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## English Dominance as Racist Nativist Microaggressions: The Need to Reframe Restrictive Language Policies for California's Latina/o Students<sup>1</sup>

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### *Context and importance of the problem*

Latina/o students have lower educational attainment outcomes than any other major racial group in the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). Researchers have largely used deficit frameworks that blame Latina/o students, their families and communities for this low educational attainment (Valencia, 2010). A Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit) framework in education challenges deficit perspectives of Latina/o students and examines the institutional barriers that leads to low educational attainment for this group. This policy brief uses LatCrit in education—an explanatory framework used to expose the institutional racism that creates and reproduces educational and societal inequities for Latinas/os—to reveal how Latina/o students in

California experience subtle, daily and

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<sup>1</sup> The full article of the study summarized in this policy brief was published by Taylor & Francis, Ltd in the *Journal of Educational Studies*. See Pérez Huber, 2011.

cumulative forms of racism in education, racist nativist microaggressions. These microaggressions emerge in Latina/o students' experiences with restrictive language policies in public K-12 schools (Pérez Huber, 2011). Racist nativist microaggressions reveal institutionalized racism within public K-12 schools by connecting the subtle, everyday forms of racism students experience in the classroom, with state policies that support the subordination of Latina/o students.

Racial microaggressions are systemic, everyday forms of racism that are subtle, layered and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, committed automatically and unconsciously. (Pierce, 1969; Solorzano, 2010). Racist nativist microaggressions can be understood as a type of racial microaggression. Racist nativist microaggressions expose a form of racism that links race, immigration status (real or perceived), and language, which target both immigrant and non-immigrant Latinas/os (Pérez Huber, 2011).

This type of microaggression helps researchers understand the consistent and subtle ways Latina/o students are subordinated in schools by negative perceptions held by educators.

### *Critique of policy options*

In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 227 (Prop 227), termed the “English for the Children” initiative. Prop 227 ended rights established by *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) for English learner (EL) students to be provided with the same instruction as English-dominant students in public schools. Prop 227 restricted bilingual education in California public K-12 schools and mandated EL students into structured English immersion programs. At the time Prop 227 passed, Spanish-dominant Latina/o students comprised 81 percent of EL students in California (California Department of Education, 2006). This restrictive language policy continues to guide K-12 classroom instruction in the state, although research has found that the achievement gap between EL and non-EL students in the state has

remained substantial (Wentworth, Pellegrin, Thompson, and Hakuta, 2010).

In a study examining how undocumented immigrant and U.S. born Chicana<sup>2</sup> students experience English dominance in California public K-12 classrooms, I found that policies like Prop 227 support and encourage teacher practices of English dominance over immigrant and U.S. born Latina/o students. Further, I argued English dominance could be understood as a function of English hegemony (Pérez Huber, 2011). According to Macedo, Dendrinos and Gounari (2003) English hegemony reinforces ideological superiority of the English language and maintains social domination over linguistic minority (and non-white) groups. The students in this study were targeted by English dominance in public K-12 schools, regardless of immigration status and language fluency. The study found that student experiences with English dominance were often subtle, and occurred consistently throughout their

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term Chicana to refer to female students of Mexican descent. I use the term Latina/o to refer to a larger pan-ethnic population of people from Mexican, Central American, South American, Cuban and Puerto Rican descent that may share similar experiences.

K-12 educations. These microaggressions not only functioned to subordinate students' language, but their forms of knowledge, cultures, and lived experiences. The English dominance described by students was indeed a form of racism that could be explained by racist nativist microaggressions.

Solorzano (2010) outlines a model for conducting research on racial microaggressions that includes identifying 1) the type of microaggression, 2) the context of the microaggression, 3) the effects of the microaggression on the individual and, 4) the responses of the individual to the microaggression [\(see fig. 1\)](#). This study identified racist nativist microaggressions as a *type* of racial microaggression that occurred in the *context* of K-12 education. Future research should examine the *effects* of racist nativist microaggressions on students over time, and how students *respond* to them.

Figure 1. [Types, Context, Effects and Responses to Racial Microaggressions in Education](#) (adapted from Solorzano, 2010).

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| <b>TYPES</b>     | How one is targeted by microaggressions                               |
| <b>CONTEXT</b>   | How and where the microaggressions occur                              |
| <b>EFFECTS</b>   | Physical, emotional or psychological consequences of microaggressions |
| <b>RESPONSES</b> | How the individual responds to microaggressions                       |

#### *Policy recommendations*

The findings of this study revealed the role of restrictive language policies in supporting English dominance as a function of English hegemony in California K-12 public schools. A LatCrit theoretical framework uncovered racist nativism as a form of institutionalized racism that perpetuates educational inequities by subordinating Latina/o students' language to maintain social domination over this group. Educational inequity will lead to future social inequities for Latinas/os in California who are pushed out of the educational pipeline. Policy

recommendations for disrupting the institutionalized racism faced by Latina/o K-12 students in California include:

- 1) Overturning Prop 227 and other restrictive language policies in California public K-12 schools.
- 2) Reframing language policies from a critical (rather than deficit) framework that values the language, forms of knowledge, cultures and lived experiences of California's English learner students.

Eliminating restrictive language policies would be an initial step needed to end state sanctioned practices that uphold English as a superior language. A reframing of K-12 language policies is necessary to allow educators to draw upon the linguistic abilities and academic strengths of EL students. This reframing should include an explicit focus on drawing from the assets of Latina/o students who comprise the vast majority of EL's in California. This asset-based approach would position policy and practice as a social justice project for *all* students in the state.

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