

**“Attitudes, Policies, and the Failing of Students in a Rural Academy:
Critical Race Theory as a Lens for Exploring Educational Issues, and
Empowering Students and Parents in a Rural Newfoundland Community”**

Education 6100: Critique #3

**Name: Rob Power
MUN ID: 9236571
Prof: Dr.'s Crocker and Burnaby
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In “Critical Race Theory and Ethnographies Challenging the Stereotypes: Latino Families, Schooling, Resilience and Resistance” (1999), Villenas and Deyhle show how seven different ethnographies draw upon critical race theory to expose the ideological and political structures that have created an environment of institutionalized racism, ultimately resulting in an education system designed to fail Latino students. These structures, seen through a critical race theory lens, have the aim of perpetuating the status quo of the current American social order by silencing and nullifying the voices and values of Latino students and their families (Villenas and Deyhle, 1999, p. 413).

Villenas and Deyhle’s examination of the application of critical race theory, and my own experiences as an educator, lead me to believe that critical race theory could be a powerful tool for exposing and correcting inequities in the formal education system here in Newfoundland and Labrador. The inequities of which I speak are limitations in the access students in some rural areas have to the best opportunities that can be provided by our modern K-12 education system (Petracek, 2002). The following anecdotal comments, recalled from my pre-service teacher training, and my year of experience teaching in a less-affluent rural community, are what convinced me that critical race theory, as described by Villenas and Deyhle, could be applied to the delivery of education in rural Newfoundland:

“Most of these kids aren’t university material...”

“These kids see their parents getting all kinds of money and handouts from the government, so they don’t see any need to work...”

“Their parents don’t care about school, or see any value to getting an education...Most of their parents don’t have any more than a grade three or four education...How can you expect these kids to want to learn anything?”

“You can’t expect any support or help from the parents...”

“Most of the smart parents left after the moratorium, so all that’s left here are the ones with no education, who can’t get a job anywhere else. There’s no support or value in the home for education, so the kids don’t care about it..”

Although the school at which I worked was situated in a community that was extremely hard hit by the collapse of the northern cod stocks, and the school itself did seem to have an inordinately high number of low-achievers, discipline problems, and dropouts, these types of comments sound rather harsh and discriminatory. They remind me of the types of comments about Latino students and their families mentioned by Villenas and Deyhle (1999, p. 414). Reading their article got me to thinking about issues concerning the disparities between rural and urban students that were recently highlighted by Heidi Petracek in a segment on the CBC’s “Learning Curves” documentary (2002). Petracek (2002) noted public opinion that rural students receive a lower quality of education, and are disadvantaged compared to their urban peers. She cited the results of standardized tests, as compared on an international scale (Petracek, 2002). Petracek’s (2002) piece also highlighted public calls for an education system designed to meet the needs of rural students, as opposed to expecting rural students to succeed with a curriculum designed to be delivered in urban schools, with their greater wealth of funding and resources.

The issues raised by Petracek (2002), and the anecdotal comments that I have recalled, could be used as a point of departure for critical research (Gitlin and Russell, 1994, pp. 181-202), using critical race theory as a model (Villenas and Deyhle, 1999, pp. 413-445), to help understand the roots of the difficulties imposed on students in rural schools, and to help empower rural communities to improve access to educational opportunities for their children. The first step from there would be to involve members of

rural communities, perhaps students and parents in the community where I taught, in the process of formulating research questions, designing the study itself, and deciding upon research methodology (Gitlin and Russell, 1994, p. 181-202; Tite, n.d., *a, b, c*). As equal participants, the researcher and the community members could reflect upon the experience of rural education, and the attitudes about rural schools and students that appear to be involved in the problems they face (Ibid).

Villenas and Deyhle (1999, pp. 417-437) describe how the ethnographies they examined show the forces that have categorized, or castified, Latino communities as cultural “others,” and as somehow deficient in terms of the background needed to succeed in American schools and society. A critical race theory lens could be used, first, to help identify exactly what attitudes and myths, as well as what power structures, have been involved in categorizing rural students and communities as “others,” and as deficient in terms of deficiency theory (Ibid., pp. 417-437; Tite, n.d., *a, b, c*). I say myths, because a cursory examination of data comparing the results of primary and elementary school students in rural and urban zones in this province indicates no significant difference, quantitatively, in the performance and abilities of students in each area (Department of Education, 1996, 2002). If the students display equal ability at one point, perhaps any differences in their high school performances could be institutionally explained.

Villenas and Deyhle (1999, pp. 417-437) show how several ethnographies explore how the effects of European-American colonization, and the labelling of white, middle class standards as cultural and educational norms, have resulted in systematic racism, the labelling of Latino students as inherently deficient, and the blocking of access to the best educational opportunities. Canada is not without its own patterns of developing national

standards of curriculum, and the environments under which education is accessed (Barrell and Hammett, 2000, pp. 30-49; MacKay and Sutherland, 1992, pp. 37-43). The question that could be explored might be, “whose standards?” Are they white, Anglo-Canadian, middle-class standards oriented towards urban students destined for postsecondary education? Who decides on these standards? Are students and parents in rural communities, such as the one where I taught, left out of this process? How and why? Critical race theory, as explored by Villenas and Deyhle (1999, pp. 413-445), and the ethnographies they discuss, suggest that the ideologies of the dominant class are being propagated through their power structures, in an effort to suppress communities and cultures that are feared, and viewed as not only different but deficient. Perhaps this same lens could expose similarly racist policies and actions directed towards rural communities, and the rural way of life, in a country where globalization, urbanization, and information technology are increasingly being heralded as the wave of the future (Barrell and Hammett, 2000, pp. 30-49). Critical race theory could be used as the lens through which education is explored in rural communities, by rural students and parents. It could allow them to add their voice to educational reform, helping them to expose the ideologies that fear or oppress the rural lifestyle, disadvantaging rural students (Villenas and Deyhle, 1999, pp. 413-445; Gitlin and Russell, 1994, 181-202; Tite, n.d.).

Villenas and Deyhle (1999, pp. 433-440) describe how a lack of representation in power structures, such as school boards and city councils, helps to perpetuate racism and negative policies directed towards Latinos. They also describe how, through the process of critical action research, some Latino communities banded together, found a communal voice, and gained the political power needed to raise and address their concerns (Villenas

and Deyhle, 1999, pp. 437-440). Critical research in rural communities could involve the writing of ethnographies to show the experience of rural students in the current education system (Ibid, pp. 413-445; Gitlin and Russell, 1994, pp. 181-202; Glesne, 1999, pp. 43-65, 155-173; Tite, n.d., *a, b, c*). This, in turn, could expose the true nature of their frustrations, the reasons for differences in their academic performance, if any, and the root causes of discrimination against rural students and their parents. The comments I mentioned earlier show the same attitudes that were falsely held about Latino students in the United States—that they are deficient, and that their parents either do not support education, or have improperly raised them (Villenas and Deyhle, 1999, pp. 417-437). Critical race theory was used as a lens to expose the fallacy of these attitudes, to empower the Latino community, and to give them the voice needed to affect positive change (Ibid, pp. 413-445). The same principles could be used to expose the labelling of rural students, and the denial of access to an education system tailored to rural needs, as a form of racism. It could be used to give a voice to the rural community where I taught, and to empower its members to give their children the educations they deserve, and are capable of attaining.

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