instead facilitated presentism or the application of a present-day analysis. In this sense, these distinct analytical lenses are tinted with a set of personal experiences and identities that can either interfere with or encourage complex historical analysis.

In this study, students were able to identify the benefits of whiteness. As reiterated by student after student, Whites hold a set of rights and privileges that other racial/ethnic groups do not. These responses can be attributed to their own racialized identities. Although

segregation laws no longer exist, students are well aware of present-day forms of discrimination. Thus, students used their lived and present-day worldview to interpret the past. Using these tools, students were able to develop historical empathy—being able to analyze history within its time period—as they were able to understand the context of Mexican Americans in the 1940s. Specifically, they understood why Mexican American historical actors in the 1940s would choose to claim whiteness. This aligns with previous research that has found that the racialized identity and personal experiences of Students of Color create different historical meanings that may be more critical and resistant (Almarza & Fehn, 1998; Epstein, 2001).

At the same time, using lived experiences to analyze history poses limitations. This was the case when discussing language segregation. Students struggled to place it within the historical context of the 1940s. When students were asked whether Mexican Americans in the 1940s should be segregated for allegedly not speaking English, the majority of students immediately assumed that they were immigrants who did not speak English. For this reason, they justified segregation in the 1940s. According to them, segregating schools provided additional forms of “support” that benefited both Mexican Americans and Whites at the time. The truth, however, is that many segregated Latinx students, the Mendez children among them, spoke English fluently.

Additionally, students in this study dissociated themselves from Mexican Americans who were assumed to be foreigners and non-English speakers. This is exemplified when students used pronouns such as “they” to position themselves against Mexicans. In othering these historical actors, students reproduced racial and language stereotypes about Mexican Americans. This is also known as intraethnic othering: the process of resisting a racially stigmatized status at the expense of reproducing racial stereotypes (Pyke & Dang, 2003). This aligns with studies that find that ethnic groups’ relationship to their language can become problematic when “the groups’ language exists in a subordinate position within a system of sociolinguistic stratification” (Bedolla, 2003, p. 265). In attaching a negative linkage to historical actors’ language, students engage in what Bedolla (2003) calls selective dissociation. This refers to “the selective distancing of themselves away from the sectors of the community that they see as to blame for this negative attribution” (p. 266). In this way, students separate themselves to develop a positive social identity for themselves. Although there is research that

corroborates the significance of racial/ethnic experiences in historical meaning, this finding shows us that language serves as yet another factor shaping historical interpretations. In this case, students' current experiences and beliefs hindered their ability to analyze historical evidence that outlines the discrimination of Mexican Americans on the basis of language.

A contributing factor to these responses is the prevalent media misrepresentation of Mexican Americans. According to Santa Ana (2002), English- and Spanish-language media reproduce the common portrayal of the Latinx community as being an immigrant one. Rarely do people consider the differences between established generations of Mexican Americans and recent immigrants (Jimenez, 2010). Instead, present-day discourse about Mexican Americans remains closely tied to immigration. A clear example was the 2016 U.S. elections that discussed immigration reform as being a Mexican American issue only. In presenting the Mexican American experience as a singular and prevailing story, it is no wonder why students immediately presumed the foreign status of Mexican Americans in the 1940s. Evidently, applying their contemporary views limited students' ability to recognize language segregation as a proxy for race in the 1940s.

The fluctuation between students racialized experiences as an asset but their language experiences as a limitation complicates previous research. The data reveals a complicated limbo between historical empathy and presentism. On the one hand, students' personal experiences hindered their capacity to understand language segregation in the 1940s. This is more consistent with prior research that documents how presentism interferes with historical analysis (Epstein, Mayorga, and Nelson, 2011). At the same time, it helped students develop historical empathy, the ability to analyze historical events and actions within the context of their time. This complicates existing research (Almarza & Fehn, 1998; Epstein, 2001) highlighting how students understanding of the present can be leveraged to develop historical analysis of a phenomenon of a distinct time period.

Herein lies our contribution to the field; we argue that it may be unrealistic to think that students' personal experiences do not play a role in developing historical empathy. This might be impractical because we cannot ask students to leave their experiences, multilayered identities, beliefs, and values at the door. If we wish to engage students in critical understandings of history, it is crucial that we understand how young people enact their intersectional identities in the classroom.

In understanding that young people possess various identities that inform their interpretations of history, educators can make more informed decisions about what and how to teach social studies subjects to a diverse group of students. However, this does not equate to a generic approach that encourages educators to make a curriculum more culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This means teaching historical events, such as *Mendez v. Westminster*, with their full set of contradictions that highlight the complexities of the given event (Levins Morales, 2016). That is, prompting students to understand how discrimination functioned in another time period, how it has evolved over time, and what role they may play in these modern-day repressive forces. This is imperative because, as we saw in this study, students of color often perpetuate pre-existing social orders. In providing these opportunities, we can begin pushing students to critically analyze history while giving an avenue to confront their own misinterpretations of history that reproduce hegemonic practices (Paris & Alim, 2014).

Conclusion

Students do not enter the classroom as empty vessels (Freire, 1970). Rather, they bring their own historical and social understandings that are influenced by their family, communities, media, peers, and racial/ethnic cultures. Together, all these factors contribute to the meanings they attribute to historical events. However, these different components are not symmetrical. Rather, the identities and experiences of students are fluid as they create meanings about history. Having said this, as educators, it is vital that we support the value of multiculturalism and multilingualism in the classroom. This means going beyond cultural sensitivity and awareness and selecting historical lessons that lend themselves to examining the various intersectional factors while also tapping into students' own misconceptions.

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