From Safe Spaces to Sacred Spaces:
Chicanx/Latinx After-School Youth Development and Transformational Resistance

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Abstract

This ethnographic case study examines how a social justice-based after-school (AS) youth leadership development program became a space for youth participants to develop a critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice action. Research demonstrates that youth development programs and models that cultivate agency among Youth of Color directly contribute to Positive Youth Developmental (PYD) outcomes (Larson, 2006), and are an effective intervention strategy for youth at high risk of school pushout. However, few studies specifically examine the factors that prompt engaged Chicanx-Latinx AS youth participants to develop a resistance behavior that reflects a critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice—Transformational Resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). In this article, I explain how youth participants explicitly cited how creating "safe spaces" and chosen-familial bonds through femtoring/mentoring relationships cultivated transformational resistance outcomes. I conclude by discussing how the Black Panther Mentorship Program (BPMP), a social justice-based AS youth program, transcended the traditional notions of safe spaces and transformed into a *sacred space* because it gave youth participants holistic forms of unconditional acceptance, acknowledgment, and interconnectedness. As a result, BPMP youth's connection to sacred spaces enabled them to overcome personal and educational barriers.
Keywords: Chicanx/Latinx youth, Safe Spaces, Sacred Spaces, After-school programs, positive youth development outcomes

The disparity in Chicanx/Latinx educational attainment is cause for national concern. Chicanx/Latinx populations are the largest racially minoritized population in the United States (US Census, 2020). Still, there has not been a significant increase in educational attainment compared to their white counterparts in the United States (Covarrubias, 2011; Perez Huber, et al, 2015; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). Similarly, as a racialized ethnic group, Chicanx/Latinx populations have the lowest educational attainment relative to their white counterparts (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013). The educational experience of Chicanx/Latinx is one of accumulated structural and institutional marginalization and inequity (Duncan Andrade, 2005; Yosso, 2013). Chicanx/Latinx students struggle to access the economic and social resources their white, middle-class counterparts benefit from (Orfied & Ee, 2014). In Communities of Color, public schools are often segregated, underserved, and underfunded; poor urban schools are often ill-equipped to compensate for these structural social inequalities (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Orfield & Ee, 2014). 3 out of 10—approximately 30% of Chicanx/Latinx youth growing up under these educational conditions, including recent immigrants, are pushed out of school nationally (Covarrubias, 2011).

To fully understand the severity of high school pushouts for Chicanx/Latinx youth (Tuck, 2012), we must frame it within the context of the "school-to-prison pipeline" narrative. Critical scholars (Sojoyner, 2013; Valles and Villalpando, 2021) assert that there is a direct pipeline of Students of Color who get pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system. The overrepresentation of police in schools, zero-tolerance policies, suspensions, and high-stakes testing contribute to the school-to-prison nexus phenomenon (Stovall, 2018). Consequently, research indicates that Latino (and African American) males are more likely than their white counterparts to be suspended from school (Rios, 2011; 2017), be given a disability classification (Artiles, 2013), and are half as likely to be identified for talented and gifted programs (Torres & Fergus, 2012). Moreover, Latino males consistently report that they are less likely to seek help at school, including assistance offered by teachers, staff, and peers, because of the hostile schooling environment within schools (Ponjuan, Clark, and Sáenz, 2012). School and community-based interventions such as after-school (AS) programs are needed to support low-income Youth of Color to gain academic success and positive youth development outcomes to address this crisis.

Critical scholars argue that current AS youth development programs and models are

limited by an inability to examine the complex social, economic, and political forces that bear on the lives of urban youth, particularly Chicanx/Latinx youth (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Emerging research shows, however, that AS youth development programs that employ a social justice youth development (SJYD) framework and focus on PYD outcomes can empower youth to identify, critique, and transform structural and institutional forces, as well as provide avenues to engage in social justice actions (Ginwright, 2016).

In further addressing the disparity in Chicanx/Latinx educational attainment, this article draws from an ethnographic case study that sought to understand how Chicanx/Latinx youth participating in a social justice-based AS program, the Black Panther Mentorship Program, developed a transformational resistance (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001) consciousness that motivates toward social justice and critiques social oppression (Ramirez, 2018). The following research questions guide this article: How do Chicanx/Latinx youth in an AS program cultivate a transformational resistance consciousness? How do in-school and out-of-school educators implement relational pedagogical approaches to create sacred spaces and transformational resistance outcomes for Chicanx/Latinx youth?

Literature Review

Sacred Spaces

A few critical scholars have engaged in educational discourse centered on creating and engaging sacred spaces. A study examining a community collective of a critical educators' racial affinity group noted that participants' utilization of *testimonio* and storytelling pedagogical approaches contributed to collective learning and healing culture. The power of "holding space for one another" cultivated sacred spaces for critical educators of a racial affinity group (Pour-Khorshid, 2018).

In addition, Chicana/o/x scholars have theorized on creating sacred spaces within university institutions designed to maintain hegemonic and colonizing ideological perceptions of Students of Color. A study highlighting the experiences of Chicana educational researchers working collectively in predominantly white university institutions noted how creating a "Xicana-centered" sacred space enabled them to develop a sense of empowerment to be their authentic selves and foster intellectual growth, emotional support, and collective validation (Soto et al., 2009). Epistemologically, the authors theorized that the circle of dialogues and reflexivity were spaces for knowledge creation by simply sharing their Chicana subjectivities and

telling and listening to their own stories, aligning with Chicana feminist cultural intuition conceptual frameworks.

In this article, I draw on cultural healer and clinical therapist Jerry Tello's *La Cultura Cura* framework, which centralizes the healing and restorative power of gathering in sacred spaces that offer unconditional acknowledgment, acceptance, and interconnectedness. Tello (2018) explains that engaging in sacred and ceremonial spaces leads to a remembering/re-claiming of the ancestral teachings and values that speak to the importance of embracing one's personal sacredness, a sacred interconnectedness within a circle/community of support, and the journey to find one's sacred purpose(s) in life.

Theoretical Framework

Transformational resistance is a conceptual framework emerging in critical race theory in education. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) theorized that hegemonic definitions of Chicana and Chicano oppositional behavior as solely deviant fails to acknowledge the systemic, institutionalized forms of oppression and domination that contribute to their oppositional behavior and the agency that Students of Color have in displaying oppositional behaviors as expressions of resistance behavior. They contend that students' resistance behaviors can be classified in four ways: (a) Reactionary Behavior; (b) Self-defeating; (c) Conformist; and (d) Transformational Resistance. In Figure 1, "Defining the Concept of Resistance," youth oppositional behavior is measured in quadrants of resistance.
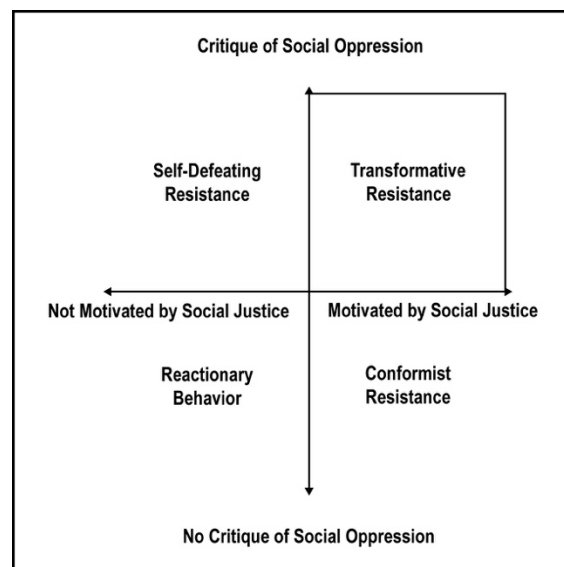

Figure 1. "Defining the Concept of Resistance" (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Solórzano & Delgado Bernal (2001) also theorized that student resistance behaviors could be expressed internally or externally, depending on the context and the level of students' agency. The authors thus framed student resistance in a model that contextualized resistance behaviors in thematic categories and provided a clear analysis and measurement tool for scholars, practitioners, and community members.

Solórzano & Delgado Bernal's article was instrumental in influencing subsequent literature on student resistance and provided a framework for resistance discourse (Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2022; Cammarota and Fine, 2010). Their model highlighted the role of human agency, a consciousness of social oppression, and motivation for social change in shaping expressions of resistance behavior and then categorized, identified, and articulated different forms of student resistance. In doing so, Chicanx/Latinx student resistance discourse shifted into a paradigm that considered how human agency could be expressed in multiple ways, illustrating the fluidity of resistance behaviors on a spectrum from *reactionary* to *transformational*. Further, the student resistance framework is a powerful tool to articulate and operationalize youth oppositional behavior in a manner that acknowledges the harmful resistance behaviors and the potential for transformational resistance outcomes.

As a youth intervention worker and researcher for nearly 20 years, I have seen firsthand the positive developmental outcomes among Chicanx/Latinx youth when they develop a transformational resistance consciousness (Ramirez, 2018). Youth asset-based behaviors such as possessing a deepened sense of purpose and empowerment are reflected in a heightened expression of youth voice, increased aspirations, embracing of one's social identities, and genuine desires to be agents of change in their schools and communities. After conducting the study this article draws from, I began to reflect on the role that the creation of safe spaces played in cultivating transformational resistance outcomes for Chicanx/Latinx youth. The overwhelming reporting of study participants' connection to a safe space was a direct result of BPMP's implementation of the Mayan philosophy, *In Lak Ech, Tu Eres Mi Otro Yo, You Are My Other Me*. Rooted in ancient Mayan epistemology, ontology and axiology, *In Lak Ech* provides a worldview that promotes the interconnectedness of humanity. In his book, *Amoxtli the X codex: In Lak Ech, Panache Be, Hunab Ku and the Forgotten 1524 Debates*, Dr. Cintli Rodriguez (2010) explains the Indigenous concept of *In Lak Ech* as a symbiotic framework for human beings to become interconnected in their humanity. He states:

In Lak Ech is not simply an ancient Indigenous Maya concept; in fact, it is a prescription for how we should treat each other as human beings. It is the anti-thesis of dehumanization. It is the first step toward rehumanization. It is the first step in viewing our fellow human beings not simply as neighbors, but as brothers and sisters. As co-equals. (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 20)

Rodriguez's definition of *In Lak Ech* speaks directly to the ancient Indigenous epistemological aims that provided a framework for human beings to engage with one another in a manner that provided a sense of belonging and interconnectedness, which encourages relationships and spaces wherein human beings have empathy, unconditional acceptance, and restoration.

BPMP fostered a culture that allowed youth participants to feel safe and interconnected through *In Lak Ech* principles. As a result, BPMP youth participants' were able to establish an interconnected community of support that included their peers and adult allies, which was foundational in developing a critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice. This phenomenon prompted me to think beyond the foundational role that safe spaces contributed to transformational resistance outcomes, and toward illuminating in-depth interconnectedness to a community of support among their peers and adult allies in the cultivation of sacred spaces.

Methodology

The Black Panther Mentorship Program

The BPMP was a student-instituted peer femtoring/mentoring program that resulted from a youth participatory action research project where students sought to address the pushout rate at their high school. BPMP was designed to be a social justice-focused youth leadership development program to empower young people to realize their potential to reach their personal and educational goals and learn how to engage in community-building and grassroots organizing efforts. BPMP youth participants engaged in programming that focused on:

- **Empowerment**: Increased self-awareness that drew heavily from Ethnic Studies, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), and Indigenous knowledge.

- **Positive Peer Support and Femtorship/Mentorship Relationship Development:** Utilized a holistic approach to provide a safe space for academic and personal support to overcome barriers at school and home.

- **Health & Wellness:** Participated in workshops and activities promoting health and wellness, including art-based projects, plays, hikes, bike rides, field trips, and talking circles, to respond to toxic stressors.

- **Activism/Civic Engagement:** Learned leadership development strategies to engage community building and grassroots youth organizing efforts.

- **Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR):** Engaged in youth participatory action research for community-based action research focused on addressing social inequalities on campus and in their neighborhood.

- **Field Trips:** Attended cultural, educational, political, and Indigenous ceremonies to provide exposure to spaces, knowledge, and networks to support their leadership and personal development.

BPMP took place after school at a Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) high school in the Pico/Union/West Adams area of Downtown Los Angeles. The Pico Union/West Adams area is primarily low-income, where 90% of students at the local high school qualify for free and reduced lunch (California Department of Education, 2016). According to 2010 census data, the population is 85% Latinx, 65% foreign-born residents primarily from Mexico and El Salvador, with a high concentration of undocumented and mixed citizenship status families; 87% of mixed-status citizenship homes are single-parent households. Around this time, in addition to economic and educational disparities already in place, the Pico-Union/West Adams neighborhoods were experiencing high levels of gentrification, resulting in low-income Latinx immigrant families being displaced due to land development, and soaring rent hikes, gang and drug violence, including increasing gun violence due to the rise in marijuana dispensaries, and increased police surveillance and harassment of street vendors and neighborhood residents (Gorski, 2002).

Under these conditions, BPMP participants were exposed to high levels of social toxins (Ginwright, 2016) that resulted from struggling to navigate and negotiate environments that cause pain and trauma, such as having family members deported, and fatigue from being hyper-vigilant against violence and harassment by gangs and law enforcement. The sociopolitical conditions and high levels of trauma experienced by the study participants contributed to why BPMP was perceived and embraced as a safe space where Chicanx/Latinx youth could find support and interconnectedness that facilitated kinship bonds with their peers and adult

femtors/mentors, which, in turn, enabled them to keep moving forward in reaching their educational and personal goals.

Research Positionality

From 2011-2018, I established relationships with youth participants, parents, teachers, and school staff. I co-facilitated developing and implementing youth empowerment and mentoring programs in three LAUSD high schools with an immigrant rights organization called the *Advancing Justice Center* and community partners. I conducted the study to generate research to support the increased resources for AS youth leadership development programs for youth who are at risk of being pushed out of school. To do so, I developed relationships of trust and reciprocity after eight years of working with the youth, school officials, and community partners. With a spirit of reciprocity, I supported the overall goals of the *Advancing Justice Center*'s youth leadership program. I earned trust and respect as an activist-scholar and youth worker practitioner by honoring my methodological commitment to engage in research "with the community" and not "on the community." My research positionality is therefore grounded in conducting grassroots, youth/community-engaged research that can be used—and operationalized—as a resource for social justice and healing outcomes.

My Cultural Intuition

I draw from Chicana educational researcher Dolores Delgado Bernal's (1998) Chicana feminist epistemological concept, "cultural intuition," to utilize my lived experiences, experiential knowledge, and nearly 20 years of youth development work experience to inform the study. Cultural intuition asserts that Chicanas, feminists, and Scholars of Color have a particular way of making meaning in their lives. Within that process, they have a unique perspective based on being members of marginalized groups in the US. Delgado Bernal (1998) theorizes that four primary sources contribute to cultural intuition: 1) one's personal experience (including collective experience and community memory), 2) existing literature, 3) one's professional experience, and 4) the analytical research process itself. My cultural intuition informs how I co-analyzed data and themes with youth participants and acknowledged the role of creating safe spaces for BPMP youth in cultivating transformational resistance outcomes, and theorized how BPMP programming space was transformed from a safe space to a sacred space. In this next section, I provide an overview of the study's findings that demonstrates how BPMP youth participants cited the role that safe spaces grounded in the principles of *In Lak Ech*

contributed to the development of transformational resistance behaviors. In addition, I illustrate how BPMP safe spaces provided feelings of unconditional acceptance and a heightened sense of belonging to a community of support for their peers and adult allies, which I theorize speaks to sacred spaces and sacred interconnectedness.

Findings

The Creation of "Safe Spaces" grounded in the values of In Lak Ech

Study participants reported that BPMP's AS youth programming provided a "safe space," which was foundational in their cultivation of a critique social of oppression and motivation for social justice. Traditionally, the term "safe space" is understood as "an environment that allows students [youth] to engage with one another over controversial issues with honesty, sensitivity, and respect" (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 135). However, I build on this notion by highlighting how the safe space within BPMP was directly related to students' cultivation of agency, and as a foundational condition for fostering critical socio-consciousness, and how the BPMP safe space was transformed into a sacred space that provided an interconnectedness and restoration able to sustain hope and motivation in the participants' daily lives.

Curly Sunshine is a 19-year-old, gender-nonconforming Chicanx who was born and raised in the Mid-City area of Downtown Los Angeles. Curly Sunshine grew up in a mixed-citizenship status home with their undocumented mother and two older sisters. During their childhood, they worked with their mother as a street vendor, assisting in translating with English-speaking customers. Developed through their life experiences, *Curly* has strong communication skills and carries *themselves* as a natural leader. *They*[1] joined the BPMP in the tenth grade and became active participants, taking on several leadership roles. In high school, they founded the first-ever LGBTQIA[2] student club on campus to address the hostile environment and lack of visibility of queer students on campus. Moreover, *Curly* theorized on the interrelationship between creating a "safe space" and developing a social justice lens:

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[1] Curly Sunshine's intersectional identity pronouns are: They, Them, She and Her.

[2] LGBTQIA stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Allied. https://gaycenter.org/about/lgbtq/

I feel that the process of creating a "safe space" and developing a social justice lens goes "hand in hand." It's essential for youth to be in a safe space first because… why learn about social justice? Why care about other people? Why go out of your way to try to make this world better for other people if you don't have a group of people that actually care for you and are there for you? So I think that by creating a "safe space," you open doors for people to actually connect to their humanity, connect into their compassion, connect to their love for one another, you know, it's *In Lak Ech.*

Curly provided a powerful theorization on how establishing a "safe space" is foundational to developing youth resistance that embodies a social justice critique. *They* theorize that BPMP's safe space embodied the practices of human interconnectedness and a sense of belonging outlined in the philosophy of *In Lak Ech.* Under these conditions, safe spaces play a foundational role in the process of re-humanization, which is necessary to develop a critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice—Transformational Resistance (Brayboy, 2005; Covarrubias & Revilla, 2003)

Another participant, *Brother B*, a 19-year-old Chicanx BPMP youth leader, highlighted the significance of engaging in a safe space, contributing to his critique of social oppression. *Brother B* grew up in the Pico/Union/University Park area of Downtown Los Angeles. His parents emigrated from Mexico in the late 1980s and separated when he was five. His mother worked as a garment worker and always supported his educational aspirations. *Brother B* joined the BPMP during the 10th grade when his school therapist recommended that he take a step out of his "comfort zone" and build his social skills by joining an AS program. After participating in a BPMP YPAR project which focused on racial microaggressions and positive coping strategies, he created an online community blog called the *Black Rose Press*. In the following passage, *Brother B* illuminates how his experiences with BPMP as a safe space cultivated a community of respect and inclusion:

I definitely feel that BPMP is a "safe space" because of the values of *In Lak Ech, Tu Eres Mi Otro Yo, You Are My Other Me.* I felt that in my years of being in BPMP, we maintained our values of being connected with one another. BPMP did uphold the value of 'if I hurt you, then I'm hurting myself,' and I did see that, especially in how BPMP members treated one another. They were respectful to one another and always tried to maintain

that respect, inclusiveness, and diversity. Those values make BPMP a great program and a wonderful "home" to be in at school.

Brother B's reference to BPMP as a "home" speaks to the kinship bonds and feelings of safety he experienced engaging in BPMP youth programming spaces. He credits the interconnectedness and unconditional acceptance of BPMP to the values of *In Lak Ech* that created a familial environment in which BPMP members felt safe and supported. It was important for the Chicanx/Latinx youth participants to engage in the BPMP AS program space, especially within the hostile and violent schooling spaces that historically (and present-day) have been designed to eradicate their cultural identity, agency, and expressions of dissent. Thus, *Brother B*'s reflections illuminating the importance of having a safe space that felt like home, which was also grounded in the Indigenous worldview of *In Lak Ech,* truly amplifies the power of resistance and survivance that comes from unconditional acceptance and interconnectedness of Chicanx/Latinx youth.

In addition, *Brother B* shared that BPMP provided a safe space for him to affirm his LGBTQIA identity:

> In BPMP, I found a "safe space" thanks to mentors *Johnny Rockit, Ivette Ohh*, and *Tim Tezzy.* I was able to embrace my LGBTQIA identity fully. I had already come out as LGBTQIA before participating in BPMP, but at that time, I was still trying to figure out how to embrace my identity fully. But with the support of BPMP, I could stand firmly in my LGBTQIA identity when it came time to write my personal statement for the UC's. I was able to include my LGBTQIA identity in my essay. I needed to express it. I felt that these admission people needed to know that this is who I am. And so BPMP helped me build up my confidence too! That's what the "safe space" of BPMP has given me.

Brother B's reflections truly capture how a safe space with a community of support of femtors and mentors assisted him in unapologetically embracing his LGBTQIA identity as an expression of transformational resistance to the heteronormativity and dehumanization embedded in U.S. society. The development of a sociopolitical consciousness led to an understanding that disclosing his queer identity in his college admissions essay was an act of resistance to normalizing the public suppression of his LGBTQIA identity. This process of affirmation within BPMP, coupled with his motivation to share his LGBTQIA identity, was a means to disrupt the traditional narratives of college essays that align with power, privilege, and white supremacy.

A third participant, *Cio,* illuminated how engaging in a "safe space" provided her support as an undocumented Latinx student in LAUSD. When she was eight, she emigrated from Guatemala to the US with her older sister as an unaccompanied minor. Her mother, who had emigrated years prior, worked as a street food vendor in the Pico/Union/West Adams area of Downtown Los Angeles. Throughout her childhood, *Cio* took on adult roles to support her single mother's food vending cart as a necessary means to ensure her family could afford rent, food, and clothing. Thus, *Cio* and her two sisters experienced a process of adultification where they helped their mother prepare, cook, and vend before school, after school, and on weekends. With the demands of working long hours and the pressures of a heavy academic workload, *Cio* found herself not having time to enjoy life as a teenager. In this following passage, *Cio* explained how her participation in BPMP's "safe space" gave her a community of support and a temporary reprieve from the pressures of her daily routine:

> A "safe space" means that you've been accepted and that you feel comfortable. Because sometimes you might not feel that support at home, and you might feel depressed. In my case, at home, I felt like time would just run by so fast, you know. I would go home, go to work, and then go to sleep, and then get up and start it all over again. But being at BPMP actually helped me see that my time was important there. I was able to use that time to experience the love of other people and feel all their positive expressions. It could be someone giving me words of encouragement like '*Cio,* you're good at this' or '*Cio*, you did this—Great job!' At BPMP, I felt all that positivity was feeding into me. I believe that all falls into a 'safe space' because it helps you gain confidence in yourself. And then you add all the love of your own family and then all the love from members of BPMP. It all makes a big difference in your life. It gives you hope! And you know, some youth really need that cuz they may not have that at home.

Cio's reflections on her engagement in BPMP's "safe space" speak directly to the contribution of pyd outcomes, such as building her confidence and developing a sense of connection to a community of peers and femtors/mentors. It also provided an opportunity to establish connections and support with same-age peers, which helped mitigate the stressors of undergoing the process of adultification. Adolescent development scholars (King et al., 2005) identified the critical role of building confidence and connecting to a community of positive peers for youth to move from surviving to thriving. Additionally, *Cio* cited that the community

love and support she received from her involvement in the BPMP space gave her hope. Increasingly, youth development scholars conducting healing justice work (Ginwright, 2011; 2016), highlight hope's critical role in increasing resilience and overall mental wellness among urban Youth of Color. *Cio*'s engagement in BPMP increased her hope as she struggled to manage adult roles and responsibilities to ensure her family's livelihood. Thus, BPMP's "safe space" directly increased her resilience and wellness.

Moreover, *Cio* credited the "safe space" and community support of BPMP with her ability to overcome her fears and negative stigma of being undocumented within U.S. society:

> BPMP helped me not to fear being undocumented. Before as an undocumented student, I used to think I'm not valuable to the U.S. But the support I got from BPMP made me feel that everything I do in this life counts and is important to the world. This [affirmation] gave me a lot of self-respect. Being undocumented in the U.S. is hard; everyone says undocumented immigrants are here intrusively. But you know what, undocumented immigrants are here because we are the ones who are doing a lot of hard work for the U.S. [economy]. Basically, the U.S. provides work, and we [undocumented immigrants] provide them a service, which is our work!... What I gained at BPMP was to value ourselves and see how we can give back to the community.

In the passage above, *Cio* highlights how BPMP directly contributed to developing her positive self-perception of her undocumented identity as a direct act of resistance to the fear and racist nativism within U.S. society. The conscious awareness to reframe her undocumented identity to align with being the hardest workers in the U.S. workforce and that her life has value driven by a desire to give back to her community embodies transformational resistance outcomes. *Cio's* transformational resistance directly pushed back against the deficit perspectives and dehumanizing narratives that frame undocumented Latinx immigrants as criminals with low self-worth. Thus, *Cio's* reflections illustrate how transformational resistance consciousness can lead to PYD outcomes such as increased self-confidence, self-worth, and self-efficacy (Larson, 2006; Riggs, 2006).

Another participant, *Ivette Ohh*, a 24-year-old Undocuscholar,[3] was a youth facilitator and coordinator at BPMP for nearly six years. She was one of the original student co-founders

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[3] I use the term undocuscholar to signify students who embrace and frame their undocumented status and identity as an asset in their engagement of the U.S. educational system.

of the program while in the 10th grade. She was born in Nayarit, Mexico, and migrated with her mother to the U.S. when she was six months old. *Ivette Ohh* grew up in the Pico Union neighborhood of Downtown Los Angeles, a Mexican and Central American (im)migrant community that suffered high levels of poverty, violence, and historically underfunded and under-resourced public schools (Simon, 1997). In the tenth grade, *Ivette Ohh* and her classmates utilized the findings of their YPAR project to develop a femtoring/mentoring after-school program as a prevention and intervention strategy to address the high school pushout rate. In the following passage, *Ivette Ohh* shared how BPMP provided a safe space, and how grounding the space in *In Lak Ech* created a culture in which youth participants internalized the values of acceptance and interconnectedness. She states:

> The reciting of the *In Lak Ech* poem every time we close our BPMP youth sessions influenced the youth to internalize the values of 'Tu Eres Mi Otro Yo, You Are My Other Me.' And we as facilitators, internalize it too. In a subtle way we are 'programmed' to treat each other with respect and love…. I think the beauty of our BPMP space was that we created a culture where all the youth participants knew that BPMP was a safe space for us all. They knew BPMP was a space to articulate their ideas, and they would not attack one another for not having the same belief system.

Ivette Ohh's commentary highlights the intentionality of BPMP adult facilitators to engage in programming rituals and practices that nurtured a culture that youth participants felt safe to express themselves. She eloquently theorizes on how the reciting of the *In Lak Ech* poem at the closing of BPMP youth programming was, in many ways, a ritual or ceremonial practice that reminded the youth and adult facilitators to respect and love one another. The internalization of humanizing values that center acceptance, respect, love, and interconnection by BPMP youth participants directly challenges the dehumanization that Chicanx/Latinx youth experience in U.S. society.

In summary, these findings indicated that creating a safe space was a foundational element that created a community of support and familial/kinship bonds in which BPMP youth participants experienced unconditional acceptance and a deepened sense of belonging. In addition, BPMP youth highlighted the development of Transformational Resistance consciousness in ways that strongly affirmed their marginalized intersectional identities, such as being LGBTQIA and undocumented. And lastly, the BPMP youth program's embracing of the

values of *In Lak Ech* created a culture of unconditional acceptance and interconnectedness, which led to it being more than a safe space. It transformed into a sacred space.

Discussion

In summation, study participants highlighted that engaging in "safe spaces" was foundational in developing a critique of social oppression. The inclusiveness and human interconnectedness that shaped the BPMP programming space were created by utilizing the Indigenous epistemological framework of *In Lak Ech*, which Chicanx/Latinx youth participants described as central to BPMP being a "safe space." Chicanx/Latinx Youth in the program reported undergoing a deepened sense of belonging and membership within a humanizing community. This process led BPMP members to experience a degree of human interconnectedness and positive outcomes.

Scholars have critiqued the notion of creating or holding "safe space" within structures or institutions inherently designed to be violent and dehumanizing for People of Color (Carter, 2007; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Some scholars contend that when youth or communities challenge hostile climates within institutional spaces, they transform them into a "brave space" (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Cook-Sather, 2016). I contend, however, that framing BPMP as a "safe space" accurately describes how the space functioned for people with marginalized social and intersectional identities. LGBTQIA and undocumented youth, for example, experience high levels of trauma due to structural oppression (Schmitz, et al, 2020) in their schools. Chicanx/Latinx LGBTQIA and undocumented youth populations' physical safety is often at risk in public and institutional spaces, and this population experiences higher rates of suicide, addiction, and school pushout (Brown & Hyatt-Burkhart, 2013). I also argue that a space that focuses on creating a humanizing community environment where youth do not feel that they will be verbally attacked or bullied is cause to label BPMP as a safe space. The dearth of spaces where Chicanx/Latinx youth feel a sense of inclusiveness and human interconnectedness in communities or schools also gives reason to identify spaces such as BPMP as safe spaces.

Transforming Safe Space to Sacred Space

By understanding themselves not solely as isolated individuals, but as interconnected members of a broader community that cared about them, BPMP participants could engage space through the sacredness of healing and togetherness. Participants' sense of interconnection to one another's humanity led to creating a sacred space, where once youth

humanized one another and felt deeply interconnected to BPMP, they transcended their relationship to the AS youth space and their school environment. Changing their relationships and connections to one another and their classroom spaces manifested indigenous epistemology as an act of decolonization within schooling spaces that are inherently colonizing and dehumanizing (Pizzaro, 1998). Youth participants and facilitators successfully reclaimed their humanity and interconnectedness within oppressive schooling structures as an act of resistance and refusal.

Further, the Indigenous epistemological and humanizing pedagogical practices that cultivated the creation of sacred spaces align with re-Indigenization for urban Chicanx/Latinx youth when they learn concepts, ceremonies, and rituals that originated in their ancestral epistemologies (Acosta, 2015). Arce (2018) reminds us that the re-Indigenization of Chicanx/Latinx youth occurs when they are exposed to and engage in culturally rooted Indigenous epistemological frameworks such as *In Lak Ech.* And by doing so, there is a decolonizing and liberatory component to shifting institutionalized spaces like schools or after-school programs to sites of empowerment, healing, and re-humanization. BPMP youth participants and adult facilitators collectively changed the relationship between the space and its members by operating from humanizing and Indigenous-centered interconnectedness relationships (Ramirez, 2018).

Within these temporal environments, spiritual activism (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Huber, 2009) can promote a resistance that enables one to transcend structural and institutional forms of oppression. The youth participants in BPMP created and participated in a space two times a week that provided them hope, authentic caring relationships, and human interconnectedness. BPMP's programming space transformed into a "sacred space" because the youth participants and adult facilitators built a community of love, support, and inclusiveness that resulted in social, emotional, and mental replenishment to exercise their empowerment, resilience, and agency.

Implications

This article offers perspectives for in-school and out-of-school educators seeking to create sacred spaces that empower Chicanx/Latinx youth to engage in transformational resistance outcomes. In an educational system and white supremacist society that dehumanizes Chicanx/Latinx youth, it is the responsibility of the educators (in both formal and informal settings) to exert a high level of intentionality in developing the relational, pedagogical, and

curricular practices that cultivate sacred spaces and transformative youth resistance behaviors. There needs to be an unequivocal recognition of the harm and trauma caused by the structural and institutional violence experienced by Chicanx/Latinx youth, especially those with intersectional, marginalized identities such as LGBTQIA and undocumented youth populations. From this premise, we need to create youth-centered spaces that provide unconditional acceptance and interconnectedness to a community of support from peers and adult allies. In addition, there needs to be a shift toward a Chicanx/Latinx youth engagement that incorporates a holistic framework that centers them first as human beings before they are seen as students or future workers within our capitalist society. Our Chicanx/Latinx youth need to be framed and treated as sacred, even when they do not embrace their sacredness and are on a daily journey to realize their sacred purpose (Tello, 2018). Finally, school leaders must actively pursue opportunities to develop collaborative partnerships with community youth workers, organizers, and organizations. Community elders, youth and cultural workers, healers, mentors/femtors, artists, and activists can play an important role in sharing their wisdom, talents, love, acceptance, and unconditional support with our young people. Let's start working together in a sacred interconnectedness that centers on developing humanizing relationships of trust, acknowledgment, respect, and dignity with our youth and adult allies. Palabra.

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