# Framework for a New Political Praxis:
## *Respeto, Dignidad* y *Conocimiento*

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## Abstract

This article uses story as a process to highlight the work in a South Texas community that focuses on the education of youth and the development of community. The work is guided by a new consciousness of place, community engagement, and identity formation. The work is local, but breaking the isolation of youth, families, and ideas has been part of an emerging theory of change. The document takes us in and out of stories of place in an attempt to transfer the work to other communities. It presents the voices of witnesses to take the concepts used in this Mexican-American community into other spaces. The work is informed by place, theory, and practice.

## Preface:  Story of Circle at the Llano Grande Center

This article begins with a virtual circle that cuts across the life span of the work of the Llano Grande Center, an education nonprofit organization nestled inside Edcouch-Elsa High School, a rural school along the Texas-Mexican border.  Llano Grande employs circle to teach classes at this high school, to conduct staff meetings, to structure community seminars, and to organize for advocacy campaigns.  The virtual circle brings together stories from actual circles that transpired between 1996 and 2012. The stories are grounded in place, as "place" is a value that informs the teaching and learning process at Llano Grande.  It includes stories from outside this Mexican-American community, because Llano Grande work is also characterized by a purposeful attempt to breaking the isolation of our own existence.

Carmen tells the first story, one that begins when she was 12 years old and swam with her mother and sister across the Rio Grande River in search of a better life in the United States.  They fled oppressive conditions in their native Mexico and entered their new country undocumented.  When she enrolled in the high school a few years later, Carmen began her work at Llano Grande, where she would develop as a youth leader and community-based researcher.  Before she graduated from high school, she and other Llano Grande youth testified before the Texas Legislature in support of legislation allowing undocumented students to pursue higher education opportunities.  They joined a state-wide youth effort to advocate for legislation that would become the basis for the Dream Act.  The advocacy work persisted for Carmen and her peers past their high school days.  Today, they advocate for issues such as federal rural broadband legislation, a more humane public school accountability system, and greater access to health care for immigrants and indigent people.

Carmen is a real person, but she is also a metaphor for the numerous students who have been part of the work of the Llano Grande Center since the organization began its work in the mid 1990s.  Countless Mexican-American students have been part of a developmental process where they prepare themselves for college by exploring their personal narratives, learning how to be community-based researchers, and practicing

policy advocacy. But Llano Grande has also pushed the idea of breaking the isolation of our rural existence, and of our relative homogeneity, particularly as the student populations in schools where Llano Grande has a presence are comprised of largely Mexican-American students. In Edcouch-Elsa High, for example, Mexican-American students make up 97% of the student body. Llano Grande pursues this goal by forging relationships with a network of diverse schools, organizations, and communities. Through the years, it has developed deep relationships with African-American schools and organizations from both urban and rural parts of the country; with Native Americans from Laguna Pueblo, Lummi, Salish, and Seneca; and with Native Hawaiian communities.

As Carmen opens storytelling around this virtual circle, others similarly share stories about their own lives; some are Mexican American, some are not. Authorship of this article reflects the same reality. Each of us has been intimately involved in the Llano Grande work—some as founders and staff members, others as significant partners through what has become the Llano Grande network. Such is the Llano Grande way. It's about a way of life that pays attention to local realities, just as it listens to and learns from the stories of others. It is how we teach and learn through a micro-macro dynamic that celebrates our stories and the stories of others.

## Setting: History, Geography, and Llano Grande Pedagogy

This document expands the discourse on teaching, learning, and leading by focusing on the academic and community work facilitated by an educational community in south Texas. It is the product of a sustained, collective conversation facilitated by the Llano Grande Center, focused on teaching, learning, and a call for community change. Llano Grande's mission is to revitalize the community through youth and community engagement initiatives born out of the local high school and situated in a community context. The organization creates access to higher education, engages students in community change initiatives, and develops leadership that respects local history and culture. Teachers and organizers who facilitate the Llano Grande work pay particular attention to identity formation of both youth and adults in this largely Mexican-American region.

The community lies in what economists and demographers count as the most economically distressed metropolitan statistical area in the country in the rural part of Hidalgo County, some 15 miles north of the Texas-Mexican border (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The region is a product of a political economy predicated on three old economic principles: 1) cheap land, 2) cheap labor, and 3) good weather. The political economy mirrors larger international border conditions, as well as other rural communities in Texas and across the United States. The historic political and leadership structures are a consequence of an ecology and political dynamic that benefits a small group of power-holders who have historically held onto political and economic power, and forcefully resisted change (Anders, 1982; Montejano, 1988). The results are characterized by communities and institutions marked by underinvestment and persistent marginalization.

Understanding micro and macro historical contexts is essential to the discourse on educational policy and the development of public schools (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004). Systemic issues of racism and poverty cannot be undone in an abbreviated period of time. It took years to build unjust and unequal communities and educational systems; deliberate and patient approaches are essential to reverse systemic trends through policies and practices (Alemán, 2006; Barrera, 1979; Montejano, 1988; Pizarro, 2005). The persistence of unequal structures creates a current situation with profound economic gaps and wide educational achievement gaps (Rothstein, et al, 2008). Unfortunately, this historical evidence has been omitted from the prevailing discursive process that informs educational policy and practice (Neil, 2004). The current culture of education informed by models of assessment and accountability (Padilla, 2005) has become an oppressive force that squashes creativity in schools and communities.

This force is based on numbers, incomplete data, and mandatory tests that have not proven to be valid, based on basic psychometric standards and practice (Koretz, 2008; Lasser, 2004). In short, a single test score is an incomplete measure to determine how much a student has achieved or grown academically, or in other ways that may be social, emotional, cultural—all basic areas of growth that good teaching would engender. Mounting evidence points to the flawed nature of current educational policy and practice; much of the emerging claims argue that No Child Left Behind ignores sound learning theory, while enforcing adverse practices such as

teaching to the test and other narrow ways of instruction (Meier & Wood, 2004; Ravitch, 2009; Rothstein, et al, 2008; Valenzuela, 2004). The educational and public policy we experience today has been largely constructed void of an authentic story of practice and absent of a serious cultural analysis (Spindler & Spindler, 2000).

In spite of this, there are places such as Llano Grande where local people find hope and work toward engaging youth, families, and schools to shape better communities. In this place we view youth as assets and families as pillars of support. Our commitment is to raise children with a different consciousness where parents and elders are teachers, local storytellers, and even heroes. We respond to traditional demographic statistics and the socio-historical and economic forces that shape the debilitating statistics, but those do not determine our future, or our ways of knowing. As teachers, learners, and local leaders, we accept the responsibility and challenge of changing the condition of our hometown and communities across the country that may look like ours. This article builds on the work we have done since the mid-1990s as public school educators; advocates for youth, family, and community; and university faculty. We invite partners from diverse communities who have learned, witnessed, and contributed to the development of the work, and who have carried Llano Grande practices to their own communities.

The practices and theories we have developed have begun to travel to other places where children of color live and learn (Fullan, 2008). We use story as a critical tool for identity formation, sound pedagogy, and effective advocacy. Stories are data and action. This approach can open up imagination and creativity in the development of a framework for a new political praxis that acknowledges and nurtures the respeto, dignidad y conocimiento (respect or consideration; dignity or self-respect; thorough understanding) of our elders within the existing cultural and political realities of our youth.

## Methodology

Llano Grande's methodology is grounded in theory and informed by practice—a praxis congruent with and supportive of a dynamic, new political and pedagogical framework. Central to the methodology is a theory of change model guided by local conditions and contexts. We use stories of students, their families, and our partners as observables (data sets); we employ story as an organic and life-long tradition for capturing context, inquiry, and pedagogy. This process is encapsulated in a theory of change model that informs the research for this document.

### Theory of Change

At the center of the practice, this theory of change is a circular process that situates the developm ent of self for both youth and adults in relationship with the local ecology. Story is simultaneously the data collection strategy and framework for analysis. We enlist the metaphor of story as "anatomy"—through which we describe the complex and organic process at the core of human activity (see below for a more detailed explanation).

Story as method is also an invitation to provoke the reader to imagine the possibilities of change. The power of reader generalizability is implied, and we the authors—practitioners ourselves as builders and leaders of the Llano Grande Center—hope readers can find these stories and possibilities of action in their own communities. We look at the components that mold the process, which in turn, filters data, organizes it, and puts it back out in a medium that makes sense. This process then informs the necessary action required to move the theory of change into action.

### Observables

The observables collected for this document include stories, conversations, and testimonies to the work we have done and its local application. We use the Llano Grande archives, which include: student narratives; oral histories of parents and other local residents; community forums; student-led ethnographies; and sundry other measures, such as, field notes and video recordings from various Llano Grande community activities. The practice is grounded on the assets of the work, the places we live in, and the relationships cultivated therein.

This, too, frames the lens of data collection and analysis. Story informs the work and method. The nexus of this process is human agency and identity formation, informed by cultural dynamics, local ecology, history and action. In short, everything is data.

## The Anatomy of Story as Meaning-making

We use the "anatomy of story" metaphor to allow the story to flow with a particular rhythm and balance through the presentation of the following components: navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). Carmen's story is a data source. It serves as an examination of culturally relevant theory and practice and as an analysis of the political economy that shapes our communities and schools. Carmen's story helps connect the reader to the abstract process of story-harvesting and meaning-making.

**Navel**. Just as the umbilical cord feeds human life during its embryonic stages, we see the navel representing the core of the human anatomy, and as the central component that feeds and balances the story. In storytelling a balance must be achieved between the message and the core values within the story. The core questions that emerge from the story are elements that spring from the navel and are essential for developing the core purpose of the story.

**Heart**. The human heart gives the body the ultimate meaning and is the source of human passion; in the same way, the heart of the story is typically its meaning and even its passionate quality. The passion is shaped by the values that guide the efforts that fuel action. These values include the emotional, moral, and relational ways of knowing the story.

**Mind.** The mind is the center of all analytical thinking, and at this stage of story development we bring critical analysis to its formation. The mind is what fuels the ideas, the imagination, and instructional action.

**Hands.** The hands massage and help mold the values, ideas, message, and rhythm of the story. This negotiation of the message is a complex and sophisticated process, and it accounts for environment and tone of the delivery. This is the stage where the story is told and retold until the choice of language, the nonverbal element, and the message are all coordinated and delivered.

**Legs.** If a story has longevity, if it impacts others beyond the storyteller, it probably has legs. A story with legs is one that lives and moves, could be passed down from generation to generation, and may just stand the test of time. The story with legs also begins to contribute to the identity of place, people, and organizations. The story with legs moves people to action, provokes new questions, and helps identify the work that is connected to the story. Stories with legs also help individuals and groups develop the necessary agency to push, resist and amalgamate the outside forces to allow for the creation of a new reality for the self, the group, and the community in which we live.

We offer this metaphor of the human anatomy as a concrete visual and as a framework of analysis for the abstract concept of story making and sharing. We firmly believe that everyone can become a storyteller, and we humbly offer this process as a tool for expanding the reader's imagination while also putting forth the ideas that stories are living constructs and are malleable constructions of humans and our environment. We invite the reader to use this as they read the stories below.

## Theory in Action

Carmen's narrative at the beginning of this document embodies the dimensions of a theory of change model. Her work as a high school student dealt with multiple levels of engagement. She collected data locally to found a Spanish immersion institute and petitioned the State to pass DREAM Act-type legislation through the use of public and participatory methods. We believe schools can ground their practice and accountability system within a theory of change model that becomes a roadmap informed by three levels: micro/local, meso/organization, and macro/state and/or federal. The theory of change model should be accompanied by action research strategies (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004; Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008; Stringer, 2007) that allow educators to continuously assess the progress of children, schools, and communities. Action research as method creates the tools and space for local communities and institutions to engage in the data/story collection.

In this context, analysis and action are situated in the hands of the people that are the closest to the daily reality.  When educational politics, policy, and practice of accountability are grounded in healthy relationships, continuous dialogue, and collective reflection, schools emerge as participatory spaces inclined to include parents, community partners, and students/ children in public and transparent research processes.  The current accountability system is grounded in deficit thinking and is destructive to schools and communities; we propose an alternative framework for Mexican-American and other children and communities of color based on a new political praxis informed by *respeto, dignidad y conocimiento*.

### New Political Praxis: Teaching, Learning, Leading & Change

We put forth a framework to respond to the education of Mexican families who are redefining the shifting demography in this country. We propose strategies that are researched-based, field-tested through our work as teachers, community organizers, researchers, and university professors.  They respond primarily to the condition of Mexican-American families and communities, but we invite the reader to take what is relevant and to couch it within their own context.  The strategies to *reculturalize*[17]  our educational system are interdisciplinary and grounded in the notion that we cannot solve social issues by looking at them through a single lens; this cultural change requires multiple perspectives. We learn from our elders that intimidation and threats do not sustain change—though this is what educational policy seems to be based on.  Educational policy in Texas for the last two decades has become an attack on children, parents, teachers, our cultures, and our schools.

We provide stories that highlight our framework and draw direct connection to our use of story as data and action as we elaborate on the process of harvesting and sharing stories. To engage the change process, we urge educators, policymakers, and communities to listen to the stories of children in order to humanize and reculturalize our schools (Fullan, 2001). With the following stories, we take the opportunity to put a face on theory, practice and method.

### José's Story

> I would like to speak a little bit about my family.  Although we are very poor monetarily and we lack the luxuries that other students my age may have, I have to stress that my family has had a great influence on me.  Every time I speak at a conference, it is not I that speaks; rather, it is my father's wisdom and my mother's humility that speak.  It is the laughter of my brothers and the sparks of friendship of my two sisters. It is the stories shared by my grandfather, and the struggle to live and laugh of my grandmother. Everything that I stand for, everything that I am is my family.  Those are the roots of who I am and that is what I portray.  It is the feelings and the sentiment of my family that speak through me.  I am just a vehicle through which their words are spoken…
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> As we are placed in this system where competition and change are introduced, unfortunately the thing we learn most is to assimilate and feel ashamed of what we have.  I had always been ashamed of what I was, of what my parents owed, of the food that I ate, and of speaking the language that I speak [Spanish]. I don't feel that way anymore.  I have changed, and I believe I have also seen a change in the community in general.  I credit much of my transformation to my work with the Llano Grande Center.

José's narrative teaches us that he experienced a transformation from being ashamed of who he was to feeling powerful because of his family and personal identity.  Through a series of academic exercises at the Llano

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17. This concept comes from multiple conversations we have had with educational anthropologists including Henry Trueba, George Spindler, and Doug Foley.  Itsuggests that schools are living cultures. To create sustainable change, we must reimagine its social fabric, its social rules for engagement, values, relationships and celebrationsThis process is inherently social and dynamic in nature.

Grande Center, José learned the power of story, of words, and of responsibility. He did this as he also learned advanced reading and writing skills. As he studied in school, his culture became relevant, and he became important. Indeed, when he travels, he takes his whole family with him, as he described symbolically in his narrative: "it is not I that speaks; rather, it is my father's wisdom and my mother's humility that speak."

Jose's story intersects with what some scholars describe as grounding learning in the familiar (Spindler & Spindler, 2000). Making classroom instruction relevant to the socio-cultural and political reality of children is critical for engagement and lifelong learning. Our research and professional teaching experiences teach us that when the learner understands him/herself, the instruction becomes relevant, and the learning process much more engaging and transformational (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This is true at all levels of instruction (K-life). We recommend schools listen to and learn from José's story and redirect the resources they have allocated to test-prep materials toward staff development to ensure that schools become culturally competent learning organizations.

## Ikaika's Story

I'm from Wai'anae, on the western coast of Oahu; it's one of the most impoverished parts of the island and the place where most Native Hawaiians live. It's also a place that is seen as the undesirable part of the island. We have a bad reputation, as people, and as a place. But my story is about how we're good people. My purpose today as a Hawaiian youth is to change the narrative of Wai'anae. I'm doing that as an organic farmer and as a producer of digital media who tells stories about the strengths of our community. I love my kupuna, my fellow youths, and my hometown. I am Wai'anae.

The youth from the Leeward coast of Oahu push back at the master narrative and privilege their parents, grandparents, and the land. This is where they find their life, feed their soul, and construct their identity. Like the Mexican-American youth in South Texas, they are always burdened by the perceptions of outsiders, but they are also committed to rewriting their narrative. Youth redefine the stories of their families for the purpose of building personal power, identity, and academic skills.

We must engage in conversation and explore the local values of our neighborhoods, families, and community and allow them to guide and inform educational policy and practice. These values then should inform where we go, what we do, how we do it, and how we pay for it. This process should be democratic in nature and inclusive (Pearl, 1997). We must be democratic as these conversations take shape in families and schools.

## Delia's Story

When I graduated from high school, I became the first in my family to leave my rural south Texas hometown to attend college. I attended an Ivy League school in the Northeast, and upon graduation decided to return to teach history at my alma mater. "Why are you here, after having gone to Yale? Aren't you supposed to be doing more important things?" asked one of my students upon my return. My response was, "Because you and this community are important to me." Interestingly, fewer students have asked the same question since my first year in the classroom. More frequently, one can hear students say, "I want to attend an Ivy League school and then come back home, just like Delia did."

Beyond the symbolic value that my return to this community carries, especially for young Latinas, I also play an important role as an educator who teaches students to understand their community, their families, and themselves. I assess my students based on their ability to read, write, and think critically, but they're also measured by their ability to carry on a meaningful conversation, conduct a formal interview, and by their ability to collect data as researchers. Through this work, students

understand the nature of building relationships with family members, just as they learn to build trust and care with others in the community. In short, my students become active citizens both in school and in the community outside the school.

Delia's narrative points to a consciousness cultivated when she was a teenager, and it is an awareness she has sustained. The prototypical pathway for talented young Latinas/os is to leave their hometown—especially if they hail from rural areas—to become educated and never return home. Delia reverses the trend of this ubiquitous "brain drain" (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002) by coming back home, but she does it so she can participate in the development of her community. She represents the person working for the common good, rather than the educated youth who is expected to succeed by leaving the "barrio" in search of more lucrative opportunities.

## Giovanni's Story

I'm a 7th grader at Sankofa-Shule African-Centered charter school in Lansing, Michigan. I want to tell a story about something that happened recently at an assembly at my school. A candidate for mayor came to talk about his campaign, and after he finished his political speech, he asked if there were any questions. The problem was that after he asked, "Are there any questions?" he then added, "Well, I guess I don't have to take questions because you don't vote anyway." Many of my classmates kind of gasped, others rolled their eyes. Then, I raised my hand and said, "I don't think that it is right for you to discount what we have to say, simply because we can't vote now. We will vote one day, and we will remember that you did not care about what we had to say today."

That day, everybody talked about what I said to the mayoral candidate. By the end of the week, the story made the community paper. I believe that as a result of his comments, he lost major support from the African-American community. Ultimately, the candidate lost the race by a very thin margin. Everybody at my school said it was because of what I said to him that day at the school assembly.

Giovanni's radical action directly impacted the outcome of an election, but just as importantly, it helped him develop his authentic public voice. The daily conversations in school on the role of citizens in our community gave him the strength and the skill to be public about his ideas and his commitment to this community. This space, similar to the one created at the Llano Grande Center, makes the daily life of youth tantamount to the curriculum of the school. There should be no difference between what we study in school and what we experience in the community. Life experiences become the curriculum in the life of a young African-American student, who also acts as citizen and community leader. The story demonstrates the transference of similar practices in different contexts and communities. The power of sharing similar struggles then moves us to a common space and struggle—at which point we become one in the struggle for creating stronger communities for youth of color in this country.

## Reframing the Discourse

Stories in this article have been nurtured by exercises in self-reflection and identity formation. Greater ontological clarity emerges from storytellers—whether they are Mexican-American, African-American, or Native Hawaiian—when family, school, and community contextualize and support the identities of the storytellers. A cultural congruence exists when community/families and our schools are aligned in values, language, pedagogy, and forms of communication. However, presently incongruence exists between the home and the policies and practices that are pushed and passed by state and federal lawmakers (Valenzuela, 2007).

The politics of education are always in contention. We have historically seen values change from a focus on issues of access, quality, equity, and excellence to what we currently see as a focus on choice and efficiency.

Unfortunately, the value and culture of assessment (Padilla, 2005) has prevailed. These values are informed and aligned with market practices rather than democratic principles. Working for the common good must return to the public discourse and be front and center of this change process. These conversations should serve to inform the type of organizations we need in our communities.  Organizations are created to meet the needs of people while schooling should meet the needs of children, teachers, and communities (Habermas, 1987; Sergionvanni, 2000). However, we have seen some unintended consequences of bad public policy. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its predecessor in the Texas accountability system have created a bureaucratic structure that has made the individual needs of children a priority below the organization's needs. This has also made the professional and personal lives of teachers and school leaders difficult to negotiate and many times survive (McGhee & Nelson, 2005). These culturally incompetent organizations also damage the communication with parents that is needed to forge a culture of engagement in schools (Padilla, 2005).

We must shift our policy framework from reactive to proactive.  This country's history of discrimination and alienation for people of color, the poor, and women requires public policy to address seriously such historical ills.  But we must begin to use policy as a method for informing practice that will be relevant to the lives of people.  We recommend that people who are most affected by the issues be participants in the policy identification process and its formation. Participation is at the heart of a democratic society and we must be democratic in practice—not only in language.

## Closing Discussion

Around circle, youth and adults raise broad-based issues that can inform an agenda to enhance human and living conditions. The conversation on education must include the lessons learned from the fields of political economy, community development, and stories of youth and families.  Schools mirror society, and housing patterns impact who goes to what school. The achievement gap is a fallacy if we do not tend to the conditions that help create the gap (Rothstein, 2009), which has also been called the "achievement debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006). We suggest that this harvesting and sharing of story is appropriate for closing gaps and paying debts. In this context, housing, health care, nutrition, jobs, after-school activities are all critical components that significantly influence the wellbeing of children.  We must invest in creating a decent society, if we are to close the achievement gap.  The political economy should be informed by the value and commitment to building sustainable communities. This political economy framework supports schools, should respect the ecology, and provide equity for all. Educational leaders must be in conversation with local, state, federal, private, and public leadership to inform their local development.

Schools should put relationship building front and center. Learning theory tells us that learning is first social and then cognitive (Vygotsky, 1978; Trueba, 1999); without the social dimensions of the human being, interaction and engagement are significantly diminished. The relationship process helps individuals understand and negotiate issues of power, courage, and hope.

Our recommendation for next steps is to engage in a public conversation that includes youth, families, and citizens at the local level.  We must engage in a metaphorical circle and converse, where power is distributed and grounded in relationships, respect, dignity, and knowing (respeto, dignidad y conocimiento). The future of our policies must be broad-based and informed by the values of equity and radical participation.  It should consider the assets of the local ecology, families, and youth.  Assets such as language, culture, and identity should be nurtured, preserved and embedded into the climate and curriculum of schools. Youth in our communities are waiting for the invitation to engage in a sincere and proactive way, but the systems we build must be congruent with their values, practices, and interests.

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