A Chican@ Pathways Model of *Acción*: Affirming the Racial, Cultural and Academic Assets of Students, Families and Communities

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Abstract

This article presents our conceptualization, initial creation and implementation of a university-school-community partnership, the Westside Pathways Project. We introduce our work in developing and sustaining this K-16 educational pathways partnership as one way of broadening the affirmative action discussion. By describing a model of *acción* that addresses college access starting at the earliest educational stage in which students and families interact with public institutions of education, we pivot from traditional notions of affirmative action research. In delineating our partnership, we argue for affirming Chicana/o students culturally and academically while simultaneously taking action to create awareness of and access to higher education across educational settings, with students of varying ages, together with families and community members.

Introduction

Throughout South Texas and South Central Texas, Mexican origin women helped establish and operate private *escuelitas* to offer Tejano children the opportunity to study academic subjects and to maintain their culture and language…Teachers could set up an *escuelita* in a room in their homes. They used simple equipment and supplies, making do with what they could obtain…*Escuelita* teachers used a bilingual-bicultural curriculum in language, social studies, science, mathematics, geography and physical education. They also offered classes in music and drama...While the *escuelitas* educated a number of Tejanos who entered the professions, they likewise provided the children of the poor the opportunity to learn…[One student] recalled that she learned almost nothing at the ranch school, where the students were predominantly Anglo and classes were conducted in English. In addition, Anglo students regularly harassed the Mexican students…In contrast, she recalled with relish her success during her brief attendance at the *escuelita* in Crystal City, where her family moved when they left Loma Vista. There, in the company of other Mexican children and under the tutelage of a Mexican teacher, she learned to read and write sufficient Spanish to serve her throughout her adulthood. (Acosta & Winegarten, 2003, pp. 152-155)

The first of the *escuelitas* opened in 1897 in Hebbronville, Texas, and represented parents' dedication to struggling against the inequitable opportunities their children faced in public, rural schools (Acosta & Winegarten, 2003). These parents, both Mexican and Mexican American, possessed a deep understanding of the racist schooling their children would experience. Seeking to counter the lack of access to equal opportunity and knowing that a caring teacher with high expectations and a culturally additive perspective could best prepare students, the *escuelita* movement in Texas served thousands of children in the early to mid-20th century (Salinas, 2000). Lessons were taught in Spanish and included Mexican history. Teachers very often were strict, but they cared about their pupils and understood their families (Acosta & Winegarten, 2003; Montejano, 1987; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998).

This early Chicana/o history informs our conceptualization and the initial creation of the university-school-community partnership, the Westside Pathways Project, that we co-direct. Guided by our desire to

counter the ways in which many children have been made to feel less than in K-12 schools, we are ever cognizant of the pervasive inequitable schooling conditions that educational systems produce for students of color and Chicana/o students specifically. While *escuelitas* sought to affirm Mexican American students for who they were and where they came from, they were not necessarily designed to create an avenue toward universities and colleges. The Westside Pathways Project is a contemporary example and an educational progeny of the *escuelita* movement, but with an explicit goal of creating educational pathways to higher education. It is a response to the historical neglect (Delgado Bernal, 1999; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998) and current state of educational inequity for Chicanas/os. Drop out rates for Chicana/os – or as we call them "push-out" rates – are among the highest of all student groups (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Rumberger & Rodríguez, 2002). While parents and families continue to be viewed as deficient and uncaring by those who make policy, implement programs, and lead classrooms (Garcia & Guerra, 2004), the Spanish language, as has been historically (San Miguel, 2004), remains characterized as a detriment to student success (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Trujillo, 2005). Access to colleges and universities remains challenging for the large majority of Chicana/o students (López & Moreno, 2014; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). In fact, the school to prison pipeline, particularly for Chicana/os, is more solidified than the school to college pipeline (Valles & Villalpando, 2013). Scholars like Solórzano and Yosso (2001) have demonstrated how these leaks in the school to college educational pipeline begin at the earliest educational stages and are systemic and pervasive at all levels.

It is with these understandings that we enter the discussion about and around affirmative action in higher education, especially as the conversation relates to Chicana/o students, families, and communities. The debate consistently incites conflict and tension among practitioners and policy makers, while garnering a significant amount of rigorous research and commanding the attention of the courts. We understand that policymakers continue to legislate and appropriate funds that neglect equity across K-12 systems (Alemán, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007), and while often these same policymakers and educational leaders influence decisions and propose policy changes on affirmative action, the fastest growing and youngest of the student groups remains underserved both in public K-12 and higher educational contexts (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Rather than center our article on the judicial aspects or institutional policies that often surround affirmative action scholarship, we instead introduce our work in developing and sustaining a K-16 educational pathways partnership as one way of broadening the affirmative action discussion. By describing a model of *acción* that addresses college access starting at the earliest educational stage in which students and families interact with public institutions of education, we pivot from traditional notions of affirmative action research. In delineating our Westside Pathways Project, we argue to **affirm** Chicana/o students culturally and academically – as was endeavored by teachers and parents of the *escuelita* movement – while simultaneously taking **action** to create awareness of and access to higher education across educational settings, with students of varying ages, together with families and community members.

In the section that follows, we first outline our rationale for inserting a K-16, community-based model into the affirmative action debate. Next, we situate the development of our *acción* model in sociopolitical context that includes fiercely anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o forces in one of the most conservative states in the U.S. Then, we describe our foundational principles and outline the three partnership programs that form the Westside Pathways Project. We highlight strategies for creating a culture of higher educational awareness and expectation and propose our Westside Pathways Project as one model of *acción* that works across K-12 and higher educational institutions from within and among communities and families of color. Finally, by sharing two examples of affirmation and action that resulted from our partnership work, we conclude by illustrating how any future affirmative action literature and discussion would benefit from including the voices and experiences of students, families and historically underrepresented communities along the educational pathways.

Our Premise for Models of *Acción*: Racial Realism in K-16 Pathways

In the spring of 1961, President John F. Kennedy first put forth the term "affirmative action" with his issuing of Executive Order 10925. Meant to address the continuing inequalities that existed in employment and housing practices, his administration actively sought to provide redress for the centuries of discriminatory acts

directed against people of color and women in the U.S. In his issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation almost one hundred years earlier in January 1863, President Abraham Lincoln also leveraged the weight of the federal government behind the "freeing of the slaves," and in a sense began to re-frame the debate on human rights, the morality of holding persons in bondage, by re-centering foundational tenets of the U.S. Constitution[2]. Almost a half-century after the issuance of President Kennedy's executive order, Abigail Noel Fisher, a white female and recent Texas high school graduate, was denied admission to the state flagship university, the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin). Challenging the university's narrowly written affirmative action policy, she sued UT-Austin for violating her rights under the equal protection clause of the fourteenth amendment. Characterizing the university's affirmative action policy as one that gave unfair preference to – as she and her lawyer's claimed – underachieving students of color over high-achieving White students like herself, they argued that the university's race-conscious admissions process gave preference to racial minorities while specifically discriminating against Whites. Although race continued to be a factor in the university's calculation of admissions index scores, it was not the primary, sole, or overriding factor used in determining admission. Stated plainly, the university did not assign a specific numeric value based on an applicant's race during review of applications. Abigail Fisher was not disadvantaged for being White, she was denied because all the factors considered for admission were evaluated and her academic record did not meet the necessary cutoff score.

Kennedy's executive order, Lincoln's proclamation, and Fisher's suit are instructive in that they help us to historicize the ongoing struggle to provide equal rights and equal access for persons in the U.S. The legal decisions made and policies implemented because of their actions are innately political. A struggle to live up to Lincoln and Kennedy's calls for equality and for ending discrimination continues today. We specifically mention *Fisher* because its ruling, although settled in the courts, has not ceased to impact and influence development and implementation of institutional affirmative action policies across the country. Similar to what President Kennedy first called for in seeking to "affirm" and "act" on behalf of persons of color who "have often been unjustly denied the opportunity to work for the government or for government contractors," we have developed Westside Pathways Project to create spaces where students and families can be affirmed as people and have the opportunities to act against their disempowered positions.

While we stand with scholars of affirmative action who continue to argue for creating equal opportunities and with those who struggle to make equal educational opportunity more of a reality, we also argue here that our thinking and praxis on creating more effective affirmative action must be broader than what the conventional thinking on this issue has been. Calling for the inclusion of student, parent/family, and community voices as a way of supplementing how affirmative action is often thought and talked about, we call for an approach that centers Chicana/o schooling histories, affirms Chicana/o educational realities, and cultivates spaces for action where Chicanas/os are positioned to advocate and struggle against their neglected educational predicament.

An expansion of this dialogue and inclusion of Chicana/o students, parents, and community perspectives and voices along the K-16 pathway is necessary because we understand that public schools are not necessarily "broken" as some in legislative and media circles might characterize them (Paul, 2013; Sinquefield, 2013). Rather, we argue that systems of education are actually structured to disadvantage students and communities of color. As several Chicana/o educational scholars have comprehensively documented, these histories of racism and oppression (Blanton, 2004; Delgado Bernal, 1999; Donato, 1997; San Miguel, 2004; Valencia, 2005) have been foundational to the ways public schools have operated. Because public schools – where the majority of Chicana/o students continue to be educated – remain inequitably funded (Alemán, 2007; Carey, 2004), provide little access to advanced coursework (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004), and shortchange Chicana/o students' rights to quality, caring, and rigorous teachers (Nieto, 2003), having a discussion of effective affirmative action programs or policies without basing the discussion on Chicana/o K-12 experiences does not serve the debate well.

Our second premise for creating more opportunities for student, parent, and community perspectives in the affirmative action debate is that we also believe that any model of action must begin by incorporating students and their families at the earliest possible educational stage. In Utah – as is the case for many states in

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2. We understand that the actions of these Presidents and their administrations were not motivated solely by a pursuit of equity and social justice. The interest convergence (Bell, 1995) that led to these actions is beyond the scope of this article.

the Union – disadvantaging of youth of color, lowering expectations and denying educational opportunity begins very early in their educational pathway (See Alemán, 2009; Alemán & Rorrer, 2006; Perlich, 2008). Coupled with a lack of rigorous academic programming, discipline policies exacerbate negative schooling experiences for Utah students of color. As Chiang's (2014) recent school-to-prison pipeline report demonstrates, the priming of young children for the criminal justice system has tragic effects on the so-called drop-out rates of Chicanas/os and other students of color. These practices begin with very young students and continue along the educational pathway. Deficit thinking and practices unfortunately continue to hinder the inculcation of higher educational aspirations so that rather than prepping students for higher education, they are being prepped for the criminal justice system (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). An *acción* model has to start at the earliest point in which students and families interact with institutions of education. Beginning this work with students in middle or high school is too late.

Finally, we contend that any affirmative action model must cultivate "action" by and with parents and communities. The literature on "parent involvement" is voluminous (Epstein, 2007; Sanders, 2008), and we too believe in the important roles that parents can and do play in supporting the educational success of their children. But what about students who do not come from so-called traditional family units? What of those parents and families who must contend with immigration status, with school personnel who do not have the language capacities to work with persons who speak languages other than English, or with single-parent or same-sex family structures? Our belief and the strategies that we utilize include affirming all family structures. Affirmative action is necessary but cannot work without a relevant model of *acción* that includes students, families and communities of color. Working with students only is not enough (López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Olivos, 2007), just as working in an English-only environment is not enough. (Fránquiz & Salinas, 2013).

A Majoritarian Context: Xenophobia and the Pipeline to Prison in the New West

The Office of Civil Rights Education Data (CRDC) reports 20,153 disciplinary actions in Utah schools in 2011. Based on the total student population, we found that American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students all faced discipline at disproportionately higher rates. American Indians were disciplined three and a half times more often than expected, Black students were disciplined three times more often than expected, and Hispanic students were disciplined one and a half times more often than expected. (Chiang, 2014, p. 10)

Tragic as it may be, it unfortunately comes as no surprise for those of us working in the Utah public schools that the "school-to-prison pipeline in Utah starts with children in elementary school, ranging in age from five to twelve years old" (Chiang, 2014, p. 6). With disproportionate rates of punishment – including in-school suspensions and expulsions – students of color face consistent surveillance and inequitable disciplinary action, even while in elementary school. The political landscape, long known for mirroring the conservative values of the predominant faith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (otherwise known as the Mormon Church), is one that ironically promotes family and children on one hand, but passes anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o legislation[3] and largely ignores the multiple educational achievement gaps that negatively impact Utah Latina/o students (Alemán & Rorrer, 2006). The drop-out rates in Utah, like in other states, has been masked by ineffective data collection and an ever-changing formula for calculating those that are pushed out of the public school system. Chiang's (2014) policy report found what many community leaders know from their advocacy with communities of color, that in Utah "over half of students learning English as a second language (52%) dropped out…[and that] nearly 70% of those incarcerated in state prisons did not complete high school" (p. 10). Latina/os make up 12% of the total state population and 14.4% of K-12 student population, however the state of Utah continues to fail to provide equal educational access and opportunities for students of color, and Latina/o and Chicana/o students in particular (Alemán & Rorrer, 2006; Sanderson, 2005).

In the urban district in which our pathways partnerships are located, 40% of the total student enrollment

3. Utah's Illegal Immigration Enforcement Act (HB 497) is a far-reaching enforcement-only bill that copied several provisions virtually outright from Arizona's controversial SB 1070. While Utah's law is not quite as extreme or draconian, the core provisions remain in tact and have the same goal of driving Latinas/os from the state.

is Latina/o. It is one of the largest and most diverse districts in the state and provides a window into what the future of Utah school districts will encompass. Exhibiting segregation along geographic lines, Eastside schools in the district are disproportionately White and have the largest numbers of students categorized as high socioeconomic status. Westside schools, on the other hand, are mostly made up of students of color and families are disproportionately classified as low socioeconomic status. In regards to access to rigorous and specialized academic programming, magnet programs and those developed as college preparatory programs are mostly located in Eastside schools. The only program not located in an Eastside school – the district's high school international baccalaureate (IB) program – is located in a school that is 60% students of color and 42% Latina/o. Despite being located in this school, within school segregation is evident in that 73% of students in the IB program are identified as White and only 8% are Latina/o.

With this racial segregation and inaccessibility to specialized, enrichment, or college preparatory curriculum as a backdrop, it was clear that some form of affirmative action to address the existing racial inequalities was needed. We specifically sought to engage in community-based *acción* in Westside neighborhoods. The neighborhoods and its students have for generations been denied opportunities afforded by the state's flagship higher educational institution. Our goal was to work with these communities in neighborhoods and communities often portrayed as overrun by gangs, where students are thought to come from families that pass on their so-called cultural disadvantages. Unlike this perception, we see a community with untapped knowledges and families with cultural assets not always valued and/or utilized by traditional manners of schooling.

Because research supports the idea that if students have good academic preparation and are well grounded culturally they can succeed wherever they go in higher education (McLaughlin & Blank, 2004; Solórzano et al., 2005; Yosso, 2005), a conscious choice was made to form our partnerships with schools and with students from these communities. Although the students we work with are predominantly Latina/o and Chicana/o, we also work with students from various communities of color and those classified as first-generation college students.

Westside Pathways Project: Our Model for K-16 *Acción*

In the ten years since founding *Adelante*, our first university-community partnership, and with our most recent organization and formation of the Westside Pathways Project, we have attempted to remain steadfast to foundational principles that value reciprocal, community-engaged scholarship (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Del Carmen Casaperalta, 2008); culturally relevant and assets-based reform and practice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001); parents and students as holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002); and, academic enrichment and racial identity formation activities for youth (Flores & Benmayor, 1997; Pizarro, 2005; Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009). Although we have remained keenly aware that the systems and institutions in which we work are foundationally racist (Bell, 1995), our intent in working within them long-term has been strategic, political and pragmatic. By linking our three partnerships to form the Westside Pathways Project we have sought to create transformative educational spaces – or as Duncan-Andrade (2009) refers to them, those "cracks in the concrete" that when nurtured allow "roses to grow" – that would affirm students' racial, cultural and academic identities while fostering possibilities for action and transformation. The Westside Pathways Project, therefore, is organized around increasing college awareness and access and the fostering of educational leadership and academic enrichment, but centrally it is meant to affirm the racial and cultural identities that the youth and families with whom we work carry within them, as a means of developing their educational, social, and political tools.
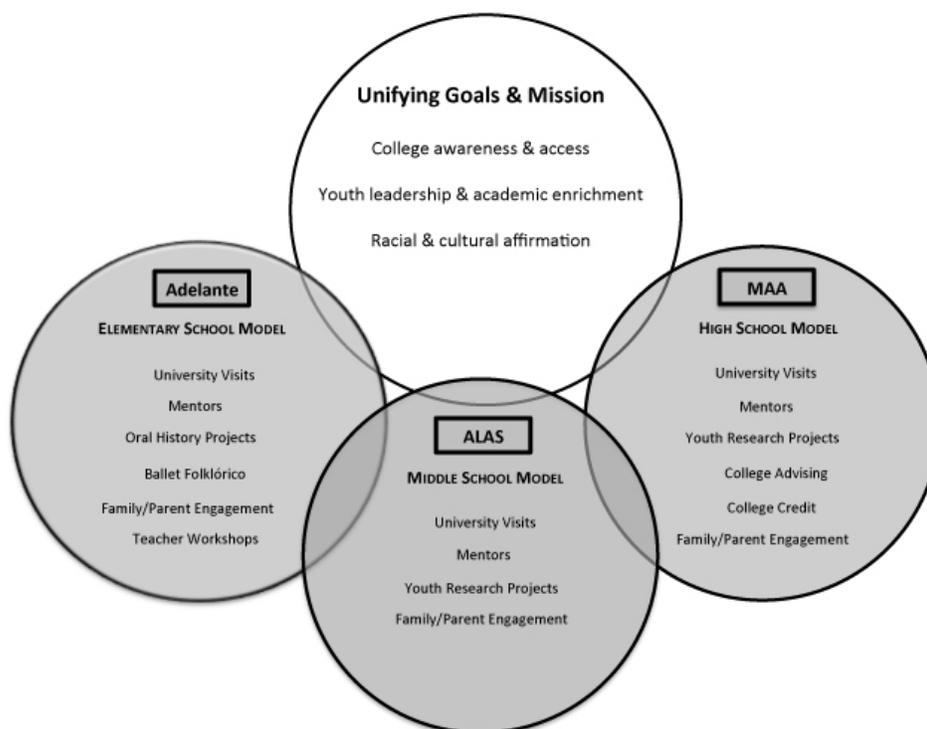
Figure 1: Overview of the Westside Pathways Project

The Westside Pathways Project came into existence in Fall 2013, when Drs. Delgado Bernal and Alemán merged, expanded upon, and directly linked up three college-access, university-community partnerships with which they had been working to develop independently. The merging of these partnerships involved parents, teachers, educational leaders, community members, university partners, undergraduate student mentors, and nearly 50 graduate students, mostly students of color from the College of Education, who have served as graduate research assistants or volunteers with *Adelante*, ALAS or MAA partnerships over the last ten years. What follows is our description of the three partnerships, each in different stages of development, along with brief discussions of the overarching goals that link them all under the umbrella of the Westside Pathways Project.

Adelante Partnership: The Elementary School Model

Adelante, founded in 2005, is a K-6 model premised on the belief that all young people, including students of color and students from lower-socioeconomic families should be expected and prepared to enroll and succeed in college, and that college preparation must emphasize students' intellectual development in relation to community, culture and pedagogies of the home (Flores Carmona & Delgado Bernal, 2012). *Adelante* provides higher educational experiences to elementary school students and fosters a college going culture in the school. By providing university visits, science camps, and college students of color mentors who work in the classrooms, students at this elementary school are exposed to hands-on enrichment activities, but also get university role models throughout their time in elementary school. The most developed and longest standing of the three partnerships, *Adelante's* programmatic activities also include support for teachers and parents. Over the years parents have participated and initiated activities ranging from group dialogues with teachers and "*Dia de los Niños*" celebrations to managing a community garden and having bi-monthly meetings to talk about school and community issues (Alemán, Perez, & Oliva, 2013). Their activism and leadership was particularly visible when they wrote a letter to the university president in support of *Adelante* after threats to its stability were made by a former principal.[4]

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4. This event is discussed below and is used as an example of affirming parent perspectives and providing spaces for action to occur in a public school setting.

There is a need for establishing culturally relevant partnerships in urban settings that will help in the development of academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical/sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). To address this need and to support teachers in this area, *Adelante* has reinforced teacher efforts by providing professional developments related to culturally relevant pedagogy and teacher assumptions and expectations of their students. In one professional development, we shared some of our preliminary findings about the school culture and teacher perceptions--some of which were very deficit oriented-- from a survey teachers completed. During the professional development, teachers spent time watching video narratives of the educational journeys of college students of color. These narratives pointed to the challenges in their journey including being placed in lower-track courses and teachers who held low expectations of them. Teachers spent time reflecting on these narratives and did some collaborative thinking and talking about what it means that some teachers believe a college-going culture is too lofty of a goal for *Adelante*. Though it was a difficult discussion, it was certainly a small step in the right direction toward developing teacher leaders and a more culturally relevant partnership.

Delgado Bernal and Alemán's research finds that after ten years of partnership work, the elementary school, its faculty, parents and students, is one that now promotes a college-going culture and creates awareness. Their research also points to how the original cohort of kindergarteners, who are now ninth graders at the local high school, articulate their desire to go to college, what they need to do to get there, and their concerns about how to pay for college (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, & Flores Carmona, 2008; Delgado Bernal, Alemán, & Garavito, 2009; Alemán, Delgado Bernal, & Mendoza, 2013).

Activists, Leaders & Scholars (ALAS) Partnership: The Middle School Model

ALAS has been in development since fall of 2012 when the first of the elementary school student cohorts who participated in the *Adelante* partnership began to attend middle school. Most of these students attended one middle school so we strategically began to build a relationship with this school's principal and faculty. This partnership seeks to maintain contact with students as they transition and progress through the middle school years. Similar to *Adelante*, programming includes mentoring from undergraduate students of color and university visits throughout the academic year, however, we have also begun to develop programming that includes college access workshops and youth-based research projects that explore cultural, ethnic and racial identities. In summer 2014, ALAS piloted the first overnight university camp where students transitioning to high school were provided the opportunity to consider college options, stay in college dorms, and attend a college class.

The ALAS middle school students (as well as the elementary school students in *Adelante* and high school students in MAA) regularly interact with university students of color as mentors and role models at their school or in the community. Since ALAS' inception, 75 college students have served as mentors at the middle school and some have served for consecutive years. In 2007-2008, we began to partner with two campus entities (Ethnic Studies Program and Center for Ethnic Student Affairs) to develop and institutionalize an Ethnic Studies service-learning course that serves as a cohort class for the Diversity Scholars Program, a first-year program serving first-generation college students and students of color (Delgado Bernal et al., 2009). Each year between 90 and 120 freshmen students of color participate in the Scholars Program and by extension serve as mentors in *Adelante*, ALAS, or MAA and receive service-learning credit. Teachers consistently cited the significance of the undergraduate mentors of color as influencing the school culture. These undergraduate students of color embody the goals of Westside Pathways Project, and their physical presence in classrooms signified college awareness for the teachers and the younger students. While the daily presence of college students of color has contributed to a college going culture, our research also demonstrates that the retention rates of the mostly first-generation college students has been positively associated with their mentoring experience (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, & Garavito, 2009).

ALAS is clearly our least developed partnership, as we have not had as long a relationship with the middle school's faculty and school leadership. Currently, we are building trust with the school's new principal and assistant principals, the second school administrative team since 2012. Three other elementary schools feed into this school and we are challenged with issues related to funding coordinators, sustaining relationships

with the student cohorts, and working with new families that, although are very similar demographically, have not had the chance to work with us. What has remained consistent is our commitment to creating spaces for transformation, where students and their families are affirmed for who they are and encouraged to act upon the access to higher education expectations that we can help facilitate.

Mestizo Arts & Activism (MAA) Youth Collective: The High School/Youth Model

MAA, founded in 2007 by university professors who specialize in youth studies, urban education and participatory action research methodologies (Cahill, 2010; Cahill, Quijada Cerecer, & Bradley, 2010), is a youth of color collective that exposes high school students to participatory action research, civic engagement, and college readiness. MAA youth are predominately Chicana/o Latina/o students who attend local high schools and live in Westside neighborhoods. The collective meets after school twice a week at a community-based art gallery. Programming engages youth in participatory action research with their college student mentors and partnership staff and allies. MAA's emphasis on academic enrichment and college readiness is achieved through "research and personal experiences as a way of promoting social justice and of making youth voices heard."[5] Because youth are addressing sociopolitical issues in their communities and personal lives, the curriculum includes the use of media, spoken word, and dialogue to introduce students to a range of ideas that can be helpful in understanding their own racialized, gendered, or classed experiences. For example, listening to and interacting with award-winning poet Joaquin Zihuatanejo talk about his love for the Spanish language, all that he learned from his grandfather, or the 'isms he experienced growing up, allows youth to critically think about their individual and collective experiences as Latina/o youth.

MAA youth take leadership positions in directing their research projects, conducting community needs assessments, co-facilitating group dialogues, and presenting their work to others. Over the last seven years, they have produced a body of work that articulates concerns related to issues such as immigration, child abuse, educational inequities, legislative policies, and body image. They have distributed their community-based research via blogs, websites, videos, digital stories, and via community talks and about a dozen national and local conferences. Simultaneously, within this community learning space, the students receive college access information including assistance with the college application and admissions processes, as well as information and support for those seeking scholarship/financial aid. Most importantly, in terms of the educational pipeline, in the last four years approximately 90% of the seniors have applied to and attended college after graduating from high school. The majority of these students are first-generation college students, demonstrating that MAA is contributing to a strong foundation for creating college access for underrepresented students.

We completed our educational pathways K-12 link when we partnered with the MAA collective in 2013. At the time, MAA had undergone several transitions in faculty leadership. In the early years, the collective was guided by three professors, Dr. David Quijada, Dr. Caitlan Cayhill, and Dr. Mathew Bradley. However, after two of them accepted faculty positions at other universities, and Dr. Bradley lost his life in a tragic accident, the youth were left without any full-time faculty advisors/mentors. We[6] had collaborated with MAA faculty in the development of *Adelante* and our community-based scholarship, and we had presented to MAA youth researchers in the past so we had a deep familiarity with the youth leaders and the philosophy behind the work. Because we were seeking to make further linkages to the K-16 pathways work we had been developing, our conversations with MAA youth and other concerned faculty at the university led to our accepting an invitation to work with the youth into the future. MAA remains solid programmatically, and the *Adelante* students with whom we have worked with since 2005, now have access to youth research and leadership programming at the MAA site. Nonetheless, the last two years have been a time of organizational transition, trust building, and solidifying the goals and mission of the program.

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5. See http://maacollective.org/about-us/maa-staff/ for the Collective's youth-authored mission statement and youth project examples.
6. Delgado Bernal and Alemán were university faculty colleagues of Drs. Cahill (Urban Studies), Quijada Cerecer (Education) and Bradley (Honors), and had participated with them as a part of community-engaged scholars collaborative sponsored by the University Neighborhood Partners at the University of Utah.

Affirming Identities and Fostering Action for and with Chicana/o Students, Families and Communities

Each of our partnership sites commenced at different times and we continue to serve students of varying ages and grade levels. The challenges of implementing these programs remain – sustainability, logistics, funding, and the building of trust with educational leaders, each with fluctuating levels of commitment to social justice and transformation. As in the case of the *escuelitas*, the partnerships have caring mentors throughout and the programming validates the rich knowledges, cultures, histories, and personal experiences that the students, youth, and families bring with them to these spaces. Students, youth, and families are not only situated to access information and the expectation of higher education, but they are fundamentally affirmed for who they are. Spaces are facilitated so that action is sparked and transformation occurs via the acknowledgement, validation, and celebration of the cultural, racial and academic identities that students, youth and families have. In the following section, we highlight two examples of affirmation and action that were cultivated in these educational spaces.

Parents Creating Spaces of Transformation

When we first developed *Adelante* and began working with kindergarteners and their parents, an educational leader told us, that Latina/o parents at the school did not participate in their children's education. She said, "I don't know how many you will actually get involved. My Hispanic parent involvement at this school is pretty low. They don't value it. I can't get anyone here on a Family Math Night even though I offer to feed them." Fast forward a few years later, and parents (mostly immigrant Spanish speaking mothers) gathered together in a series of Community Advocate workshops to discuss the needs of the community and formulate recommendations for improving the education of their children. Following the workshops, parents stayed engaged in the school in a variety of ways including a parent group called, *Segunda taza de café*. More recently, that group of parents transformed into *Padres en acción*, a school-based advocacy group, which provides a forum for parents to advocate and support their children's education. The account[7] below describes their *acción* on behalf of their children when a number of issues related to a problematic discipline policy that had their children sitting on the hot pavement during recess and a possible cut to the Spanish dual immersion program came to the forefront. We believe it demonstrates one of the ways in which parents, in particular, are creating spaces of transformation.

It was the first time this group of mothers had decided to take a concern to the district office. There had been numerous meetings with the principal, but this time she had insulted them to the point that they felt they needed to speak to someone at the district office. On one occasion, an educational leader, Mrs. Diaz[8], stated within earshot of a mother, "The mothers involved with the school's parent group are a bunch of vigilantes. They're just starting trouble in the school and not making my job any easier." On this morning, parents had decided to take their concerns directly to a district leader who had direct supervision over the school. Parents had made a list of talking points they wanted to discuss with the district, and as we waited in the school parking lot for everyone to show up they organized the caravan. Delgado Bernal, Alemán, Neri, the graduate student working with the parents, and one of the parents drove the group of 12 to the district office only a few miles a way, but what seemed a world apart from the school's neighborhood. When we all exited the cars, the mothers led the way through the front door where a receptionist was sitting at a desk. The receptionist looked up from her computer when she realized that there was a group of people right in front of her. "How may I help you?" she asked with a surprised look on her face. "We are looking for Mrs. Jones," replied one of the mothers. Do you have an appointment?" asked the receptionist. "No, but we would still like to speak with Mrs. Jones." The receptionist told us what floor and room Mrs.

Jones was located.

We all took the stairs up to the third floor. The office was located to the right of the stairway. Delgado Bernal and Alemán were the first to walk into the small office. The administrative assistant immediately greeted the group and asked what he could do to help us. Delgado Bernal began to explain to the receptionist why we were there when Mrs. Jones, an older White woman who had been working for the district for almost thirty years, walked out of her office. "Ms. Jones. This group is here to talk you," the receptionist said. Ms. Jones was taken aback to see such a large group of mothers in her office and very quickly stated that she was busy, and "I don't have time to meet with anyone today. In fact, I have a meeting in a few minutes. You can't just come in here and expect to meet with me." Neri translated for the mothers. "Tell her that we are here to discuss serious issues and concerns," one of the moms said to Neri in Spanish. Neri communicated that to Mrs. Jones, but Mrs. Jones abruptly stated, "I understand, but you can't just come in and expect to be able to talk to me. You need to schedule an appointment first." Delgado Bernal and Alemán told her they would like to schedule an appointment and she motioned them, but not the group of mothers, into her office. She proposed a meeting in two days, and Delgado Bernal stepped out of the office to confirm with the mothers waiting in the reception area with Neri that the day and time worked for most of them. Once the meeting was confirmed, Mrs. Jones stepped out of her office and walked past the group of mothers without saying anything to them. As she was leaving out the door, Mrs. Hanson, an African American district leader who has been an educator for 40 years, entered from a back hallway. She greeted all the mothers, and Alemán briefly told her why they were there and that Mrs. Jones could not meet with the parents today. Mrs. Hanson quickly invited the parents to a very small conference room down the hall, apologizing that she didn't have a larger space to meet at the moment. During an hour-long meeting, Mrs. Hanson listened, asked questions, and took notes as the parents expressed their concerns in Spanish and explained why they had come to the district office on this day. Neri translated for Mrs. Hanson. She made no promises and took no action, but she expressed concern and informed the parents that she would be present at the meeting in two days with Mrs. Jones. As we exited the small conference room the parents all thanked her and shook her hand goodbye.

As we walked outside the building, the mothers started speaking in Spanish and one of the mothers asked, "So what are we going to do now?" We all stopped to talk outside of the main entrance. Responding to the question, but also speaking to the rest of the group, another mother said, "We are all going to come to the meeting. We have two days to notify more parents about the meeting. Hopefully more parents can come." The mothers nodded in agreement. "We can ask those that can't come to the meeting to write a letter stating their concerns and experiences at the school," suggested a third often very quiet mother. Someone offered to begin making phone calls to other parents. And someone else suggested that some of them talk to parents and families as they are picking up their kids today and tomorrow. Before walking to the cars, the mothers confirmed their action plan to prepare for their meeting.

The mothers' action in taking their concerns to the district and in preparing for the next steps clearly contrasts the views held by the dominant discourses that frame them as "uninvolved" parents. They approached the district specifically because school policies and practices (unlike the *escuelitas* of the early 1900s) were not affirming their children's learning, and unfortunately it was their brown bodies that were so disrespected when they first entered the district space. The mothers expressed frustration with the way they were initially treated at the district. Yet, they were appreciative of the district administrator who listened to them, seemed satisfied with the preliminary outcome, and were hopeful that their voices would be heard. Their collective actions are illustrative of the ways in which parents come together to create spaces of possibility for educational transformation.

"Roses That Grow from Concrete" via Ethnic Studies for Fifth and Sixth Graders

Similar to the *escuelitas* of the early 1900s, and as response to the historical neglect and current state

of educational inequity for Chicanas/os, *Adelante* offers an ethnic studies after school "college class" to fifth and sixth graders. The class, taught from a Chicana feminist perspective by two of our graduate research assistants, offers a curriculum and pedagogy that allow students to think and analyze their lives critically. Although the course is held on school grounds, we argue that it provides an alternative relational space in which students use theoretical ideas to meaningfully discuss issues such as borderlands, gender, immigration, and stereotyping. The account[9] below is from a fall afternoon when the fifth and sixth graders watched a four-minute clip of Family Guy, a show all of the students are familiar with. The clip highlights interactions Consuela, the family maid, has with others on the show. Using a familiar show/media source, the purpose was to begin a critical examination of stereotypes and deficit thinking. We believe the Chicana/o studies class is just one example of the Westside Pathways Project cultivating transformative spaces in which to grow roses from concrete (Andrade, 2009).

We start the clip. This particular clip highlights Consuela's "English accent". Consuela becomes the butt of the joke because of her lack of "English proficiency" which creates miscommunication between her and Peter. At the same time that she can't understand him, she also manages to be "smart enough" to steal from him and the family. The students instantly recognize Family Guy as many of them shared that they watch it at home. They are excited because they consider it a funny show, and they anticipate laughing throughout the clip. Some are even fidgeting in their chair from excitement when they see what we are planning to show them.

At the beginning of the clip, most of the students are laughing. In exchanges between Consuela and Peter, it is clear that Consuela's lack of understanding English is a funny and laughable thing they are picking up on. As co-instructors, the two of us exchange glances as they laugh, but we do not say anything. We allow the clip to play. As the clip progresses, we notice that the students are not laughing as loud as they were at the beginning. The four-minute clip is a constant repetition of the ways that Consuela is portrayed stereotypically. At some point towards the end of the clip, Consuela is seen crossing the border to meet with an estranged man that she seeks to have relations with. This image, combined with her job, accent, and skin tone on the show, forms a clear picture of the way that society generally thinks of Latinas/os and in particular Mexicanas/os. As the clip comes to the end of its four-minute run, the students have become more quiet than loud. Their initial excitement and energy had changed into quiet stares, and inaudible small talk.

When the clip stops, we flick the lights back on and see the students staring at us, each other, and the projector screen. Based on their body language, it seems apparent that the repetitive nature of Consuela's behavior has communicated something to them about not only her, but perhaps even about themselves. What they at first found to be hilariously funny, turned into something more serious and perhaps even disturbing. As we open up the discussion, Socorro [the co-instructor] shares that her mother has been working many years in the housekeeping department at a hospital, cleaning beds and rooms. This conversation sparks some students to share their own stories, where two of them share that they also have mothers who clean houses and take care of children. After having opened up the conversation through sharing information that is personal to us, we then ask the students "What are some of the stereotypes associated with Consuela?"

The first student to make a comment about this question is Emma who says that Consuela "is dumb." We follow up with "Why do you think that?" This time, not only does Emma respond but other students chime in as well, shouting over one another that Consuela is seen as dumb because she knows limited English,

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9. The account is written based on the field notes of Socorro Morales and Sylvia Mendoza, doctoral students studying student engagement in the ethnic studies class. Each have been involved with the partnership for over five years and have close relationships with many of the students. See also Morales, S., Mendoza, S., and Delgado Bernal, D. (2014). Education in Nepantla: A Chicana Feminist Approach to Engaging Latina/o Elementary Youth in Ethnic Studies. Unpublished manuscript.

has an accent, attempts to steal things when no one is looking, and does not have common etiquette such as not going into a restroom when someone is using it. We discuss these actions as being a stereotype because they are widely held perceptions that people have about Latinas/os, rather than actual things that Latinas/os do in practice. The two students who shared about their mothers earlier then begin sharing that their mothers have a tough job because their bosses treat them unfairly. In particular, Emma shares how Americans (but really she means white people) treat her mother unfairly because she gets underpaid for the amount and type of work that she performs. They also both share they have sometimes gone to help their mothers at work and know that their mothers receive less pay than they should compared to other workers who are white.

In sharing these aspects about their families, we then move to asking them the question of why do they think that school is important? Socorro shares that her mother always told her education was important because her mother did not want her working labor jobs where Socorro would be underpaid, like her mother was. This comment once again sparks discussion among all the students who unanimously had experiences with their parents telling them to stay in school. They all knew school and education is an important means to not being treated the way that their parents were being treated in their jobs. They understood that without an education, it would be more difficult for them to be able to defend themselves in the world of work and they would have less access to jobs that are less labor intensive. As these conversational threads end, the students start to take up topics that are tangential to the discussion and we decide to break for recess.

Like the *escuelitas*, this class is founded on a deep understanding of how these fifth and sixth graders have been made to feel less than in schools and society and of the racism they face on a daily basis. Cultivating a space of affirmation for young people and stressing the importance of schooling, the ethnic studies course explicitly articulates a healing pedagogy that combines critical thinking and sophisticated discourse analysis in a space that validates the students and their material realities in order to allow roses to grow from concrete.

Concluding Thoughts

The affirmative action debate must more fully incorporate the perspectives of students, families and communities who experience unequal and inequitable schooling along the educational pathway to higher education. Our Westside Pathways Project is but one example of how educational spaces – both in and out of educational institutions – may be fostered. The two scenarios that we share can also provide some insight into affirming Chicana/o identities as one way of preparing students and their families for the challenges they will face prior to matriculating into higher educational institutions. They also provide a view of how sites of action can provide transformational moments not only for individuals but also for the collective. In fostering strong partnerships and building relationships long-term from kindergarten through high school, we see this project as one that can be organized to inform educational policy and practice. We believe that our long-term growth and sustainability – and our potential for contributing to the dialogue on affirmative action – will hinge on our ability to create spaces where "roses can grow" in the spirit of *escuelitas* that sought to welcome, care, and love their students from the onset of their educational journey.

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