

Pump Up the Blowouts

Reflections on the 40th Anniversary of the Chicano/a School Blowouts

By GILDA L. OCHOA

WHEN ONLY ONE OF THE 22 STUDENTS raised her hand, I was not surprised. It is the rare student who begins college having learned the history of Mexican Americans in schools. This time, the question was how many knew about *Mendez v. Westminster*—a 1947 case that resulted in the elimination of de jure segregation for Mexican students and was influential in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. I probably would have received a similar reply had I asked about the Lemon Grove Incident of 1931 where the activism of Mexican immigrant parents resulted in the first successful desegregation case. Typically, a few more students know about the 1968 Chicana/o School Blowouts, but these overall patterns of historical exclusion are deep and their ramifications are real. Not only are many students denied access to crucial history, but also the myths about education, meritocracy, and equality are kept intact.

By not providing students with the tools to understand the historical continuities and changes in schools, we may be reinforcing beliefs that so-called student failure is rooted in individual students, families, and teachers—not in a legacy of structural and educational injustice. As I hear students' anger about not learning this history until

college, I also think about the millions of students who are not able to attend college and may never learn this history.

Thinking in particular about the Chicana/o School Blowouts, how are our K-12 schools teaching this important movement? Does it appear as an assignment, a lesson, a paragraph, a footnote, or is it left out completely? Is it taught as an event



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Chicano Blowout organizer Carlos Montes, shown here at a 1968 rally for the Poor Peoples' March to Washington, was also a founder of the Chicano rights group the Brown Berets. Montes and 12 other students were arrested for organizing the Blowouts.

to be romanticized from the past that has no bearing on us today? Is it co-opted in a slogan devoid of a political movement, presented as a struggle led by just one person, or is it used to help understand today's schools and inspire a new generation of students?

In the 1960s, inspired by the black Civil Rights Movement, the farmworkers movement, and the land rights struggles in New Mexico, Mexican American students were increasingly voicing their dissatisfaction with the history of discrimination and unjust schooling. As historian Gilbert Gonzalez has described, this schooling was informed by beliefs that Mexicans were biologically and culturally deficient and structured by vocational tracking, school segregation, unequal facilities, and Americanization programs. The emphasis was on making Mexican Americans into English-speaking and Anglo-practicing individuals as quickly as possible. Many schools had rules against speaking Spanish, and students breaking such rules faced punishment and humiliation.

Growing increasingly frustrated, youth mobilized, and in March 1968, over 10,000 East Los Angeles students walked out of their schools protesting a system of educational inequality. Carrying "Chicano Power" and "Viva La Raza" placards, students had a list of nearly 40 grievances and demands for the Los Angeles school board. At a time when about half of Mexican American students did not complete high school, students shifted the debate from theories blaming students and families to one that centered on institutional injustices. They demanded bilingual and bicultural education, more Mexican American teachers, relevant curriculum, accurate textbooks, and the end of curriculum tracking and prejudiced teachers who steered Mexican American students into vocational classes.

Though students were organizing for quality education, the police overreacted to their demonstrations, and the media caught police officers beating and arresting students. The school

walkouts, along with depictions of police brutality, galvanized community members, and Mexican American students throughout the Southwest and Midwest also demonstrated for educational justice. The walkouts drew national attention to the vast disparities in schools and helped to set in motion the formation of Chicana/o Studies classes, programs, and departments in colleges and universities throughout the United States.

What Is Learned by Teaching About the Chicana/o School Blowouts

Hopeful
Angry
Mad
Faithful to the Movement
Con mucha esperanza
Enojada
Fiel al movimiento

—Lucy and Diana (8th graders)

Working with students such as Lucy and Diana from middle school through college has taught me several lessons on the importance of teaching about the Chicana/o School Blowouts. First, introducing students to the factors leading to the blowouts can provide teachers and students with the tools to make historical-contemporary connections that enhance critical thinking skills. We must ground contemporary schooling in the legacy of injustice. Without historical-contemporary connections, we miss crucial structural patterns and allow the notion that "racism is a thing of the past" and that "there is a level playing field" to fester. Such perspectives underlie today's debates surrounding "the achievement gap" and are used to advocate for the continuation of standardized and test-based curriculum. Blame is directed at students, families, communities, and teachers, and the roots and reproduction of inequality in schools and society are camouflaged.

Two weeks into a Pomona College class on Chicanas/os-Latinas/os and Education, we were

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discussing Chicana/o Studies as a discipline that critiques systems of inequality and challenges dominant conceptions of a meritocracy. Some students had trouble understanding the historical conditions necessitating such an approach. Socialized in today's schools, they had neither been encouraged to see systemic injustices nor to unmask romanticized images of the U.S. However, after viewing and discussing a clip from *Taking Back the School*, a video combining original footage



A scene from the 2006 HBO movie *Walkout*, which was produced with the assistance of a number of activists from the 1968 walkouts.

from the 1968 walkouts and contemporary interviews with the participants, students had a clearer appreciation of the precursors leading to the formation of Chicana/o Studies. By thinking about how Chicana/o history has been left out of schools and the ways that students were mistreated in the 1960s, they seemed better able to understand the importance of exposing such injustices.

Teaching about the Chicana/o School Blowouts also provides an opportunity to discuss the legacy of resistance that accompanies injustice. For too long, Latinas/os have been depicted as “sleeping giants” who passively accept others’ dictates. Lessons on the history of activism better enable us to envision strategies for change and devise ways to work collectively to address lingering and new injustices in schools and society.

Just as college students have benefited from learning about the blowouts so too have 7th and 8th graders. In an afterschool social justice class, my brother, Enrique Ochoa, and I connected the 2006 school walkouts for immigrant rights to historical patterns of student activism. After discussing the contemporary school walkouts and community responses to them, we drew upon the 1968 walkouts and the video *Taking Back the Schools* to help students see that their activism was part of a larger history of student resistance. Learning about this legacy of resistance inspired some students to search for individuals who had

experienced both the 1968 and the 2006 student walkouts. Such grounding of contemporary struggles to the past also makes history and schooling more relevant to students’ lives.

Representing nearly 60 percent of Latinas/os in the 2000 U.S. Census, Mexican Americans are the largest Latina/o group. By teaching about the blowouts, Mexican American students may better see themselves in the curriculum, and all of us will see the history and potential power of youth. Even for the growing number of Mexican immigrants and children of immigrants who are in our schools, an awareness of this history can facilitate their understanding of the intense English-only pressures and inequalities that older generations of Mexican Americans have encountered—an awareness that may enhance Mexican American/Mexican immigrant relationships by making apparent differing historical relationships with the Spanish language. A recurring pattern shared by many of the Latina/o teachers interviewed for my book, *Learning from Latino Teachers*, was how course curriculum on Chicana/o history, especially information on the Chicana/o Movement, was crucial for empowering and exciting them about school. They talked about being “woken up” and becoming more vocal when learning this history.

We can use the school blowouts to discuss the differing histories and experiences of the over 45 million Latinas/os in the United States. We all

want to be known and understood, and assumptions that all Latinas/os are Mexican should be avoided. There is vast diversity by class, language, color, gender, and generation in the United States among Latinas/os and even within ethnic or national origin identities. Nevertheless, in spite of these differences, there are similar histories of U.S. imperialism and racism that can be explored to ground the history of Mexican American schooling to patterns of U.S. power and control throughout Latin America. To show the diversity and similarities among Latinas/os, I have used *Latino Los Angeles*, a collection of articles on global transformations, community formation, and forms of activism. Juan Gonzalez's *Harvest of Empire* is helpful for providing a detailed history of U.S. imperialism across Latin America.

Since the Chicana/o School Blowouts did not emerge in isolation, by discussing their relationships to other political movements, we can better connect our shared histories and struggles across race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. Likewise, as with many movements of the period, sexism and heterosexism were sidelined until racism and classism were addressed. By teaching about the exclusionary practices that occur even within social justice movements, we can examine intersecting forms of domination and the benefits of greater inclusion.

When teaching about the school walkouts and encouraging students to see the importance of connecting multiple forms of injustice, I have used poetry by women of color who critique the sexism of the 1960s movements and the racism of the 1970s Women's Movement. In particular, two anthologies, *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Making Face, Making Soul*, offer engaging and powerful pieces that illustrate the importance of adopting an intersectional approach that does not give primacy to race, class, or gender.

Both high school and college students have responded well to poems in these collections by Pat Mora on identity and Bernice Zamora on her

experiences as a Chicana. A helpful resource that links the various movements of the 1960s and 1970s together in Los Angeles is Laura Pulido's *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*.

The injustices in our schools and society are as pervasive as ever, and much work lies ahead. Fortunately, we have many examples of resistance and growing amounts of scholarship to learn from and teach. I look forward to the day when more students raise their hands into a collective fist when asked about the history of inequality and resistance in schools. It is at that point when we will be better positioned to learn from the past and radically restructure our schools and society in more just ways. Forty years from now, another generation of youth should not have to make the same demands as those from the 1968 school blowouts. ■

I look forward to the day when more students raise their hands into a collective fist when asked about the history of inequality and resistance in schools.

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- Pulido, L. (2006) *Black, brown, yellow, and left: radical activism in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Recommended Resources

Videos

I have used the following videos in class to facilitate learning, dialogue, and reflection on Latinas/os and education. Some historical background is helpful before showing the videos.

- Taking Back the Schools*, The National Latino Communications Center, KCET Los Angeles and Galan Productions, Inc., 57 min., 1996. Documentary on the 1968 Chicana/o School Blowouts with original footage from the walkouts and contemporary interviews with the student organizers.
- Walkout*, Directed by Edward James Olmos, 110 min., 2006. Feature-length film on the 1968 Chicana/o School Blowouts.
- The Lemon Grove Incident*, Directed by Frank Christopher, 60 min., 1986. Docudrama on the 1931 struggle by Mexican parents in Southern California to prevent the segregation of their children into a Mexican school.
- Fear and Learning at Hoover Elementary*, Directed by Laura Angelica Simon, 53 min., 1997. Documentary on the contemporary impact of anti-immigration policies on students at a Los Angeles-area elementary school.
- Mendez v. Westminster: For All the Children: Para todos los niños*, KOCE Television, Directed by Sandra Robbie, 30 min., 2002. Documentary with members of the Mendez family on this important school desegregation case.

Books

- Acuña, Rodolfo F. *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, sixth edition. Longman 2006.
- García, Alma M. *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*. Routledge 1997.
- Rosales, Francisco A. *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*. Arte Publico Press 1997.