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Biculturalism and Educational Success: The Case of the Social Justice High School in Chicago, Illinois, USA

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***Abstract*—**The aim of this contribution is to present the experience of the U.S. secondary school Social Justice High School (SoJo), part of the larger Campus of Little Village Lawndale High School (LVLHS) located in Chicago, Illinois (USA). This experience can be considered a concrete application of the principles of the educational perspective known, in the United States, as Social Justice Education, aimed at ensuring quality education and educational success for students from disadvantaged groups, particularly those characterized by "biculturalism", i.e. students with a dual cultural and linguistic background. The contribution will retrace the historical and social events that led to the birth of the SoJo, explaining the principles and methods used by the school to achieve its objectives and giving also some statistical data.

***Keywords*—**Biculturalism, educational success, social justice education, social justice high school.

I. Introduction

THIS contribution intends to present the experience of the SoJo, a secondary school located in Chicago, Illinois (USA), as a short case study about the ways by which the educational success of "bicultural" students can be achieved, in contexts characterized by social disadvantage.

The theoretical background is represented by the perspective of the *Social Justice Education*, a pedagogical movement which pursues social justice in education, mainly understood as equal opportunities for educational success and the right to quality education for students belonging to cultural "minorities", as well as to all students. From this perspective, therefore, it intends to go "beyond interculturality", thereby underlining the fact that it is not enough to pursue a praiseworthy recognition and appreciation of the diverse identities and cultural differences, but that it is also necessary to address issues of social justice and equity, to ensure equal opportunities, educational success, quality education to students in disadvantaged social conditions [1].

II. The Socio-Historical Context

The story of the Campus LVLHS and of the SoJo school inserted in it, can be considered a sort of practical realization of many of the principles and ideals held by the movement of Social Justice Education: It is, in fact, a concrete example of how resistance to oppression by active communities can subvert, at least in part, situations of injustice in societies. This story originates in the events happened in May 2001, when a group of Mexican-American mothers began a hunger strike to fight in favor of the construction of a new secondary school for their children in the Little Village neighborhood in the city of Chicago.

The area of Chicago, the largest city in Illinois, State of the U.S. Midwest, is considered an area of considerable "geographical differences", with regard to demographics and the quality of schools. Based on statistics relating to the period 1999-2000, in fact, the schools of the six areas of the city could be classified, as regards quality of training and resources, in "plus" schools, mostly concentrated in affluent neighborhoods populated mainly by whites, and "minus" schools, located in the most disadvantaged areas, populated by African Americans and by Mexican-Americans [2]. This model has been particularly persistent, even after the legislative initiative of one of the School Districts in Chicago, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), i.e. *Renaissance 2010*, legislation aimed at creating new schools, often with the formula of the charter school, or, in any case, privately run, which resulted in new phenomena of gentrification and inequalities at the educational level [2].

In 1998, the District decided to build three new secondary schools, but actually only two were effectively built: The Northside Prep and the Walter Payton, inaugurated in 2001 in wealthy neighborhoods of the city. The third, which was supposed to open in Little Village, poor neighborhood with overcrowded schools, remained pending, despite the greater need and urgency [2]. The evident inequity of this situation, led many residents of the district to organize a series of protest events, one of which was the mentioned hunger strike, which lasted 19 days, to fight in favor of the school building that had been promised to them. Thanks to the outcry caused by the strike, the community was able to gain power over the district administrators, to the point that they were forced to resign. The new elected, Arne Duncan (future Secretary of Education of the Obama Government) and Michael Scott, reallocate funds for the construction of the promised school, marking the victory of what has been defined as a "grassroots political action" [2]. In addition, this action did not stop when allocating funds, but continued even later, in the design and construction of the new school. The community, in fact, had a say even on the architecture of the building, which recalls the Aztec myth of the "Five Worlds" or "Five Suns": the architects in charge of the construction created four schools

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and a common space, to symbolize precisely the "fifth element" of the myth [2]. Finally, the community decided that one of the four schools would be devoted to the theme of social justice, thus giving birth to the *SoJo*. Four years later, in the fall of 2005, the Campus could be inaugurated.

III. The Structure of the Little Village Lawndale Campus

The Campus is made up of four small autonomous schools: the Multicultural Arts H.S. (or Multicultural Academy of Scholarship), the World Language H.S., the Infinity Math, Science, and Technology H.S., and the Social Justice H.S.

Each school has its own administrator, its own teaching staff and about 400 students from *Little Village* and the neighboring district of *North Lawndale*. Students share some facilities, such as, for example, the library, the pool, the courtyard, the auditorium, the gymnasium. This type of structure allows to have the benefits of a relatively small school environment, without sacrificing the ability to use the services of a larger complex [2]. To get this kind of school organization, activists had involved parents, asking them – with a survey – to outline the ideal learning environment for their children. They said that what they wanted was a small and safe place, academic rigor, attention to bilingualism and biculturalism, to art, dance and music, as well as to matters considered important for the job, such as mathematics, science and technology. In addition, in the survey the parents expressed the willingness to promote the values of peace and equity, so that their children will never forget the collective struggles to affirm justice.

IV. The SoJo: Features, Values, and Objectives

One of the four schools parts of the Campus is the mentioned SoJo, whose features, values and objectives are well expressed on its website [3]. A fundamental feature of the school is its particular conception of knowledge, which is intended not only in the traditional and academic sense, but also as a "community" and "critical" knowledge. The community, in fact, is seen as an equal partner of the school in the construction of the educational process and great importance is given to the knowledge of the residents of the area, who are considered the greatest "experts" of the local needs and thus able to participate meaningfully in the development of a "transformational and culturally relevant curriculum" [3]. Moreover, in addition to the traditional knowledge – intended to prepare students to pass standardized tests, to master the contents, to achieve the preparation required for access to college or university – the school tries to foster "critical knowledge", as the various subjects, such as Math, Science, English and History, are taught in order to be "analytical tools" to investigate the surrounding society and the injustices embedded in it. Particular attention is given to issues related to culture, ethnic identity and language, as well as to themes that bind to instances of social justice, such as "race, equality, peace, gender and environment" [3].

The SoJo bases its educational activities on "seven essential values": Unity, Respect, Self-Discipline, Excellence, Service, Honesty and Ownership, Being prompt and prepared [3]. Building upon these values, the school has the objective to guarantee the right to a "quality education", so that the students can be prepared for college or for other post-secondary education. More specifically, the school has the aim of training students to the appreciation and preservation of their "ethnic and cultural identity", to be at the service of their community, guided by a passion for "peace, justice and dignity of every person". Another important goal is to ensure that all students become "critical thinkers", through a rigorous, innovative, meaningful curriculum, and learning methods based on "projects" and "problems", related to the issues of the real world, such as race, gender, culture, equality, peace, justice and the environment, all seen as "catalysts" for the development of the curriculum [3].

The school activities are based on the following fundamental beliefs:

- Truth and transparency: honesty and authenticity in communication and relationships among students, the community and everyone involved in the school;
- Struggle and sacrifice: this refers to the fight against the systems of power that historically have been used to "deny, regulate, prohibit access to basic human rights" [3];
- Responsibility and agency: to take responsibility for being agents of change, exposing the truth about the mechanisms of power and work together to stop them, and, at the same time, being "manufacturer of power" in order to meet the needs of the community;
- Collective and community power: to overcome the historical obstacles that have weakened and divided communities, so as to promote continuous improvement and progress.

The school finally expresses its expectations, relating to students, parents, teachers and the school community as a whole. The main effort is directed to each student, to provide them with adequate basic preparation, to stimulate the critical thinking and be able to "deconstruct" various textual forms, to help them identify their strengths and weaknesses, providing support also at the socio-emotional level, to develop an appreciation and understanding of differences, to stimulate the desire to learn throughout the course of life.

The school is also committed to developing authentic and meaningful relationships between families and community organizations, to assume the role "of the student and the teacher" and always act with professionalism and responsibility towards the community. With regard to families, they are asked to be committed to the community, to be involved in extra-curricular and extra-school activities, to be informed on important issues affecting the lives of their children [3].

Students are also asked for a commitment that must be above all "to oneself", fully participating in the educational process inside and outside the school, taking personal responsibility for their own learning, working hard to give the best of themselves and achieve the best results. At the

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behavioral level, a lot of importance is also given to regular class attendance and punctuality, to take care of their health and safety, to act as positive models for other students. Parents are recommended to ensure that their children attend classes daily, to have good communications with teachers and school staff, to stay updated on the tasks assigned and the marks of their children, to contact the school in case of doubts, questions, ideas, concerns, to encourage their children to read every night and make sure they have a library card.

Finally, teachers are expected to be able to prepare engaging and significant lessons, to help students not only in schools but also at the social and emotional level, to attend events and extracurricular activities, to learn about the community of origins of their students, to continue to work to improve their practices year after year [3].

V. Projects and Activities of the SoJo

The school has implemented several projects and activities trying to achieve its goals of social justice in education.

Firstly, the SoJo is partner with the *Roosevelt University*, an independent an no profit university in Chicago, which has among its own objectives educational excellence for students of every race, ethnicity, social class, gender, pursued with the aim to transform their lives and that of the community through "the principles of social justice" [4]. The project in which the school and the University are involved is called *Social Justice in Action*, a program through which they collaborate in creating sessions aimed at building "cultural skills", in co-designing the curriculum, aimed at the development of "critical thinking", in the realization of writing courses at the University during the summer, as well as in organizing a summer school devoted to preparation for college [4].

Secondly, the SoJo participates in the so-called *Upward Bound*, one of the Federal projects known as *TRIO Programs*, aimed at preparing the attendance of college, especially for students from low-income families. The *Upward Bound program* seeks to increase the students' understanding about the social inequalities and encourage their development as "critical students". The courses provided by the project are held in the afternoon and include mentoring, tutoring, seminars, and so on. Moreover, the school participates at the activities of the *Saturday Campus Experience Institutes* (CEIs) of the *Roosevelt University* mentioned above: in addition to the regular curriculum of the SoJo, the students must attend, on Saturdays, these supplementary courses.

Lastly, the SoJo organize for its students several college visits throughout the year [4].

VI. Some Statistical Data about SoJo

In this paragraph are shown some statistical data about the SoJo emerged from a survey conducted in 2015 by the no profit organization *UChicago Impact*, wholly owned by the University of Chicago [5]. This survey, called "5Essentials", is part of an evidence-based system designed to drive improvement in schools nationwide. According to the organization, school success is determined by five essential components [6]:

1. *Effective Leaders*: The principal works with teachers to implement a clear and strategic vision for school success.
2. *Collaborative Teachers*: The staff is committed to the school, receives strong professional development, and works together to improve the school.
3. *Involved Families*: The entire school staff builds strong relationships with families and communities to support learning.
4. *Supportive Environment*: The school is safe and orderly. Teachers have high expectations for students. Students are supported by their teachers and peers.
5. *Ambitious Instruction*: Classes are academically demanding and engage students by emphasizing the application of knowledge.

The results and scores of the SoJo in these five areas has been the following (the scores data are to be intended in a scale 0-100; range: least implementation; less implementation, average implementation, more implementation, most implementation):

1. *Effective Leaders*: The school received a score of **36**, *Less implementation*, representing its aggregate performance across four key indicators of this Essential: Program Coherence (62 - More Implementation), Teacher-Principal Trust (15 - Least Implementation), Teacher Influence (27 - Less Implementation), Instructional Leadership (40 - Average Implementation).
2. *Collaborative Teachers*: The school received a score of **54**, *Average implementation*, representing its aggregate performance across five key indicators of this Essential: Collaborative Practices (63 - More Implementation), Collective Responsibility (72 - More Implementation), Quality Professional Development (41 - Average Implementation), School Commitment (44 - Average Implementation), Teacher-Teacher Trust (48 - Average Implementation).
3. *Involved Families*: The school received a score of **76**, *More implementation*, representing its aggregate performance across three key indicators of involved families: Teacher-Parent Trust (74 - More Implementation), Parent Involvement In School (69 - More Implementation), Parent Influence On Decision Making In Schools (84 - Most Implementation).
4. *Supportive Environment*: The school received a score of **64**, *More implementation*, representing its aggregate performance across four key indicators of supportive environment: Safety (17 - Least Implementation), School-Wide Future Orientation (79 - More Implementation), Student-Teacher Trust (74 - More Implementation), Expectations For Postsecondary Education (84 - Most Implementation)
5. *Ambitious Instruction*: The school received a score of **72**, *More implementation*, on ambitious instruction, representing its aggregate performance across four key indicators of this Essential: English Instruction (60 - More Implementation), Math Instruction (59 - Average Implementation), Academic Press (79 - More

Implementation), Quality Of Student Discussion (88 - Most Implementation).

VII. Conclusion

The SoJo school was born with the specific intent to pursue the objective of social justice in education, providing quality education and academic success for its students, mostly African Americans and Mexican Americans from low-income families.

To achieve its goal the school has based its work on some fundamental principles related to:

- The *curriculum*: The school has tried to foster a "community" and "critical" curriculum, addressing issues of the real world (race, gender, culture, peace, justice, the environment and so on) (see paragraph IV);
- The *relationships*: Great importance is given to the collaboration among school, family and the whole community, as well as among students, teachers and all participants to the educational process;
- *Partnerships* and *projects*: Very important are also partnerships and projects conducted in collaboration with universities and colleges, especially to prepare students for postsecondary education (see paragraph V).

According to the results of the "5Essentials" survey (see paragraph VI), it seems that SoJo is achieving its most important goals, in particular with reference to items such as collaborative practices and responsibility, teacher-parent trust, parent influence on decision making, expectations for postsecondary education. Although the survey highlights some weaknesses - low teachers-principal trust, weak teacher influence, problems with safety in school - this short case study suggests some actions that could be taken to ensure educational success and quality education for students of bicultural and poor origins, as well as for disadvantaged groups in general.

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