

Organizing for Change: Latinx Im/migrant Parents, School Decision-Making, and the Racial Politics of Parent Leadership in School Reform

Verónica N. Vélez

Western Washington University

Abstract

This article draws on a multi-year, participatory action case study of ALIANZA, a California-based Latinx im/migrant parent group. Grounded in Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit), this article focuses specifically on the development of political agency among ALIANZA members, highlighting organizational strategies aimed at school reform while strengthening counter-narratives to interrupt racist depictions that functioned to cast Latinx parents as “unfit” to serve as educational leaders. Data suggests that ALIANZA’s approach helped its members heal from past abuse and racist encounters, identify and speak out against injustice, and build a collective and shared political capital to leverage their voice in local reform efforts. The author concludes with implications for future research and practice, providing specific recommendations for other educational leaders and those who train them.

Introduction

It was a typical ALIANZA meeting. I had come to admire the multiple purposes ALIANZA meetings served, one of which was the opportunity to *convivir*.¹ Tonight was especially important for *nuestro libro*,^{2, 3} as Olga had coined our collective work to bring attention to their efforts as parent activists. I opened up the conversation by asking the group to define how ALIANZA had impacted their identity as *madres y padres valientes en lucha*.⁴ Elena responded, “*Creo que la mejor manera de capturar lo que [ALIANZA] ha hecho por mi es a través del dicho, “no más atole con el dedo.”*”⁵ Unclear about the dicho’s

¹ *Convivir* is the Spanish word for “sharing time and experiences.”

² Translated to English: Our book

³ In an effort to honor the voice of my informants throughout this manuscript, I have kept their words unaltered and in the language in which they were originally shared. English translations for each quote, when needed, are provided in the footnotes.

⁴ Translated to English: Courageous mothers and fathers in struggle

⁵ Translated to English: I think that the best way to capture what [ALIANZA] has done for me, and I believe for many of us here, is through the saying, “no más atole con el dedo.”

meaning, I asked Elena to elaborate, “*Cuando una mamá está amamantando es natural que se canse especialmente si le toca un niño comelón. Hay momentos que no puedes más y para apaciguarlo entre su horas de comer se le da un poquito de atole con el dedo. Pues lo mismo pasa con nosotros – se nos ha dado atole con el dedo para apaciguarnos, para engañarnos, para no quejarnos de las injusticias que se cometen día tras día contra nosotros, contra nuestros hijos. Se justifican dándonos una miseria mientras disfrutan de los beneficios de la explotación de nuestro labor. [ALIANZA] nos dio las herramientas para reconocer y desafiar a los que se proponen seguir dándonos atole. Antes aceptamos esta realidad pero ¡no más!*”⁶

It was common to hear members of ALIANZA, a grassroots organization of Latinx⁷ im/migrant⁸ parents in California, communicate their critique of social structure, understanding of oppression, and role as resisters through the use of stories, *dichos*, *consejos*,⁹ and metaphors. This was especially true of Elena. Her analogy, highlighted in the opening vignette, underscored the transformative aspect of ALIANZA in challenging what she felt had become a normalized practice in institutions serving Latinx im/migrant parents. At its core, her use of a *dicho* spoke to a process of silencing by deception, of being tricked into believing they had been equitably “served” through false promises and stand-ins for real reform. She uses the same *dicho* to credit ALIANZA in providing her the tools to call out acts of deceit on behalf of those in power. Most striking, though, was the connection between the *dicho* and Elena’s role as a mother. By using a saying that reflects an act only a mother could fully comprehend, the *dicho* emphasized the

⁶ Translated to English: When a mother is breastfeeding, it’s natural that she becomes tired, especially if she has a child who is a big eater. There are moments that you can’t anymore, and to calm the baby between feedings, you trick her by giving her a bit of *atole* (a Mexican drink made from cornmeal) with your finger. Well the same thing happens with us—we have been given *atole* with the finger to calm us, deceive us, so that we don’t complain and speak up about the injustices that are committed day-after-day against us, against our children. They justify themselves by giving us a pittance while they benefit from exploiting our labor. ALIANZA has given us the tools to recognize and challenge those who would like to keep giving us *atole*. Before, we accepted this reality but not any more!

⁷ I use the term “Latinx” as a gender neutral alternative to Latino. It aims to disrupt the gender binary and represents a grammatical move toward justice.

⁸ I place a “/” between “im” and “migrant” to challenge the notion that all im/migrants move to the U.S. in pursuit of the “American dream,” often masking the underlying socio-political and economic factors for their migration or that transnational migration is not always one directional. Im/migrants may migrate back and forth from the U.S. and their home countries, send remittances to family members outside of the U.S., and/or dis-identify with citizenship structures and efforts to assimilate (Morissey, 2013). In an effort to more accurately represent these varied and complex realities, I chose to use “im/migrant” in lieu of “immigrant” as a grammatical move toward justice.

⁹ *Consejos* is the Spanish word for “advice.”

extent to which a mother, based on her lived experience, could identify, comprehend, and expose acts that render injustice possible.

Extending Elena's analysis, this article provides a deeper look at how members of ALIANZA developed political agency while also highlighting how they worked to continuously adapt and remake ALIANZA's political identity as one of *madres y padres valientes en lucha*.¹⁰ While difficult to capture the range and depth of approaches the group has employed since its inception, my goal here is to provide an analysis of those key strategies that best frame how ALIANZA supports and develops the leadership of its members so that collective action to create social change is possible. It's not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, the aim is to share *defining* group practices that ultimately make the case for using ALIANZA as a platform for unpacking the politics and possibilities of Latinx im/migrant parents as leaders in reforming schools and society at large.

ALIANZA

Since its inception in the late 1990's, ALIANZA defines its purpose as training, organizing, and facilitating the participation of parents in local school reform. In the process, they have called attention to the conditions affecting Latinx students and their families, who comprise the majority of students in their district. ALIANZA has organized numerous activities grounded in popular education,¹¹ such as directing leadership development trainings for parents, organizing forums with elected school and city officials, and working with other non-profit and grassroots organizations to bring resources to local families in schools. Comprised predominantly of Latinx im/migrant parents ALIANZA has been instrumental in foregrounding Latinx im/migrant concerns within local school and city politics over several years.

The Racial Politics of Parent Leadership for Latinas/os

A large body of educational research unequivocally concludes that parent involvement has a positive impact on student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 1996; Epstein, 2009; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010). Although such work has been

¹⁰ Translated to English: Mothers and fathers in struggle

¹¹ ALIANZA defines popular education as "... a process of analysis, critical and participative reflection through economic, political, and socio-cultural realities that arise from impoverished organized groups" (Organizational website, concealed to protect anonymity).

numerous, it has also highlighted important contradictions in how “parent involvement” is operationalized, the causes for the “lack” of parent participation in schools, and ideas for how to build better partnerships between schools and parents. This is not surprising considering that “. . . the concept of parent involvement is a social construct whose boundaries and expectations are impacted by culture, race, class and gender issues” (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005, p. 32). What has become a dominant thread in this work, though, has been the unrelenting search in the home for the “problem” of low parent participation. Consequently, much of this research has served to brand parents as the primary culprits for a failed relationship between them and public schools. This has been a popular finding as it pertains to Parents of Color,¹² particularly Latinxs (Donato, 1997; Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Olivos, 2004, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdes, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002).¹³

Challenging these findings, researchers have found that Latinx parents continuously expressed a strong value for their children’s academic achievement (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdes, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002) and provided a rich socio-cultural environment of learning at home (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 2001; Olivos, 2004; Valdes, 1996; Valdez, 2015). Several scholars have also explored the personal and collective empowerment of Latinx parents as they organized to address educational concerns in their communities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 2001; Dyrness, 2011; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Moreno & Valencia, 2002; Olivos, 2004, 2006; Pardo, 1990).

To understand this contradiction—the prevalence of culturally deficit (Valencia, 1997) portraits of Latinx parents despite evidence to the contrary—I employ Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) to more fully examine how multiple forms of oppression based on immigration status, language, culture, ethnicity, and phenotype intersect to shape the experiences of ALIANZA (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). In his work as parent activist in a Latinx community, Olivos (2004) finds utility in a critical race framework for understanding how the relationship between Latinx parents and public schools

. . . is negatively affected by the cultural biases . . . inherent within the institution of public education as demonstrated by its historic role of using

¹² “Students of Color” is intentionally capitalized to reject the standard grammatical norm. Capitalization is used as a means to empower this group and represents a grammatical move toward social and racial justice. This rule will also apply to “People of Color,” “Parents of Color,” “Im/migrants of Color,” and “Communities of Color” used throughout this article.

¹³ All of the work cited here challenges the argument that Latinx parents are to blame for the failed relationship between them and schools.

its power to impose the values and wishes of the dominant culture onto bicultural student and parent populations (Olivos, 2004, p. 29).

While Latinx parents demonstrate a high regard for education and exhibit multiple forms of involvement, their contributions to the education of their children do not “fit” within the narrowly-defined white, middle-class, standards of what it means to be a “good” and “involved” parent (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valdes, 1996). In their research on cultural capital in family-school relationships, Lareau and Horvat (1999) argue that “the rules of the game” that mediate the interactions between parents and school are race-specific, where white, middle-class parents have what Lareau (1989) calls “home advantage” (Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Shannon, 1996). This can translate into an environment where Latinx parents are frequently rebuffed by administrators and teachers, not included in school discussions about their children, and even less so in school decision-making (Auerbach 2002; Olivos, 2004; Rogers 2002; Valdes, 1996).

Taken together with dominant notions of parent involvement, educational policies on school accountability only contribute to a further marginalization of Latinx parents in schools (Rogers, 2002). The ineffective system of implementing such policies through school-based decision-making bodies, like school site councils, has necessitated that Latinx parents *engage* and/or *create* decision-making spaces in order to generate meaningful change. I argue Latinx parent leaders, like those in ALIANZA, acknowledge a relationship exists between the activities and strategies they employ and the context that affects, informs, and may even be contested by such efforts. Compared to white, middle-class families with “home advantage,” (Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Shannon, 1996), Latinx parents are tasked with *transforming*, not just becoming *involved* in, the spaces often allocated for them in schools. And for Latinx *im/migrant* parents, particularly the undocumented, there is the additional burden of dealing with the legal boundaries of political membership in the US, that complicate the terms of engagement in school reform.

Methodology

Using a participatory action approach, I employed a qualitative case study design to guide data collection. Events that were seen as critical, influential, or decisive were extracted as “critical incidents” as a means to understand larger phenomena from the perspective of

ALIANZA (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This type of approach allowed me to capture the relationship between ALIANZA and the broader context that informs their work, as *they see it*.

As a research paradigm, participatory action research (PAR) facilitates a research space for research collaborators to construct knowledge, transform their experiences, and work to change those conditions that affect their lives (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). It demands a move from a unilateral researcher-based approach to a multilateral community-based participatory paradigm. PAR challenges traditional, positivist research approaches that fail to recognize how knowledge is co-constructed in relationships between the researcher and the informant (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Combined with LatCrit, PAR provided the tools to help capture the experiences of ALIANZA parents while directly engaging my positionality and *cultural intuition* (Delgado Bernal, 1998) as a Chicana researcher and community organizer with ALIANZA.

I conducted observations of ALIANZA's planning of key group events that occurred from 2008 to 2012, including their internal monthly meetings, community forums, graduation events, parent trainings, and invitations to present at local and national conferences. ALIANZA parents were also asked to participate in three oral history interviews and one focus group during this same time period. In order to protect the anonymity of ALIANZA, its members, and other groups with whom it associates, all names, both individual and organizational, have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Data collected from this study was analyzed through an inductive grounded theory approach to develop themes and categories from which to make sense and interpret the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Here, I specifically employed a *critical race* grounded theory approach (Malagon, Pérez Huber, & Vélez, 2009), to assist me in isolating emergent themes. Critical race frameworks, far from functioning as "predetermined" categories, were necessary for allowing the experiences of the parents to emerge and inform the entire research process.

Three key themes emerged that defined ALIANZA's central strategies. The first approach was the creation of counter-spaces where members came together to celebrate culturally-based traditions, share concerns about a range of issues without judgment, heal from past abuse, and build solidarity. Collectively, the mothers referred to this function as *conviviendo*

y desahogando.¹⁴ A second strategy comes in the form of workshops and trainings, where ALIANZA employs popular education to help its members identify, name, and speak out against injustice. They define this as *aprendiendo a hablar y luchar*.¹⁵ Finally, the third approach, which is connected to the first two, captures how ALIANZA comes together to create new opportunities for themselves, their children, and communities. This is a strategic effort to build *political capital* that the group then uses to leverage their voice and participate in reform efforts and rests on members' confidence and critical know-how of schools and civic institutions. The group defines this last approach as *realizando y rehaciendo*.¹⁶

Conviviendo y desahogando: Sharing, Healing, and Honoring Lived Experience

Central to ALIANZA was the practice of coming together to share experiences, celebrate traditions, find support, and build solidarity. *Conviviendo y desahogando*, as ALIANZA called it, was similar to Dyrness' (2011) experience working with Latinx im/migrant mothers in Northern California when she described entering their space as “. . . soothing, comforting, like background music” (p.139), referring to the “rhythm” of their meetings, which was characterized, among other things, by a sharing of experiences, laughter, food, and the use of “non-traditional” spaces for parent engagement, such as the kitchen table. This was *conviviendo* and it was core to ALIANZA. To appreciate this process, it's necessary to understand its relationship to the spaces in which it occurs and, conversely, where it doesn't occur.

ALIANZA's gatherings occurred primarily in three locales: (1) the home of Justo and Selina, two of ALIANZA's founding members; (2) *la casita*, a small gathering place sponsored by a local non-profit organization; and (3) *Don Beto's*,¹⁷ a local restaurant whose owner is a long-time friend of the group. Taken together, Justo and Selina's home, *la casita*, and *Don Beto's*, comprise ALIANZA's working spaces where they conduct group meetings, trainings, workshops, event planning, and other activities. Although members held positions on local school or district-level advisory councils, ALIANZA rarely operated from within school or district-supported spaces, such as a parent welcome center or a PTA¹⁸ office.

¹⁴ Translated to English: Spending time together, sharing, and getting things off your chest

¹⁵ Translated to English: Learning to speak up and fight

¹⁶ Translated to English: Realizing and remaking

¹⁷ Actual name of restaurant has been replaced by a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of ALIANZA and its members.

¹⁸ Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)

I argue that ALIANZA's convening locales can be more appropriately framed as *counter-spaces*, where they challenged people and spaces that seek to exclude, silence, distort, or delegitimize their lived experiences as Latinx im/migrant parents. Dyrness (2011) defines a central function of counter-spaces as, ". . . the ability to collectively dissect controlling images of one's group and fashion alternative selves" (p. 125). Similarly, ALIANZA's use of space suggests the importance of operating from sites not mediated by deficit ideologies of Latinx parents, from which they claim institutional spaces suffer. As counter-spaces, Justo and Selina's home, *la casita*, and *Don Beto's*, offer ALIANZA members the opportunity to safely interrogate their experiences as *madres y padres en lucha* while allowing them to construct new arenas that respect their dignity and value.

ALIANZA often discussed the contradiction in using these *other* spaces as a means of gaining entry into more traditional decision-making arenas. Yesenia, a long-time ALIANZA member explained this tactic:

*Somos los de afuera queriendo cambiar a los de adentro. Nuestra meta es entrar al sistema, pero para hacerlo, tenemos que analizarlo de afuera y verlo por lo que realmente es. Haciéndolo de esta forma como lo hacemos nosotros en [ALIANZA] asegura, yo pienso, que el trabajo nuestro sea honesto y con mayor impacto porque no estamos ligados a las ideas de los que están en poder.*¹⁹

For Yesenia, the purpose of working from the "outside" was essential, where they defined the terms of their participation. But working from the outside did not mean staying there. Yesenia and the other parents highlighted how crucial it was to insert themselves politically into these "inside" spaces, or those spaces where power was leveraged. To make this happen, Yesenia relies on ALIANZA as a supportive platform. She stressed, "*sabemos que allí se toman decisiones importantes. Tenemos que entrarle, pero armados y listos para luchar. Ellos no nos van a proveer las herramientas de un conocimiento crítico. Ese es el trabajo de [ALIANZA]. Pero no por eso abandonamos esos espacios.*"²⁰

¹⁹ Translated to English: We are outsiders trying to change those on the inside. Our goal is to enter into the system, but in order to do that we need to analyze it from the outside and see it for what it really is. Doing it this way, like we do here in [ALIANZA] ensures, I believe, that our work is honest and will have a greater impact because we are not tied to the ideas of those in power.

²⁰ Translated to English: We know that important decisions are made there. We need to insert ourselves, but armed and ready to fight. They won't provide us the tools of a critical consciousness. That is the work of [ALIANZA]. But not because of that do we abandon those spaces.

Extending Yesenia's comments, Elena pointed to the structure of school-based committees as especially alienating for individuals who do not fit the mainstream model of a leader, which she defined as white, middle-to-upper class, male, English-speaking, and of course, a U.S. citizen. According to Elena, even when you have knowledge about how the system works, it is still an uphill battle just to be heard, let alone taken seriously. For Elena, her experience through ALIANZA has shown her first-hand how easily one is dismissed as a Latina im/migrant mother. She highlighted,

Hace poco, el distrito organizó lo que le llaman un 'task force' para desarrollar estrategias para involucrar a más padres. Fui, y cuando entré, me entero que contrataron a una firma con supuesto conocimiento en el área de involucramiento de padres para construir un currículo. Cuando empezó a presentar el señor americano, gringo, yo levanté la mano pero me dijeron que no podía comentar o preguntar hasta el final. . . . [T]enía que hablar porque el currículo que usamos en [ALIANZA] es igual o hasta mejor de lo que estaban presentando. ¿Por qué no usar el de nosotros? . . . Prefirieron pagar miles de dólares a este otro señor porque a él si lo vieron como experto en el área de padres más que un propio padre. Para mí era obvio. Somos padres inmigrantes. Si no fuera por [ALIANZA], yo me hubiera desesperado hace mucho . . . [ALIANZA] me ayuda a perseverar cuando te hacen a un lado.²¹

Elena points to several noteworthy reasons for why ALIANZA's decision to organize outside of schools is needed. The first rests in how these "traditional" decision-making spaces structure and often limit how individuals can participate. Second, she notes her frustration at witnessing how an agency was hired to develop curricula for parent workshops when ALIANZA already had a successful curricula and approach for carrying out these same activities. For Elena, it was clear that ALIANZA was not seen as possessing the same type of expertise and, therefore, not

²¹ Translated to English: Recently, the district organized what they called a task force to help develop strategies to involve more parents. I attended and when I entered I came to find out that they had hired a firm with supposed knowledge in the area of parent involvement to develop a curriculum. When the presenter, a white U.S. American, began I raised my hand but they told me that I had to wait until the end to ask a question or make a comment. . . I needed to speak because we have a curriculum in [ALIANZA] that is as good or better than what he was presenting. Why not use ours? . . . They preferred to spend thousands of dollars on this other person because they saw him as more of an expert in the area of parent involvement than a parent herself. For me it was obvious. We are im/migrant parents. If it wasn't for [ALIANZA] I would have become frustrated long ago . . . [ALIANZA] helps me to persevere when others push me aside.

capable of performing the task, even in light of evidence showing the contrary. It is this same belief about Latinx parents that Elena later describes as permeating most “traditional” spaces of parent engagement within schools. Because she grounds herself in ALIANZA, she is able to persist and persevere in these arenas, in large part, because the group operates outside of school and is less susceptible to the raced, classed, gendered, and anti-im/migrant ideologies informing deficit rationales for why voices like hers matter less.

In my conversations with other group members, several of them echoed Elena’s sentiment, describing a sense of strength because the group operated in ways and within spaces that validated and honored their language, traditions, cultural norms and practices, and lived experiences. All of them stressed at one point or another that these types of validation rarely, if ever, occurred within institutional spaces. In fact, many talked about the need to recover after school board or city council meetings. They described feeling drained, exhausted, and often discouraged from returning to these spaces in the future. Having ALIANZA as their home base was necessary to their recovery. A common theme characterizing these moments was the opportunity to come together as a group *para convivir y desahogar*.²²

In describing this function, ALIANZA members highlighted in particular its connection to their *autoestima*²³ that had endured injury and assaults throughout their life, and more recently, as parents working to challenge a system set on keeping them at the margins. Since joining ALIANZA, they felt their *autoestima* nurtured, healed, and strengthened, an indispensable process for doing the work required of them as *madres y padres en lucha*. As Caridad pointed out, the group helped her “. . . volver a encontrar la confianza en mi papel como madre. Sólo aquí [en ALIANZA]. . . me siento renovada y lista para seguir luchando dentro y afuera de mi casa.”²⁴ Similarly, the im/migrant women in Coll’s (2010) study identified, “. . . the importance of engaging in collective political action, but the urgency of many members’ concerns meant that their needs for social and instrumental support demanded attention in order for them to engage at all with politics and politicization” (p. 100).

²² Translated to English: To spend time together sharing and getting things off your chest

²³ The term *autoestima* translated literally to English means self-esteem. But, in this study, how ALIANZA uses the term means much more than its counterpart in English. I use the term similar to how Coll (2010) uses it in her work on Latina im/migrant women. She defines *autoestima* as a process more aligned with developing a positive self-concept that “. . . encompassed personal transformational processes. . . tied to peer support and dialogue about social issues and how to address them collectively” (p. 103).

²⁴ Translated to English: Regain my confidence in my role as a mother. Only here [in ALIANZA] do I feel renewed and ready to keep fighting both in and outside my home.

Although *conviviendo y desahogando* represent only part of what ALIANZA does, it is impossible, I argue, to understand its other activities without first exploring this function. It represents the foundation on which ALIANZA relies to “. . . [support] each other in naming and recording the experiences that [have] been suppressed, [reject] the controlling images that framed them as unworthy or ‘problem parents,’ and [recast] themselves as concerned advocates for their families and community” (Dyrness, 2011, p. 140). Using counter-spaces, ALIANZA provides a critical platform for its members through *conviviendo y desahogando* to challenge injustice and find the strength *para hablar y luchar*, the second function of the group explored next.

Hablando y luchando: Learning to Name and Speak Out Against Injustice

It was common for ALIANZA members to use words like “opresión,”²⁵ “hegemonía,”²⁶ and “patriarcado.”²⁷ Justo laughed remembering the shocked reactions they received when ALIANZA spoke in public. For him, these reactions simply affirmed what he’s known all along: that Latinx im/migrant parents are often viewed by those in power as incapable and unintelligent and, thus, unable to understand, let alone participate in, important school decision-making. He shared,

*Me siento orgulloso . . . cuando reto sus ideas racistas del padre inmigrante. Claro, nunca te van a decir que son racistas pero sus caras de sorpresa al momento de escucharnos hablar . . . revela lo que realmente piensan de nosotros—la expresión de ‘¿como es posible que este padre sepa tanto?’ Por eso es importante que estemos bien armados con un conocimiento amplio y profundo. . . . Para mí es importante nombrar las cosas como son, con sus nombres y términos apropiados. Por eso usamos la educación popular. Nos enseña a hablar y es a través de nuestra voz que podemos luchar.*²⁸

²⁵ Spanish word for “oppression”

²⁶ Spanish word for “hegemony”

²⁷ Spanish word for “patriarchy”

²⁸ Translated to English: I feel proud when I challenge their racist ideas about im/migrant parents. Of course, they will never tell you that they are racist but their looks of surprise when they first hear us speak reveals what they really think of us. Their expression of ‘how is it possible that this parent knows so much?’ This is why it’s important that we are armed with ample knowledge. For me it’s important to call things what they are, with their appropriate names and terms. This is why we use popular education. It teaches us to speak and it is through our voice that we are able to fight.

For Justo, part of the process of becoming politicized required naming injustice, using terms to appropriately describe what informs it, how it functions, and the consequences it has for their lives. He believed that when grounded in the life experiences of ALIANZA, these terms have the power to strengthen the group's ability to strategize and organize more effectively because they are more aware of what they are up against.

Others in the group shared Justo's sentiments. Several mothers commented that it was not until they joined ALIANZA and began sharing, *desahogando* and learning from each other that they finally could "name their pain" and muster the courage to change what causes it. Prior to ALIANZA, many felt vulnerable to mainstream attacks that blamed them for their social conditions and described often questioning whether they had the right to speak out and demand dignity and respect, even for the most basic things. As Felicia so aptly put it, "*yo me culpaba. No tenía una visión del mundo que me ayudara a sentirme de otra forma. Ahora me siento capaz. Puedo cambiar mi realidad y no quedarme con los brazos cruzados. Es mi derecho y mi deber. Gracias a [ALIANZA] estoy consciente y nadie me volverá a tapar los ojos o hacerme sentir mal por ser madre inmigrante.*"²⁹

Felicia's comments capture why *desahogando* in ALIANZA was so important in the process of coming to consciousness and a necessary step for speaking out against injustice. Coll (2010) found a similar process at work. For her informants,

being able to speak with other women and articulate one's story was part of being able to claim rights and demand recognition as political subjects The ability to *desahogarse* was critical for those trying to change their lives individually, as well as for those hoping to speak up for their children, their families, and their communities (Coll, 2010, p. 116-117).

Comparably, for ALIANZA, having the space to get things off their chest provided them the opportunity to articulate injustice. Combined with popular education, they developed a new set of skills, along with a new vocabulary, for addressing social problems. This is why Selina argued that the mothers were able to grasp complex terms and theories with ease. Neither she nor Justo introduced these ideas in the abstract, but rather made sense of them through what the

²⁹ Translated to English: I blamed myself. I didn't have a vision of the world that helped me feel any other way. Now I feel capable. I know I can change my reality and I refuse to sit back, with my arms crossed, and do nothing about it. It's my right and responsibility. Thanks to [ALIANZA] I'm aware and no one will ever cover my eyes again or make me feel bad because I am an im/migrant mother.

mothers shared *cuando se desahogaban*,³⁰ and the historical context of the community in which they all work and live. She stressed, “*para mi es imposible entender un concepto si no lo veo reflejado en mi vida. Los temas de ‘poder’ y ‘patriarcado’ suelen ser difíciles porque son temas complejos. Pero si alguien me enseña estos conceptos a través de mi experiencia como mujer abusada es más probable que lo llegue a entender y aceptar.*”³¹

Without exception, all ALIANZA parents spoke about the importance of popular education, a method of teaching and learning rooted in Freire’s (1973) proposals for liberatory education, most notably, his problem-posing method. Popular education is cyclical not linear, with identifiable stages of inquiry. The central goal of its approach is to gain a deeper understanding of the world as dynamic as opposed to static— a historical reality that is susceptible to transformation, as opposed to a fixed fatalistic absolute. As such, it requires that those who use it exercise patience and flexibility as they learn to continuously examine, name, and challenge injustice. It allowed ALIANZA to reclaim their subjectivity and develop a shared language of belonging along with new terms to name and speak out against injustice. It reshaped their, “. . . normative ideas and aspirations about the relationship between motherhood, rights, entitlements, and politics” (Coll, 2010, p. 73). Popular education radically shifted their understanding of the social world and their role in it, and only from this re-imagined “place,” I argue, were they able to realize their goals as a group of *madres y padres en lucha*, and remake opportunities for themselves, for their children, and for their communities. The following section briefly explores the task of *realizando y rehaciendo*³² as the final approach used by ALIANZA to build *political capital* and participate in school reform.

Realizando y rehaciendo: Building Political Capital for Social Change

In ALIANZA, all members are expected to participate in shaping the group’s practices and defining its future. As an example, Selina and Justo led a revision process of ALIANZA’s mission and vision statements during one of their meetings. Although they framed these guiding statements as a perpetual work-in-progress, at the end of the meeting ALIANZA had

³⁰ Translated to English: When they got things off their chest.

³¹ Translated to English: For me it’s impossible to understand a concept when I don’t see it reflected in my own life. Themes like ‘power’ and ‘patriarchy’ can be difficult because they are complex ideas. But if someone teaches me these concepts through my own experience of abuse as a woman it is more likely that I will come to understand and accept them.

³² Translated to English: Realizing and remaking

collectively agreed on what would be the final revisions of their mission and vision for the time being.

Misión: *Promover el cambio social, cultural y educativo de la comunidad Latina e inmigrante con sentido de justicia social a través de programas que favorezcan su coexistencia y desarrollen su conocimiento y defensa activa de los derechos humanos y civiles. Esto se llevará a cabo bajo la propuesta pedagógica de la educación popular (EP), que apoya la construcción de una sociedad justa y democrática.*³³

Visión: *Promover la coexistencia democrática de nuestras comunidades en la vida social con dignidad, respeto e igualdad de oportunidades, favoreciendo la construcción y permanencia de nuestras culturas e identidades como parte de la riqueza socio-cultural con la que contribuimos a esta sociedad.*³⁴

Both statements clearly reflected an embracing of their collective identity as *madres y padres en lucha*, one that employs political agency for social justice and reclaims a place of belonging *within* the bounds of a U.S. political community, asserting rights *as citizens*, regardless of legal status, on the basis of their humanity and contributions to society. These statements were profoundly radical, especially when considered against the backdrop of continued anti-im/migrant sentiment, legislation, and attacks throughout the country.

As I watched its members conduct community forums, speak in front of school board and city council members, and organize marches, among other things, I realized that its mission and vision is fundamentally about *realizando y rehaciendo*. This does not represent a specific activity as much as an underlying strategy and goal of continuously learning about, deconstructing, and *remaking* the relationship between their role as Latinx im/migrant parents and the spaces where important decisions are made that affect them, their children, and their families. To do this requires the capacity to name and speak out against injustice, but goes one

³³ Translated to English: To create social, cultural, and educational change in the Latino community, particularly among im/migrants, utilizing programs rooted in social justice that believe in an equitable multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. Our goal is to develop a critical consciousness that can translate into action to defend human and civil rights. To accomplish this we base our work in the pedagogical premises of popular education (PE) that support the construction of a socially just and democratic society.

³⁴ Translated to English: To promote democratic co-existence whereby members of our communities can live with dignity, respect, and have access to equitable opportunities. Our vision is to foment the development and permanency of our culture and identities as part of the cultural wealth with which we contribute to society.

step further to actualize efforts to change what is unjust. For ALIANZA, rendered outsiders, this means *redefining* and *remaking* the boundaries of belonging in order to *realize* the hopes articulated powerfully in their mission and vision statements. I argue that central to this third approach is a strategic effort to build a type of *political capital* that the group then uses to leverage their voice and participate in reform efforts and rests on members' confidence, knowledge, and critical know-how.

Through the use of popular education described above, ALIANZA intentionally builds from the community cultural wealth³⁵ of its members. Its founders, Justo and Selina, combine this strategy with a critical know-how of how institutions function, showing parents the ropes of how decision-making spaces work and how to operate within their limitations. For example, learning to speak up in spaces that use Robert's Rules of Order for conducting business. Some of this is embedded in the workshops they provide, but some of this knowledge comes from strategic alliances with other community groups, school and civic leaders, and selected institutional agents. The strategy is meant to develop ALIANZA's political network and knowledge as a necessary tactic for gaining entry into important decision-making spaces. This has aided them in developing a broad base of support that has proven vital when they campaigned for city-or school-wide policy changes or fought for im/migrant rights. The combination of efforts—identifying and building from the mothers' community cultural wealth, developing a network of political allies, and providing institutional knowledge—has led to the development of ALIANZA's *political capital*, which I define as a set of critical political skills and wisdom grounded in community cultural wealth but developed through strategic engagement with institutions and their agents.

It is important to note that in building political capital, ALIANZA adds to its shared community cultural wealth and shapes the spaces and interactions they have within schools. As evidence, all of its members sit on decision-making bodies within schools, and this access has provided them with insight and knowledge that continually shapes ALIANZA's overall strategy. Building political capital has also profoundly affected ALIANZA's members' sense of self as

³⁵ *Community cultural wealth* is defined as a community's cultural assets and resources accumulated over time (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) specifically identifies six types of capital that Communities of Color possess but are often ignored, largely the result of mainstream cultural deficit arguments more concerned with identifying pathology in these communities than about celebrating their skills and knowledge. The six types of capital include: aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, linguistic capital, resistant capital, and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005).

capable and confident *madres y padres en lucha*. They referred to these skills and knowledge as *herramientas* or tools necessary for the work they do. As Clara poignantly described, “es imposible ser buen cocinero si no tienes una licuadora, sartén—pues, herramientas básicas de la cocina . . . De la misma forma creo que es imposible ser buen líder si no tienes las herramientas que resultan de un conocimiento amplio y profundo de nuestro mundo. ALIANZA nos da esa herramientas para poder seguir luchando y peleando por nuestros hijos.”³⁶

In closing, I am reminded of a long conversation I had with Justo one afternoon at *Don Beto's*, as we worked to plan a series of popular education workshops that he and the mothers had decided to call, *la universidad dentro del pueblo*.³⁷ He shared with me that ALIANZA's efforts to *realizar y rehacer* do not simply refer to the project of remaking the world around them. *Realizando y rehaciendo* is first and foremost a project of consciousness-raising, of redefining themselves in a way that makes it possible to create change.

Discussion

Without question, all of the parents identified ALIANZA as crucial to their development as political actors. My goal here was to capture how they understood the utility and significance of ALIANZA for creating change, *as they define it*. I grounded my analysis in their meaning-making about the value of the group and its efforts. This does not mean that future research on ALIANZA should not attempt to affirm what its members have claimed. Perspectives outside of, but connected to, the group can serve to better understand how ALIANZA has altered the educational outcomes of Latinx students, improved conditions for Latinx families, and/or effectively changed the course of civic and educational reform decisions to be more inclusive of Latinx participation, particularly that of im/migrant parents.

While difficult to capture all ALIANZA has done, there were several defining practices that ultimately make the case for using ALIANZA as a model for unpacking the politics of participation for Latinx im/migrant parents in schools and society at large and showcasing what is necessary to engage parents, like those in ALIANZA, in school and larger social reform.

Three central practices stood out: (1) *conviviendo y desahogando*, which involved the creation of

³⁶ Translated to English: It is impossible to be a good cook if you don't have a blender, pan—well, the basic kitchen utensils. In the same way, I believe that it is impossible to be a good leader without the tools that come from a profound knowledge of how the world works. ALIANZA has given us those tools so that we can continue fighting for our children.

³⁷ Translated to English: The university inside the community

counter-spaces where members came together to celebrate traditions, share concerns about a range of topics and issues without judgment, heal from past abuse, and build solidarity; (2) *aprendiendo a hablar y luchar*, where ALIANZA's leaders employed popular education to help its members identify, name, and speak out against injustice; and (3) *realizando y rehaciendo*, a strategic effort to build a type of *political capital* that the group then used to leverage their participation in reform efforts and rested on members' confidence and critical know-how of schools and civic institutions. Viewed through a LatCrit lens, these strategies can rightfully be seen as *counter-strategies* used to resist the ways in which race, language, and im/migration status mediated the experiences of ALIANZA as marginalized subjects in educational reform.

For school administrators, teachers, and other school leaders, as well as those who train them, ALIANZA is a compelling case to consider. Groups like ALIANZA inform how to build school-community partnerships in Latinx im/migrant communities and support a greater inclusion of the Latinx parental voice in school decision-making. As concerns of increasing "opportunity gaps"³⁸ continue (Oakes, Rogers, Silver, Horng, & Goode, 2004; Pérez Huber, Vélez, & Solorzano, 2014), the importance of including Latinx im/migrant parents, particularly the undocumented, within educational spaces for improving schooling conditions is now more important than ever.

The testimonies of ALIANZA parents are a call to shift how educational leaders view, engage and partner with Latinx parents. Implications from this case study include, but are not limited to, the following: 1) a commitment to re-examine how parent engagement is articulated within school-based decision-making bodies, paying particular attention to the language and intent of policies governing these bodies that can exclude Latinx parents, particularly im/migrants; 2) a willingness to step outside school boundaries to understand and make visible spaces where Latinx parents convene and often organize, refusing the assumption that because Latinx families do not "show up" on school campuses, they do not care about education; 3) an understanding that including Latinx parents in shaping school-community partnerships means they are included in the *process* of defining those partnerships, and not simply viewed as the target or outcome of these efforts; and 4) acceptance and support of Latinx families when they

³⁸ Here, I am borrowing from the report issued by Oakes, Rogers, Silver, Horng, & Goode (2004), to define "opportunity gap" as the disproportionate distribution of "opportunities to learn," such as qualified teachers, facilities that are not overcrowded, appropriate learning material, etc., between schools in affluent, white neighborhoods and schools in low-income Communities of Color.

choose to meet and organize in spaces outside of schools, even when every effort is made by teachers, principals, and other school leaders to create inclusive spaces.

Conclusion

ALIANZA challenges educational leaders to expand what we understand as *leadership*. For these parents, leadership was marked by a deep faith in the inherent capabilities of those most marginalized to transform the world. Through *conviviendo y desahogando*, *aprendiendo a hablar y luchar*, and *realizando y rehaciendo*, leadership was (re)born as solidarity for ALIANZA, as a collective commitment and cultural synthesis to work side-by-side toward justice. These counter-articulations of educational leadership, I argue, are deeply respectful of and responsive to Latinx communities, while deepening our understanding of how leadership functions as a contested terrain in schools serving racially and ethnically diverse communities.

References

- Auerbach, S. (2002). "Why do they give the good classes to some and not to others?": Latino parent narratives of struggle in a college access program. *Teachers College Record*, 104(7), 1369-1392.
- Coll, K. M. (2010). *Remaking citizenship: Latina im/migrants and the new American politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1990). *Literacy for empowerment: The role of parents in children's education*. New York, NY: The Falmer Press.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1996). *Protean literacy: Extending the discourse on empowerment*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Delgado Bernal, D. (1998). Using a chicana feminist epistemology in educational research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68, 555-579.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (2001). *The power of community: Mobilizing for family and schooling*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Donato, R. (1997). *The other struggle for equal schools: Mexican Americans during the Civil Rights era*. New York, NY: State University of Chicago Press.
- Dyrness, A. (2011). *Mothers united: An im/migrant struggle for socially just education*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Epstein, J., (2009). *School, family and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Gaventa, J., & Cornwall, A. (2001). Power and knowledge." In P. Reason and H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of Action Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Glaser, B.S., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Henderson, A., & Berla, N. (1994). *A new generation of evidence: The family is crucial to student achievement*. Washington D.C., National Committee for Citizens in Education.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K., & Whitaker, M. (2010). The parent involvement process: Implications for literacy. In K. Dunsmore & D. Fisher (Eds.), *Bringing literacy home* (pp. 53-82). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Jasis, P., & Ordoñez-Jasis, R. (2005). Convivencia to empowerment: Latino parent organizing at La Familia. *The High School Journal*, 88(2), 33-43.
- Jasis, P., & Ordoñez-Jasis, R. (2012). Latino parent involvement: Examining commitment and empowerment in schools. *Urban Education* 47(1), 65-89.
- Lareau, A. (1989). *Home advantage: Social class and parental intervention in elementary education*. Philadelphia, PA: Falmer
- Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion: Race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 72, 37-53.
- Malagon, M., Pérez Huber, L., & Vélez, V. (2009). Our experiences, our methods: A research note on developing a critical race grounded theory methodology in educational research. *Seattle University Journal for Social Justice*, 8(1).

- Miles & Huberman. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moreno, R.P., & Valencia, R.R. (2002). Chicano families and schools: Myths, knowledge, and future directions for understanding. In R.R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano School Failure and Success: Past, present, and future* (2 ed.) (pp. 227-249). New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Oakes, J., Rogers, J., Silver, D., Horng, E., Goode, J. (2004). *Separate and unequal fifty years after "Brown:" California's racial "opportunity gap."* Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.
- Olivos, E. M. (2004). Tensions, contradictions, and resistance: An activist's reflection of the struggles of Latino parents in the public school system. *The High School Journal: Chicana/o Activism in Education: Theories and Pedagogies of Transformation*, 87(4), 25-35.
- Olivos, E. M. (2006). *The power of parents: A critical perspective of bicultural parent involvement in public schools.* New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Pardo, M. (1990). Mexican American women grassroots community activists: "Mothers of east Los Angeles." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 11(1), 1-7.
- Pearl, A. (2002). The big picture: Systemic and institutional factors in Chicano school failure and success. In R.R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano School Failure and Success: Past, present, and future* (2nd ed.), (pp. 227-249). New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Pérez Huber, L., Vélez, V., & Solorzano, D. (2014). The growing educational equity gap for California's Latina/o students. Latino Policy & Issues Brief, No. 29, *UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center*.
- Rogers, J. (2002). *The role of California's parents in insuring quality schooling for all.* Williams Watch Series: Investigating the Claims of Williams v. State of California (document wws-rr010-1002). UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.
- Shannon, S. M. (1996). Minority parental involvement: A Mexican mother's experience and a teacher's interpretation. *Education and Urban Society*, 29(1), 71-84.
- Solorzano, D.G., & Delgado Bernal, D. (2001). Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and Latcrit theory framework: Chicana and chicano students in an urban context. *Urban Education*, 36(3), 308-342.
- Solorzano, D. G., & Solorzano, R. W. (1995). The Chicano educational experience: A framework for effective schools in Chicano communities. *Educational Policy*, 9(3), 293-313.
- Solórzano D. G., & Villalpando, O. (2003). *A Model of Cultural Wealth.* Paper presented at the American Education Research Association, Chicago, Illinois.
- Stanton-Salazar, R.D (2001). *Manufacturing hope and despair: The school and kin support networks of U.S.-Mexican youth.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Valdes, G. (1996). *Con respeto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools: An ethnographic portrait.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

- Valdez, V. (2015). Bilinugal educación in the home: Everyday Mexican immigrant family educational practices. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal*, 9(2), 57-68.
- Valencia, R. (1997). Conceptualizing the notion of deficit thinking. In R. Valencia (Ed.) *The evolution of deficit thinking in education thought and practice* (pp. 1-12). New York, NY: Falmer.
- Valencia, R. R., & Black, M.S. (2002). Mexican Americans don't value education! – On the basis of the myth, mythmaking, and debunking. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1(2), 81-103.
- Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.

Verónica N. Vélez, Woodring College of Education, Western Washington University.
Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Verónica N. Vélez, Woodring College of Education, Western Washington University, Miller Hall 401D, MS 9089, 516 High Street, Bellingham, WA 98225. Email: Veronica.Velez@wwu.edu.