

Moving beyond the Stratification of Mexican Identity through Art

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Abstract

The determination of societal worth among Mexicans in Mexico and the United States has traditionally been decided by color (e.g. skin tone, hair texture, eye color). Such social stratification negatively affects education and healthcare access and has been correlated to increased delinquency rates as well as to violent crime. These issues raise significant social justice concerns. Art in Mexican societies is used as a way to challenge as well as to instate concepts relating to identity and socially ascribed roles. Although issues of stratification still abound, this paper will present an overview of the use of art within Mexican societies as a method of identity-affirmation and identity-reconstruction. Examples will be provided as to the role of art in informing community members of social injustices, implementing visual literacy, and in re-constructing visual associations affiliated with identity. The potential of art education to increase social interaction, facilitate assimilation, and enhance cross-cultural understanding will also be mentioned.

Keywords: social justice, Mexican-American, stratification, identity, visual literacy, cultural resources, indigenous, art education, metaphor, mestizo.

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Art in Mexican societies is a method of addressing stratification through identity-affirmation and identity-reconstruction. This article examines Mexican art that affirms identity on both a national and individual level. Based on historical examples and references to Aztec pre/ post-colonial-era work, NeoMexicanismo, Post NeoMexicanismo, and Cholo Art, implications for artists and art educators working in this environment, art should be included as an important aspect of the curriculum when they serve a high percentage of contemporary Mexican-American youth.

The basis of this perspective rests upon research illustrating ways that art is employed by disadvantaged members of society as well as how art corresponds with cultural and social interaction. Art is an essential aspect in the daily life of many stratified populations and is a substitute for the more intellectualized verbal expressions used by privileged classes (Farkas & Beron, 2004). Stratification is correlated with levels of vocabulary comprehension and usage; whereas, those of lower socioeconomic classes show more limited verbal ability (Farkas & Beron, 2004). Since culture is transmitted through social interaction (Jameson, 2006), when verbal interaction is limited, art serves a distinct role in transmitting cultural identity (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

Images are rich with concepts not easily reduced to words (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Arnheim, 2004). Cumulatively, art images are said to embody the core aspects of a culture (Prosser, 1998), and if viewed and evaluated individually, images are provide specific information about human existence (Prosser, 1998). Art images culturally interpret rather than reflect the objects which are being represented (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Circumstances and relationships in an environment are elucidated by artists and presented in a personalized and reconstructed reality; objects depicted in art take on an identity unique to both the culture and the artist (Davies, 2008; Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

Social Stratification

The word stratification pertains to a layering effect of sediment occurring in nature. Stratification also has a sociological connotation and refers to the hierarchical positioning of classes of individuals based on socioeconomic factors; the lower the socioeconomic level, the greater the likelihood that the individual will be a social outcast (Verdugo, 2009). Stratification causes serious impediments as it influences an individual's eligibility for social rewards such as education and healthcare (Verdugo, 2009). Interestingly, research

indicates that in locations characterized by a juxtaposition of culture and genetic composition, such as borderlands (e.g. United States and Mexico), cultural identity and monetary wealth are continually negotiated and there is a struggle to maintain social powers (Kofoed, 2009). Although stratification is not a new phenomenon and can be predicted based upon factors such as cultural juxtaposition and socioeconomic polarization, it does inhibit a society.

Mexicans, both within the United States as immigrants and within their country of origin, have experienced a system of stratification in which many fall short and are ineligible for social rewards (Massey, 2009). Color (e.g. skin tone, hair texture, eye color) denotes worth within Mexican society, and ironically, Mexico consists mostly of individuals with indigenous-derived, dark skin who are viewed as being below lighter-skinned Mexicans of European origin (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2008). Worth assignment based on genetic ancestry not only limits the likelihood of social unity but also allows elite minority whites to obtain positions of leadership in Mexican society, falsely representing the Mexican majority (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2008). Due to stratification, Mexican identity is marked by the experience of being an oppressed majority.

Negative Effects

Stratification perpetuates inequality and injustice and creates a vulnerable population (Grodsky, Warren & Felts, 2008). By negatively affecting education and healthcare access, stratification stimulates factors which increase crime rates (Farkas

& Beron, 2004; Hackman & Farah, 2009). All of society suffers as a result of extreme stratification, even those on *top*.

Symbolic interactionist theorists have emphasized the role that identity and self-concept play in behavior, and definitions of self have been found to be a predictor of crime (Blumer, 1969; Brownfield & Thompson, 2005). This is because self-concept is heavily influenced by factors such as social interaction (Bernburg, Krohn & Rivera, 2006). Social rejection causes an impaired self-concept and leads to internal questioning such as, "Who am I?" An example of this is: "Who am I? Mofo, I'm a gangsta." Poor self-concept inevitably affect behavior and interactions (Bernburg et al. 2006). Social problems, peer group rejection, and low socioeconomic status (all of which coincide with stratification) have been found to correlate with increased rates of delinquent behavior and violence (Shaffer & Steiner, 2006).

Individuals exhibiting delinquent behavior and violence are excluded from enjoying social rewards, creating a cycle of socially deviant behavior and the experience of social rejection (Rebellion, 2006). Recidivism studies reveal that individuals incarcerated once in their lifetime are more likely to be incarcerated multiple times (Bernburg et al. 2006). In the United States Hispanic re-incarceration levels are higher than that of inmates of other ethnicities (McGovern, Demuth & Jacoby, 2009). A growing body of research suggests that Hispanic defendants are perceived as a greater threat and are "blame-worthy." As a result, US residing Hispanic

defendants experience harsher penal outcomes (McGovern et al. 2009).

Important to consider is how social stigma affects stratified members. Recent literature suggests that pain resulting from physical harm and pain that results from social rejection affect neural circuitry and computational processes in the same way (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). The brain interprets both experiences similarly. Being socially rejected and being considered an out-group member triggers a neural alarm system similar to that of being punched or physically assaulted. Many individuals experiencing such neurological responses go into a fight or flight response. Humans may be wired to react vehemently to rejection. Cardiovascular system response intensifies, breathing rate increases, and heart rate quickens in a response similar to a threat state (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). Individuals responding to environmental cues while in a threat state tend to make decisions impulsively, and the behavior that results may be interpreted as deviant and worthy of imprisonment (Rebellion, 2006).

Effect of Stratification among Latinos

Mexicans have a long history of experiencing varying forms of social stratification, and of being labeled an out-group (Massey, 2009). Within the United States, Latino men are nearly four times more likely than white men to be imprisoned for delinquency-related infractions (McGovern et al. 2009). On average, Latinos have lower levels of formal education and lower literacy rates than individuals from other ethnic groups (Verdugo, 2009). Addition-

ally, social and economic factors often limit the likelihood of social acceptance of native Mexicans by members of less stratified groups; one third of US Latino adults speaks English poorly or not at all (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005; Grodsky et al. 2008; Verdugo, 2009). Additionally, millions of people from Mexico still speak the original native languages (e.g. Mixtec, Tzotzil, Zapotec, Maya, Triqui, and Nahuatl) rather than Spanish. Thus it is not guaranteed that Mexicans in the US and/or Mexico will have access to services delivered in Spanish at social service agencies and in the public schools (Lockhart, 2004).

There is a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and genetic heritage in Mexico (Farkas, & Beron, 2004; Hackman, & Farah, 2009). Today's Mexican population is composed primarily (60%) of "mestizos" or individuals of mixed-blood resulting from a combination of both indigenous and European Spanish ancestry (Loaeza, 2004). Today, native-born Mexicans are directly linked to an indigenous history. However, many Mexicans would rather forget this or deny it all together instead referring to themselves as *Hispanos* or Spanish Americans (Gonzales, 2006).

Racism in Mexico abounds as a result of Mexico's colonial past (Chorba, 2007; Loaeza, 2004). People of Indian descent (30% of Mexico's total population) often bear the brunt of racism and often live in poverty, while lighter-skinned, Spanish-descendent Mexicans (9% of Mexico's total population) live a more comfortable lifestyle in the higher socioeconomic classes in Mexico (Chorba, 2007; Loaeza, 2004).

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Art in Mexican Societies

Whether poor or rich, privileged or underprivileged, all societies have strong artistic aspects in their culture. Art serves a distinct social role (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005). Although issues of stratification related to Mexican identity have not been eliminated by the arts, for Mexican societies, art has served and continues to serve the role of ameliorating some of the negative effects of stratification (Chorba, 2007). Art within Mexican societies, both in the US and in Mexico, is used as a way to overturn previous social systems and to promote an establishment of a new identity (Craig & Paraiso, 2009; Reyes, 2006; Alba & Islam, 2009). In some contexts, art has transferred cultural knowledge between stratified groups heightening the degree of understanding and socialization (Kofoed, 2009; Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

Indigenous Artwork

Since the times of the Aztec and Mayan empires in Mexico, art has been used as a means to elevate members of society as well as to denote power and hierarchy (Sanchez, 2005). Supernatural themes and ritualized roles differentiated rulers from commoners (Sanchez, 2005). Pre-Colonial artwork played a decisive role in the success of the Spanish conquest of Mexico as linguistic, ethnic, and social barriers limited verbal interactions between the conquerors and the conquered (Gruzinski, 1995). Through artwork, imagery, and symbolic ritual, indigenous nobles became cultural brokers between the indigenous and the Spaniards during the conquest (Carruthers, 2001).

In the colonial period in Mexico, visual art was used to negotiate new bilateral relationships and identities (Franquiz, & Brochin-Ceballos, 2006; Kofoed, 2009; Gruzinski, 1995). The Pre-Colonial designs and techniques used by the artisan class native to Mexico were linked to pre-Hispanic religious practices and were contrary to Christian mores (Peterson, 1992). Consequently, native artisans were persecuted until new crafts and techniques were introduced to Mexico from Europe and taught to the indigenous and mestizo people (Carruthers, 2001). Natives learned about Spanish cultural while integrating new techniques and led to cultural pacifism as polarization decreased and the members of the indigenous population began to mix with the Spaniards culturally (Gruzinski, 1995). For several hundred years, Mexican fine arts embodied imitations of European traditions (Carruthers, 2001). As a result, art served as a means of propagating knowledge of the Spanish culture and hierarchy (Gruzinski, 1995).

Role of Public Art

Since the early 1990's, the concept of *Mexicanness* has been debated among Mexican artists. According to Chorba (2007), Mexicans illustrate what it means to be Mexican using metaphors related to the cultural phenomenon of blending, which first began in the 16th Century during the colonial period. In Mexican society, individuals have communicated with one another using art as a means to visually code complex social concepts in elaborate metaphors. Jose Clemente Orozco's five fresco murals of 1931-1932 at New York's

New School for Social Research are a great example of this. In his work, Orozco glorifies those bringing reform to the indigenous and mixed peasants of his state (Goldman, 1995).

Another example of this can be noted in the work of Yolanda López (1978) who explored and sifted through native imagery in order to present the concept of *Mexican* in a rejuvenated and modern way. Lopez addressed the widespread sentiment that Mexicans had been stripped of their history, language, identity and pride and she worked towards reestablishing a connection to Mexico's ancestry in order to make sense of current political and social struggles. *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe* (1978), the work is full of indigenous colonial-era symbology while powerfully challenging oppressive roles encountered by Mexican immigrants in the US and Mexico (Sorell & Keller, 2004).

Among Mexicans

In Mexico art is employed as a way to fulfill social functions publicly. Art images have been used as a means of rebuilding identity and addressing the development of a new cultural phenomenon as a result of colonization. Art images are used as a means to portray shared community traits, to promote a sense of belonging, and to reconstruct the metaphor of *mestizaje* or mixed-bloodedness in an attempt to unify the nation (Chorba, 2007). Otherness and racial inequality have been and still are among the most widespread depictions of Mexican culture (Craig, & Paraiso, 2009; Franquiz, & Brochin-Ceballos, 2006; Kofoed, 2009). Art is used to create images

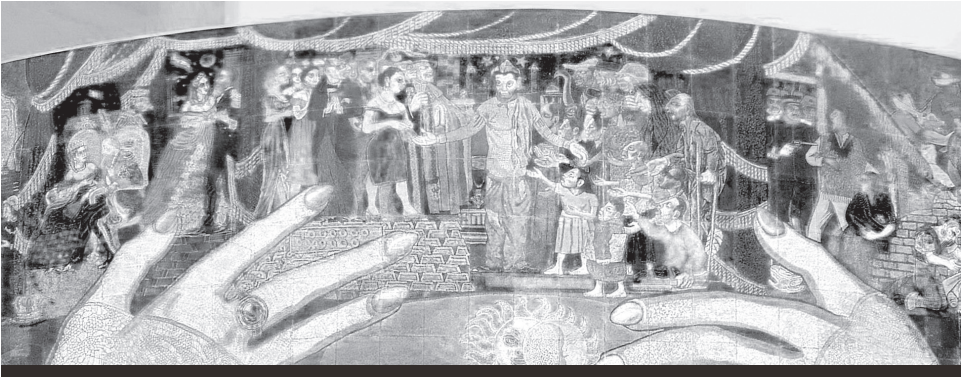


*Portrait of the Artist
as the
Virgin of Guadalupe* (1978)

of a cohesive people with a shared identity fitting for a collectivistic culture (Chorba, 2007).

The reason behind why Mexico's public art centers around the idea of *Mexicanness* or *Mexicanidad* is linked to its history (Craig & Paraiso, 2009; Franquiz, & Brochin-Ceballos, 2006; Kofoed, 2009). The concept of what is Mexican is often confused by the fact that people in power do not have physically traits similar to or behave similar to the vast majority of Mexicans. In the 1990s, the Mexican government made overt attempts to officially address issues of stratification as a result of the country's controversial and contrasting ethnic and cultural make-up (Chorba,

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Mural del Teatro de los Insurgentes (1951)
by Diego Rivera

2007). Nationalism was at an all-time low (Craig & Paraiso, 2009) and many people were not proud to be Mexican because they felt rejected for truly being Mexican. Even the word Mexican is rooted in the language of the Aztec people, Nahuatl (Aguilar-Moreno, 2006). However, those in leadership positions in Mexico often do not share the knowledge of Aztec ancestry with the Mexican majority (Bonilla-Silva, & Dietrich, 2008).

During the 1990s, government representatives of Mexico supported the notion of Neoculturation, or the creation of a new culture based on the fact that most Mexicans were of mixed race (Chorba, 2007). Neoculturation coincided with the artistic movement known as Neo-mexicanismo. This genre of artists wanted to rebuild the idea of Mexicanness by reformulating interpretations of Mexican history and social identity (Ohio Arts Council, 2009). The movement attempted to define the essence of Mexicanness through the use of native, religious and historical symbols in ways that

reflected the ideals and values of the majority of Mexicans (Ohio Arts Council, 2009).

Identity Reaffirmation

Using art to redefine the idea of Mexicanness through public reinterpretation can be noted in the work of the Neo-Mexicansimo artist, Diego Rivera. In one of his most famous murals he depicts the *Pelado* of Mexico (Goldstein, Le Blanc, Quiñones, Zinsli, DeRosa, 2009). *Pelado* literally means having been peeled or stripped as in being stripped of rights or dignity. This word was used in reference to the majority of Mexicans. In the 1950's, during the Mexican Revolution, Mestizos and indigenous Mexicans (nearly 90% of the population), were considered, the *Pelado* (Martinez, 1960). They did not hold any political or economic power and they were impoverished.

Rivera's *Mural del Teatro de los Insurgentes* (1951) in Mexico City, focused on tensions surrounding the conceptualization of Mexican identity. The *Pelado* was depicted in a state of Christ-like divinity, physically placed in a self-sacrificing position between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (Goldstein et al. 2009). The

mural portrayed a renewed interpretation of Mexicanness and illustrated a revolutionized role in society for Pelados. The mural portrayed the Pelados as the heart and soul of Mexico rather than a shameful inferior breed (Chorba, 2007; Goldstein et al. 2009).

This was not the only mural of its type. During the Mexican Revolution, the sense of self, place, and community among the majority of Mexicans (e.g. mestizos and indigenous) was greatly influenced by artistic depictions. Public murals communicated and promoted the revolutionary ideals that served to benefit the majority denigrated segment of Mexican society. Such ideals included public education for all, a concept that was new at the time (Folgarait, 1998). Through public art, the Pelados were elevated to a state of being worthy of education, healthcare, adequate income, and respect in which they were equal to those around them. Through art, the community draped itself in colorful, motivational symbolism for the well-being of the stratified majority (Goldstein et al. 2009).

Current Use of Art

The use of murals as a public means to proclaim equality and to promote communication about Mexicanness spread to the United States as immigration increased. Art is being used as a tool to bring about change in response to imposed otherness and racial inequality (Reyes, 2006). Research is documenting identity shifts among the Mexican-American population that parallel the European and indigenous blending that occurred in Mexico (Alba & Islam, 2009). Latino murals addressing this

can be viewed in urban areas across the United States and have appeared on walls, street signs, buildings, and even on cars throughout the US. This Mexican-American public art is commonly referred to as Cholo art (Reyes, 2006). Cholo is a term that has been applied to individuals of mixed-blood ancestry, and is rooted in a Nahuatl term similar to the word, *mutt* (Vigil, 1988). This term was used for indigenous Mexicans in a derogatory manner by Spaniards. Today this term is used by Mexican-American youth in a reference similar to *brother* or *nigga* and denotes pride in their cultural heritage (Reyes, 2006).

The art of the Cholos permeates the areas in which they reside. Art is created on used Chevrolets and other *low-rider* cars. Such depictions are done in a style of elaborate, airbrushed murals, which personalize the vehicles and illustrate stories about culture, ethnicity, and social struggles (Bright, 1997; Craig & Paraiso, 2009). As a result, low-rider vehicles and low-riding are said to be symbols of the Mexican-American culture. These symbols are descended from ancient customs of gathering in the *el centro* (the center of town) to display clothing and other items of social status for courtship purposes; such customs are said to have influenced the beginning of cruising, which began in the post WWII era (Penland, 2003).

Post Neo-Mexicanismo

Rodriguez and Amorales (2009) wrote that Post Neo-Mexicanismo is the predominate artistic movement of the day and Mexicanness is still its central focus. However, the

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style has changed to embrace technological advances and reflects the modernity of a global economy. In Post Neo-Mexicanismo art, the indigenous Mexican ancestry of the past is visually united with European influences through the use of new mediums and methods. Another aim of Post Neo-Mexicanismo art is to redefine acceptable Mexican artistic depictions in an effort to disinherit previous conceptualization of Mexicanness and to reinstate cultural pride (Rodrigues, & Amorales, 2009).

The most famous Post Neo-Mexicanismo artist is Carlos Amorales (Merrier, 2006). Amorales explores the concept of identity construction and his work has served as a reflection of Mexico's subcultures, social conditions, and has thematic qualities relating to the obstruction of identity (Rodrigues, & Amorales, 2009). In the recent (2008) exhibition, *Escultura Social* (Social Sculpture), 20 Post Neo-Mexicanismo artists, including Amorales, addressed Mexican identity, community dynamics, and explored new conceptual approaches to art media. Among Amorales' most famous works is the 1995, *Lucha Libre* (Free Fight), which illustrated Mexico's well-known masked wrestling matches. He wanted to explore Mexican masculinity and demonstrate what a male needs to possess in order to be "righteous enough to be a super-hero, and cool enough to be a Mexican" (Merrier, 2006, p. 16).

Overcoming Stratification

In the US and in Mexico access to ideas and processes that would allow for a restructuring of social systems is largely

dependent upon education. Among economically disadvantaged segments of the population, education levels are inferior and individuals often experience reading levels that are lower than that of other more privileged groups (Bonilla-Silva, & Dietrich, 2008). The majority of Mexicans are considered economically disadvantaged. Hispanic-Americans residing within the US have dramatically lower levels of formal education and lower English literacy rates than individuals from other ethnic groups (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005; Grodsky et al. 2008; Verdugo, 2009). Part of the reason education levels are lower is a result of language barriers which make access to education difficult.

Ideology through Visual Literacy

Visual literacy plays a role in the transference of information (Arnheim, 2004). Artistic expression is considered a central component of cultural identity (Jameson, 2006), and works of art often reflect social norms as well as distinct perceptions of the world (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Ameri, 2007; Arnheim, 2004). Art is listed as one of the principle elements involved in an internalization of cultural idiosyncrasies (Jameson, 2006). For these reasons, visual literacy serves the function of illuminating culture (Franquiz & Brochin-Ceballos, 2006; Pauwels, 2008).

Complex concepts can be conveyed through images. Before the 21st Century, the term literate referred to a person's ability to read and write, and the label literate separated the educated from the uneducated. Literacy required fluency in a native tongue. Now the concept of literacy

includes the ability to integrate sensory input, as well as the ability to categorically sort and interpret the content of multiple images simultaneously (Chauvin, 2003). Visual literacy is the process of learning from sensory information (Pauwels, 2008). A person who is visually literate compares new input with what is already stored in the brain (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Schunk, 2007). The art of Mexico provides a means for increasing visual literacy for its people.

Mexican-Americans and Art Education

For many Mexican-Americans, success in school is unlikely because they have not had the opportunity to become members of the social community (Reyes, 2006). What surprises many researchers is that Mexican-Americans are unlike any other immigrant group in that they preserve their original culture (Verdugo, 2009). Many do not integrate into mainstream society and many aspects of their homeland culture remain intact (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). Lazear (2005) found two reasons for this: (1) many Mexicans live in highly concentrated and often mono-linguistic, Spanish speaking communities and (2) immigration policy provides a majority of visas for those Mexicans entering on the basis of family ties, rather than for employment.

Closed communities and lack of employment pursuits lead to segmented assimilation (Li, 2007). Segmented assimilation refers to a situation where social barriers (e.g. stratification, poor schools, and limited employment opportunities) can lead to downward mobility

and increased stratification. Research demonstrates that Mexican-Americans are considered among the most vulnerable to downward assimilation (Li, 2007).

The creation of artwork has been correlated with increased social interaction, facilitated assimilation, and enhanced cross-cultural understanding.

Art education can assist in improving the academic performance of Mexican-Americans (Reyes, 2006; Craig & Paraiso, 2009; Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Cowan, 1999). Research indicates that the creation of artwork provides an opportunity for Mexican-American students to express identity and to escape negative social realities (Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). As one Mexican-American put it, "We are a fusion of races...our [art] can embrace all the characteristics inherent in our cultures," (Perez, 2005, p. 12). Mexican-Americans who maintain their identity as Mexicanos perform better academically than students who do not (Matute-Bianchi, 1991).

Aspects of Mexican-American and Cholo culture (e.g. low-rider vehicles, tattooed depictions of stylized crucifixes, bandanas worn with khaki pants and oversized white shirts) are associated with resistance to assimilation and even gang affiliation (Craig & Paraiso, 2009). Often Latino children have strong family ties and

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religious and culturally imbued ways of life. Yet the media can portray these children poorly, influencing teachers and peer groups (Brownfield & Thompson, 2005). Such negative perceptions play an influential role in increased dropout rates among Latino youth (Wayman, 2002). Research confirms that school administrators and teachers who lack familiarity with Latino culture misinterpret Latino youth art as gang membership imagery, viewing Latino students' art as *gang-tagging*, violent, and inappropriate for the classroom (Reyes, 2006; Craig & Paraiso, 2009). Therefore, students are often prevented from using art as a means of literacy.

In two recent publications, *Diaspora and the Art of the Barrio* (Craig & Paraiso, 2009) and *Drawn into the Community: Re-considering the Artwork of Latino Adolescents* (Cowan, 1999), the use of art in the schools was found to enhance the academic performance of Mexican Americans. These authors established that when Mexican-American children were allowed to create art in the classroom, they communicated more readily with other children. Free artistic expression promotes the development of a unique sense of self, creating a non-threatening environment for communication in the classroom. Craig and Paraiso reported that teachers learned about the students' feelings of dislocation and concerns over cultural identity from their artwork. This led to better interactions and communication patters between student and teacher.

Conclusion

Mexicans, both in the US and in Mexico, have experienced oppression as a result of stratification. Since stratification negatively affects access to education, it is correlated with increased rates of delinquency. Art is used as a way to challenge the status quo and to promote cultural integration and identity-affirmation. Mexican images tell stories about culture, ethnicity and social struggles. Creation of artwork has been correlated with increased social interaction, facilitated assimilation, and enhanced cross-cultural understanding. Today, art and the use of art in education is crucial for the contemporary generation of Mexican-American youth. Through art-making, these students can explore and illustrate highly valued familial and cultural heritage. Because the role of art is vital for coping with personal and social issues, and can mitigate the negative effects of stratification, it is a moral imperative of schools districts to include art as an important aspect of the curriculum when they serve a high percentage of Mexican-American students.

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