



# Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

---

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume II Issue I

**2017**

**AMAE Open Issue**

**Editors**

Patricia Sánchez

*The University of Texas at San Antonio*

Antonio J. Camacho

*AMAE, Inc.*

**Associate Editors**

Julie L. Figueroa

*Sacramento State*

Lucila D. Ek

*The University of Texas at San Antonio*

Journal Website: <http://amaejournal.utsa.edu>

## **"We Created that Space with Everybody:" Constructing a Community-Based Space of Belonging and *Familia* in a Latina/o Youth Group**

**Julissa Ventura**

*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

### **Abstract**

As the Latino population grows across the United States and particularly in places outside traditional gateway cities, questions arise around the challenges and opportunities for Latinos in these new areas of settlement. Situated within this context of Latino demographic change, this article examines the construction of a youth-led, grassroots Latino youth group in a mid-sized, Midwestern city. Through a community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and social justice development framework (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002), this article highlights how Latino youth and adult community allies constructed a space of belonging where youth shared their experiences and knowledge. In the group youth built upon their familial and navigational capital and developed self and social awareness. This youth constructed space differed greatly from the schools youth attended. Drawing from a 16-week, ethnographically informed study this article suggests that when youth are given an opportunity to create and lead their own space, they can provide powerful insight and perspective on educational issues. The findings from this study have implications for educators, youth workers, and policymakers looking for ways to build more engaging, culturally-relevant classrooms and programs for Latina/o students.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24974/amae.11.326>

## Introduction

Over the past 30 years, the Latino population has grown rapidly across different areas of the United States. As Latino families disperse throughout the country, Latino children are growing up in contexts that are very different from ethnic enclaves in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. In places considered part of the new Latino diaspora—areas of the United States that have not traditionally been home to Latinos—Latina/o youth are growing up in places where they are making sense of who they are, while also confronting how a majority White population perceives them (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, Jr., 2015). School districts, in particular, are grappling with the impact of these demographic shifts. This article highlights how an out-of-school, youth-led space countered the negative experiences that youth faced in schools. Participant observations and interviews with Latin@Youth, a youth group in the mid-sized, Midwestern city of Fairview<sup>1</sup>, revealed how Latin@Youth became a space where youth found a sense of belonging and also shared and constructed critical knowledge. Therefore, in new Latino diaspora sites where schools are still figuring out how to best meet the needs of Latino students and families, out-of-school community spaces may be sites of insights, resources, and possibilities.

### Youth-Constructed Spaces: Sites of Additive Possibilities

Community-based spaces have come into play for many youth of color as educational spaces with an additive approach, in contrast to the subtractive practices found in schools (Valenzuela, 1999). Although the goals and mission of community-based spaces vary widely, some studies have documented how these spaces can offer additive educational possibilities for Latina/o youth by building on youth’s knowledges and cultures, and actively engaging them in a collaborative learning process (Camarota, 2008; Flores-González, Rodríguez, Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2014; Roffman, Suárez-Orozco, & Rhodes, 2003). Latina/o youth and families usually look towards community-based organizations to find supportive services such as tutoring, mentoring, college advice, and employment assistance (Villarruel, Montero-Sieburth, Dunbar, & Outley, 2005). Studies show that community center youth programs often foster positive youth development through a supportive services approach, such as providing youth with caring mentors and role models (Rodríguez & Conchas, 2009; Roffman et al., 2003). Even in schools, close relationships between youth and school adults are often developed outside of the classroom, such as in school clubs, athletic teams, special elective courses, and/or after-school programs (Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). In addition to social capital accessed through relationships with adult staff, peer social capital—peer networks that provide access to tangible

---

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for all names of people, places, and institutions throughout this article.

forms of support—can also play a positive role in Latino student academic experiences (Gibson et al., 2004). Therefore, when community-based youth programs are well designed, they can provide students with a sense of community and access to information and support needed to be academically successful. Community-based spaces can engage and support students that are often disadvantaged by stratified school systems where resources are often unequally distributed.

In addition, some youth programs engage youth in projects for social change that seek to foster social justice youth development. These programs not only support youth to survive existing structures, but also help them develop a critical lens to better understand the systems of power, privilege, and inequality that affect them and their communities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006). Community spaces that engage in critical youth development and youth organizing take a Freirean perspective of young people, which recognizes them as subjects of knowledge production rather than empty vessels that qualified adults must fill with the right kinds of knowledge, attitudes, and norms (Freire, 2000; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006). By building on youth's cultural and social resources and developing critical thinking skills, these community spaces can positively influence youth's academic trajectory and can also have an even greater impact on their communities. While many case studies have revealed the ways in which community-based programs are active educational spaces particularly for youth of color, less has been written about how these spaces are constructed, particularly by youth in smaller, demographically changing cities. In this article, I shed light on how meaningful a youth-led space can be, particularly for youth in the new Latino diaspora.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I entered this study with a worldview that recognizes students of color as creators and holders of knowledge, a perspective that comes from critical raced-gendered epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Working from this epistemological stance, I bring together the social justice youth development framework (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) with the concept of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to engage in a richer exploration of the relationships and knowledge construction that existed in a Latina/o youth group space.

The social justice youth development framework acknowledges that youth are capable of understanding and responding to the community problems they face. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) argue that in their development of critical consciousness and social action, youth progress through three levels of awareness:

- Self-awareness: Understanding the connection between identity and power relationships
- Social awareness: Knowledge base of social issues; engagement in investigation, analysis, and problem solving

- Global awareness: Critical engagement with struggles of oppressed people throughout the world

Similarly to Flores-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, and Rodriguez-Muñiz (2014), who find the three social justice youth development stages to be continuous (realized, reformed, and developed simultaneously), I see the self-awareness and social awareness stages as closely linked and informing each other. Given that this study took place when the youth group was first getting established, I draw from a social justice youth development framework to explore how youth members developed their self and social awareness as the foundation for potential future global awareness and youth-led action.

I also draw upon community cultural wealth to inform my analysis of youth and ally interactions within the all-Latino youth space (Yosso, 2005). Grounded in critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical theory (LatCrit), community cultural wealth decenters Whiteness and focuses on the multiple forms of capital (aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, and familial) that communities of color hold, particularly from their legacy of resilience and resistance to racism and other forms of subordination (Solórzano & Villalpando 1998; Yosso, 2005). This conceptualization of cultural capital theory challenges deficit frameworks that see Latino youth as lacking the cultural and social capital to succeed within institutional structures. I found the concepts of familial capital and navigational capital particularly insightful in seeing the impact that the group had on its youth members. Specifically, the youth group was able to expand familial capital beyond just that found among relatives to include a broad sense of kinship among members and their community. Therefore, the community cultural wealth framework is able to capture aspects that are unique in an all-Latino space, while the social justice youth development framework captures the critical consciousness that can be fostered in youth spaces more broadly.

### **Methodology and Positionality**

This article is based on an ethnographically informed 16-week study at Latin@Youth, an out-of-school and youth-led space. The group described itself as “a grassroots collective of youth of color activists from the Fairview area, a movement from youth to youth that uses creative art expression and storytelling as a tool for social change and social justice” (March 8, 2013, field notes). The youth and their adult mentors, whom they called community allies, met weekly at one of the local colleges. Over the course of the study, I participated in weekly youth group meetings where I listened to youth’s stories, saw their interactions with each other and the community allies, and observed how they represented themselves within the space. I also went to community events to understand how the youth represented the group to different audiences.

I conducted a total of 12 interviews: three with adult community allies and nine with youth group members. I recruited a representative youth sample for interviews, which consisted of six female

youth and three male youth who ranged in ages from 17 to 23 years old. All interviews and fieldnotes were coded with inductive and deductive codes and analyzed for emergent themes. I used holistic, descriptive, and versus coding (e.g. school vs. youth group) and then moved on to developing themes (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2013). My data analysis also included triangulating interview data with field notes and documents, and sharing my emerging findings with participants for member checks. Codes and themes were ultimately organized, transformed, and sometimes taken out in the final phases of data analysis, which involved multiple rounds of analyzing the data for themes and patterned regularities.

### **Positionality: Ally-Researcher**

I initially met the youth of Latin@Youth while they were a part of a community center, and I agreed to be a community ally when they left to start their own grassroots group. Given the unique nature of the group, a youth-led initiative without an institutional affiliation, the group needed me as an ally, not just a researcher. Through the data collection process, I found myself in what Green (2013) describes as a game of double dutch: “like the turning ropes, my roles [were] often fluid, with unnoticeable boundaries, and yet at a moment’s notice the same roles may be distinctly pronounced” (p.152). There were times where I was more of a participant than an observer and vice versa so that my researcher and ally roles were not always distinctly separate, but rather responsive to the group’s needs. As a Latina, I shared identities and experiences with the members of Latin@Youth. However, as a researcher I also held a position of power in that I was the one who made final decisions on how their stories and our shared stories were told. My multiple, fluid, and clashing identities as researcher and community ally pushed me to work with the group to create the space they envisioned for themselves (Villenas, 1996).

### **Research Site: The Fairview Context and Latin@Youth Group**

Within the Midwestern county where Fairview is located, the Latino population has doubled from 3 percent of the total population in 2000 to 6 percent in 2010 (Long & Veroff, 2014). Although Fairview continues to be a predominantly White city, the growth of the Latino population has been most apparent in the Fairview school district. In the early 1990s, Latino students made up only 2 percent of the school district, but by 2012, Latino student enrollment had increased to 19 percent. The county and district have grappled with how to best serve this increasingly diverse student and family population; however, many non-profit organizations offer programs and services to the growing communities of color in Fairview.

I first met the youth of Latin@Youth at a local community-based organization where I volunteered with Naida Lyna, the coordinator of a youth leadership program. However, in the fall of

2012, Naida Lyna and two other youth workers left the organization due to tensions with the executive director. Youth workers felt isolated in their work with little access or input into the decision-making. The youth also felt disconnected from the organization’s leadership. Jackeline, one of the youth, described how she and many of the youth felt about the executive director:

He doesn't even know our names. He has never been to one of our meetings and he would like take credit. He couldn't even really understand where we were coming from, like our point of views. I mean he's White and we're Hispanic. We go through different things. He doesn't even speak Spanish, I'm pretty sure.

Interestingly, the executive director did speak Spanish; however, many of the youth spoke about how they had never met him and felt that he could not relate to their experiences. Feeling disconnected from the community organization’s leadership and losing some of their trusted youth workers, the youth decided to leave the organization and form their own independent youth group: Latin@Youth. The former youth workers along with myself and a few other adult community members became the group’s community allies. As the group transitioned away from the community center, I saw how they built a space of belonging and fostered trusting relationships that then gave way to an educational space where youth learned from each other and allies.

### **Latin@Youth: A Space of Belonging and *Familia***

In this section, I discuss the ways in which Latin@Youth became a place of belonging and engagement for youth, which was particularly important in strengthening their self-awareness. After leaving the community organization, the youth had many discussions about how to define the group, now that they had the autonomy to create their own identity, goals, and projects. Throughout the first few weeks of the group, I saw how youth and allies made Latin@Youth a place where youth found trust and a sense of belonging, which often contrasted with what they found in school. During her interview, Jackeline made a sharp distinction between Latin@Youth and her high school, stating:

It's not that I hate school, but I don't like high school. I don't like the people in it. I don't feel part of it. And then [at] the youth group I feel like I'm in it, I'm part of it, I play a role in it. In high school, I'm another Hispanic student type of thing.

Finding a space of belonging allowed many of the youth to develop their sense of self-awareness and recognize that their educational struggles were not just a matter of their individual efforts, but rather a part of a greater system of inequitable schooling of Latina/o students. For instance, they started to share how teachers often had lower expectations for Latina/o students and how Latina/o students were segregated into ESL classrooms, sometimes all throughout elementary school and middle school. By sharing these stories with each other, youth started to understand that their negative schooling

experiences were not a result of their individual shortcomings, but that schools played an active role in perpetuating the unequal education of Latina/o students in Fairview.

In their interviews, many of the youth spoke about the difficulty they had in finding a sense of belonging in schools. Anali, who was one of the most outspoken youth in the group, explained how she disengaged from school after exiting the English as a Second Language (ESL) program. In the ESL program, she had established caring relationships with peers and teachers, but this was not the case once she transitioned to mainstream courses. She explained:

I didn't feel motivated into going because I was just going to go sit there, and even though class might be interesting, I had no one to talk to, and when we had to pair up with someone I didn't talk to anyone, and I always felt left out and lonely. So that's one of the reasons why I kind of lost interest in school for a long time...I would go and then leave or I would just not go at all and be gone for like weeks.

For Anali, not going to school seemed like a better alternative to sitting in a classroom where she felt she didn't belong. Often, schools see students as truant or disengaged, but fail to see the reasons behind this behavior. For some students, a supportive peer network and a sense of belonging in the classroom are critical elements for their academic engagement. Whereas her school might have painted her as a truant student uninterested in learning, Anali rarely missed a Latin@Youth meeting and became a part of the "comité," a smaller group of youth who volunteered to meet before the larger group meetings to set the agenda. Her sense of belonging in the group motivated her to not only consistently attend meetings, but also take on a leadership role.

Like Anali, Rolando also had school truancy problems, but consistently attended Latin@Youth meetings. Rolando had been tracked into ESL courses all through middle school and most of high school, and he started to disengage from school when he did not feel challenged in his courses. As part of Latin@Youth, however, Rolando began to develop a stronger self-identity. He recalled how a conversation about identity at a youth group meeting had led him to ask his mother about an indigenous language spoken in her hometown in Mexico. Through his own research, he found that it was an Aztec language. Rolando said that through his involvement in Latin@Youth he was learning how to be a leader and added, "I would never learn how to be a leader in school. I don't even know how I would learn to be a leader in school." For Rolando, a sense of belonging also came with opportunities for leadership, which he had not found in school. Both Rolando and Anali, who were likely seen as truant and disengaged students at school, were consistently present and willing to participate in youth group discussions and projects, and perhaps more importantly, they started to develop a positive self-identity as leaders.

Furthermore, youth like Daysi and Gabriela, who were enrolled in higher-level classes and found

school more engaging than Rolando and Anali, still experienced feelings of not belonging in school. For example, Daysi said that for a while she thought that Latinos didn't belong in honors courses. Daysi's observation that there weren't any students of color in honors classes led her to believe that those courses were just too hard until she decided to enroll in an honors level class. In this way, the school discourses about who does and does not belong in certain courses can in fact influence students' "choice" in courses (Oakes, 2008; Tyson, 2011). Moreover, when students did enroll in higher-level classes, they felt that they had to work extra hard to prove they belonged. Gabriela, who took a number of higher-level classes, explained how she felt in these classes:

At school I feel like sometimes people expect me not to do well, so I have to constantly prove them wrong...Typically when the teachers hand back tests they don't say anything to other people and then they'll be like "oh good job". Like ok, what were you expecting?

In many ways, Latin@Youth served as a space where youth could shield themselves from the messages of exclusion, isolation, and lower expectations they received in school. In Latin@Youth they could transform negative schooling experiences into motivation to push harder and reach higher in their dreams for a better future. Students like Daysi and Gabriela did not back down from taking honors or advanced placement courses, even if those classes did not provide an inclusive environment. Most importantly, they encouraged other youth to also take advanced courses and disrupted the narrative that those courses were too hard for Latina/o students. With the support of community allies, the youth were able to not let schools define their potential. A community ally, Naida Lyna, explained that unlike many traditional youth programs run by adults, Latin@Youth had:

This belief, this energy, this trust, you know like they feel...what I see is that they are empowering themselves, you know it's like they are feeding themselves with their own power, with their own self-determination, with their own aspirations and dreams.

Through their participation in the group, the youth strengthened their self-awareness by developing a more positive self-regard and spoke with a sense of empowerment moving forward as a group and also individually in their educational trajectory.

### **The New *Familia* of Youth and Allies**

At Latin@Youth, caring relationships created strong bonds among youth and between youth and allies. Sharing their experiences as immigrant Latino students in the Fairview area was an important element in building the sense of belonging and sibling-like camaraderie between them. Often referring to the group as a *familia*, the youth and allies saw Latin@Youth as a space that truly represented them. Katya, a youth member, explained, “We created that space with everybody so that makes it even more

meaningful.” An important element of Latin@Youth was that youth felt that they were all equals in the group and therefore had equal ownership over the space. They felt supported by the community allies as well as by each other.

Unlike schools and many other youth programs, Latin@Youth was not organized by age, nor was there an age limit. The group members ranged in age from 14 to 23 years old, from high school youth to college or working youth. Older youth spoke about a sense of responsibility in mentoring the younger youth. As Katya said:

We're all leaders, and that's what makes the group so powerful. I see myself as a resource to the [younger] youth. A leader for those that maybe don't know that they are leaders but they need help making that flourish.

In seeing each other as resources and leaders, the youth collectively grew their community cultural wealth, creating strong relationships from which to draw social, familial, and navigational capital. Throughout the time of this study, I saw older youth help younger youth with homework, college applications, and scholarship applications. In many ways they were able to guide the younger youth on positive academic paths.

The community allies were also an important part of the Latin@Youth *familia*. The allies were college graduates and were either building their professional careers or pursuing a graduate education. Throughout their interviews and Latin@Youth meetings, the youth acknowledged that they looked up to the community allies as successful Latino role models, particularly because of the lack of Latina/o teachers and counselors in their schools. Gabriela said, “They're people to look up to and they're all really successful so you know sometimes we don't really see that. We don't see it everywhere.” One youth member, Lorena, said she came to the group because of “...the group's energy and the support from the allies” (March 22, 2013, field notes). The community allies acted as “institutional agents,” or adults that youth could trust in navigating the different institutions in the city (i.e. schools, colleges), providing youth with access to social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). The community allies also modeled a bicultural identity for youth, as they often spoke about how staying grounded in their cultural roots and identity had helped them navigate the school system without losing their connection to their families and communities. Therefore, the community allies supported youth in seeing their cultural roots, knowledge, and experiences as strengths, rather than deficits in their education.

### **“La Cultura Cura:” Stretching Educational Boundaries and Constructions of Knowledge**

Latin@Youth's move from a community organization to a grassroots, youth-led group allowed

for them to learn from their individual stories and develop a social awareness. As RFM<sup>2</sup>, a community ally, described:

They [the youth] all have their specific analysis and their own lens on how they see the world that is really unique to themselves...And although they may not have the language to be able to communicate that experience or that history or that struggle, they are able to come to the youth group and use the medium of the arts, dance, poetry, to be able to talk about it. And I feel like that's a powerful thing because not a lot of spaces in Fairview allow you to speak about your personal narrative or struggles without having to do it in a specific language.

In many ways the role of community allies was one of support, rather than leadership. Youth built the agenda for meetings and community allies participated in ways that validated youth's narratives as legitimate and important knowledge. As RFM explains above, the group's actions were not directed by adults, but rather by the experiences that youth had in schools and in Fairview. Unlike after-school programs that have adult-led programming, Latin@Youth was an open space for youth expression and ideas. For example, after one meeting where youth shared the challenges they faced in schools, they decided that one of their group goals would be to share these stories with the community through art projects, presentations, or theater skits. The youth wanted the broader community to learn about the issues facing Latino youth in Fairview in hopes that this would be the first step towards change.

Through their discussions in the group, the youth built an organic culturally relevant pedagogy where they accepted and affirmed their cultural identity while also developing a critical lens with which to see the world (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Sharing their stories with each other became a process of teaching and learning, as well as a process of healing where youth learned that they were not the only ones facing challenges in Fairview. Latin@Youth meetings always started with a “check-in,” and sometimes youth used this time as an opportunity to not only share, but also get advice from the group. For example, one Friday afternoon, Katya shared that the police had pulled her over. Her situation sparked an animated discussion where the youth in the group asked Katya about how the police officer had interacted with her. The group asked her: “Did the cop say why you got pulled over?” When Katya said he hadn't really given a reason, some youth said that was racist. One youth asked, “How did the cop know she didn't have a license?” While some of the youth thought Katya should fight the ticket in court, others told her about people they knew who had just paid the ticket (February 15, 2013, field notes). Katya's feelings about the situation with the police were validated in the space not only through the other youth and allies listening, but also through the conversation that followed, in which the youth

---

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym chosen by participant.

shared information acquired through their own experiences.

In talking through their knowledge and experiences with public institutions like the police, youth often drew and built upon their navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). In addition, they felt that they could talk through issues of racism through racial profiling, which revealed that they understood issues of power at play in their interactions with institutions. The construction of their own space gave youth the opportunity to start developing their critical consciousness and questioning structural systems of power in which they were often marginalized (Freire, 2000; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Moreover, having a space to talk about challenging situations such as encounters with the police enabled youth to engage in a healing process from the impact of racial and economic wounds. Youth collectively supported each other in building strength and resilience.

### Discussion

Through the stories of individual youth and Latin@Youth as a group, this article highlights the important role that out-of-school, community spaces can play in the development of meaningful relationships and constructions of knowledge for youth in the new Latino diaspora. For the youth involved in starting the group, it was important to have ownership of their own space and find a place of belonging in contrast to the exclusion they often felt in schools. These youth were able to question the dominant narrative of Latinos in Fairview through sharing their own narratives. Most importantly, the Latin@Youth space allowed for the growth of community cultural wealth, particularly familial capital, and strengthened youth's cultural identities to awaken their self and social awareness.

Latin@Youth gave young Latinos the room to explore their *Latinidad*, their Latina/o identities, in a predominantly White city. All of the youth felt strongly rooted in their Latina/o identities, often emphasizing the importance of holding onto who you are and where you come from. Yet, they also expressed a connection to Fairview as the place that had been and would continue to be their home. In the Latin@Youth space, they did not have to shed their histories or multiple identities in order to belong. Latin@Youth was a space where youth began to awaken their critical consciousness about the issues and systems that affect Latinos in Fairview (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Constructing a grassroots, all-Latino space was in itself an act of agency and resistance, as the youth left an organization where their work was unsupported. Even though this study is based on one youth group, it provides insight into how Latinos in areas outside the traditional gateway states are taking an active role in becoming part of their new host communities and working towards the change needed in these areas.

Community-based groups like Latin@Youth give us insight into what is possible when spaces emerge from youths' lived experiences, suggesting that community spaces should strive to not only be sites of social service, but also ones of social change. By having youth at the center, Latin@Youth

became what the youth needed it to be: a space based on a mutual trust to share their stories. It was a space with no rules or external expectations, which gave youth more room and time to explore the issues that *they*, not adults, deemed important. The fact that Latin@Youth was an out-of-school space allowed for youth to be openly critical of what happens in schools and became a space where new realities could be imagined. Through the sharing of their stories, youth began to deconstruct the dominant narratives that circulated in schools and the broader community. Youth began to see issues as systemic, rather than just individualized to their own experience.

Prior to creating Latin@Youth, the youth in this study felt constrained as part of a program at a community organization, highlighting how community organizations can sometimes become unresponsive to youth’s needs. There must be an attuned awareness of how to sustain youth spaces without de-centering the youth themselves, and how to construct these spaces *with* youth rather than framing them as safe havens *for* youth. In order to build a safe space for exploration and critical consciousness, out-of-school spaces need to be highly aware of the forces that may marginalize youth. On the other hand, operating outside of the dominant institutions of youth work with limited resources is not always easy. While autonomous groups like Latin@Youth reveal what is possible when youth take ownership of the construction of their own space, its unaffiliated position also raises questions around the sustainability of these spaces.

In the current context of education reform, we see little space for youth voices as schools focus on standardized testing, a common core curriculum, and accountability measures. Unfortunately, we seem to be moving further away from Anyon’s (2005) call to have education policy “join the world of communities, families and students [so that it] advocates for them and emerges from their urgent realities” (p. 199). However, Latin@Youth illustrates that youth can provide schools with powerful insight into how school structures and school cultures can create barriers for Latina/o students’ academic success. For example, youth felt that the current tracking structures at their school perpetuated the idea that Latina/o students belonged in lower level and ESL courses and this message was further reinforced when Latina/o students felt isolated in higher-level or mainstream courses. Schools should make greater efforts to learn about how a sense of belonging is fostered and sustained in different community spaces.

Many out-of-school spaces are reframing youth as powerful holders of knowledge, but it is imperative that this also happens within schools. As many school districts ask why their data shows “achievement gaps,” they can start by including students in the conversation. For instance, schools could allow for more youth-led spaces where they can openly discuss issues that they feel can improve their educational experiences. In addition, it seems that schools would be well served by having youth input in curriculum so that the curriculum could be more diverse and more reflective of student

experiences. Part of the reason why youth felt like they belonged at Latin@Youth was that they had ownership over their learning and projects. If teachers were to give students a sense of ownership in their own learning, such as by asking for their input on project ideas and asking for student feedback throughout the school year, it is more likely that students might feel like they belong in that classroom. When we ask youth to engage in meaningful ways about the barriers and challenges they face, we open the opportunity for them to provide a vast array of answers, and also push ourselves to change the questions and imagine different solutions (Fine, Roberts, & Torres, 2004).

### **Future Research**

Creating a youth-centered space with trusting relationships became the foundation of Latin@Youth. Every week, youth used their own narratives to strengthen their desire to make change in Fairview. However, these research findings are based on a small group of youth in one Midwestern city, and thus there is a need to further explore the experiences of Latino youth in other new Latino diaspora sites. Given the limited number of male youth in this study, further studies could also delve deeper into the gendered experiences of youth. For instance, the youth group was predominantly female, which begs the question about why male youth were less likely to participate. The United States as a whole is changing demographically, so working with youth who are growing up in places of rapid demographic change can give us insight into educational policies and practices that may open or limit youth's future opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

The literature on out-of-school spaces often focuses on youth action or youth research, but not enough is known about how these spaces get started. In my work with Latin@Youth, I found that trusting and caring relationships in the group created a strong foundation for youth to engage in self and social awareness. This article illuminates how finding a space of belonging where youth can create trusting relationships with both peers and adults is critical and necessary before youth pursue meaningful actions in their communities. In spaces like Latin@Youth, developing a global awareness and youth-led actions might not come until much later, but what was most important in starting the group was that everyone's experience was valued and heard. Working from an autonomous position where there were no restrictions on discussions, activities, or their work meant that youth used their own lived experiences to drive their learning. Given their experiences of marginalization in a demographically changing city, the youth that constructed Latin@Youth made sure it was a place of belonging. In Latin@Youth they explored what it meant to be a Latina/o youth growing up in a predominantly White city—discussing the day-to-day experience as Latinos, both the promising and the challenging.

Latin@Youth is an example of what can happen when youth are not simply consulted, but are actually given the opportunity to lead and create their own space. It is from these spaces that youth might give powerful insight for policy changes that could improve the educational experiences of Latinos and all students of color. In a city like Fairview, Latina/o youth do not have many opportunities to see themselves as leaders or knowledgeable actors, yet Latin@Youth gives us hope that change is possible when Latina/o youth coming of age in these areas of demographic change have the space to share what has been, imagine what could be, and fight for what they believe in.



## References

- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cammarota, J. (2008) *Sueños Americanos: Barrio youth negotiating social and cultural identities*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 105-126.
- Fine, M., Roberts, R., & Torre, M.E. (2004). *Echoes of brown: Youth documenting and performing the legacy of Brown v. Board of Education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Flores-González, N., Rodríguez, M., & Rodríguez-Muñiz, M. (2014). From hip-hop to humanization: Batey urbano as a space for Latino youth culture and community action. In A. Darder & R.D. Torres (Eds.), *Latinos and education: A critical reader* (pp.19-40). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Gibson, M. A., Gandara, P. C., & Koyama, J. P. (Eds.). (2004). *School connections: US Mexican youth, peers, and school achievement*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Ginwright, S., & Cammarota, J. (2002). New terrain in youth development: The promise of a social justice approach. *Social Justice*, 29(4), 482-95.
- Ginwright, S., & Cammarota, J. (2006). Introduction. In S. Ginwright, P. Noguera, & J. Cammarota (Eds.), *Beyond Resistance!: Youth activism and community change: New democratic possibilities for practice and policy for america's youth* (pp. xiii-xxii). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Green, K. (2013) Doing double dutch methodology: Playing with the practice of participant observer. In D. Paris & M.T. Winn (Eds.), *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities* (pp. 147-160). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hamann, E.T.,Wortham, S., & Murillo Jr., E.G. (2015). *Revisiting education in the new Latino diaspora*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age of Publishing, Inc.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465-491.
- Long, D., & Veroff, D. (2014). Latinos in Wisconsin – A Statistical Overview. *UW Applied Population Laboratory & University of Wisconsin Extension*.
- Oakes, J. (2008). Keeping track: Structuring equality and inequality in an era of accountability. *Teachers College Record*, 110(3), 700-712.
- Ream, R. K., & Rumberger, R. W. (2008). Student engagement, peer social capital, and school dropout among Mexican American and non-Latino white students. *Sociology of Education*, 81(2), 109-139.
- Rodríguez, L. F., & Conchas, G. Q. (2009). Preventing truancy and dropout among urban middle school youth understanding community-based action from the student's perspective. *Education and Urban Society*, 41(2), 216-247.
- Roffman, J. G., Suárez-Orozco, C., & Rhodes, J. E. (2003). Facilitating positive development in immigrant youth: The role of mentors and community organizations. In F. Villaruel (Ed.), *Community youth development: Programs, policies, and practices* (pp. 90-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London, UK: SAGE.

- Solórzano, D. & Villalpando, O. (1998). Critical race theory, marginality, and the experience of minority students in higher education. In C. Torres & T. Mitchell (Eds.), *Emerging issues in the sociology of education: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 211-224). New York, NY: SUNY Press.
- 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.
- Tyson, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Integration interrupted: Tracking, Black students, and acting White after Brown*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Villarruel, F. A., Montero-Sieburth, M., Dunbar, C., & Outley, C. W. (2005). Dorothy, there is no yellow brick road: The paradox of community youth development approaches for Latino and African American urban youth. In J.L. Mahoney, R.W. Larson, & J.S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs* (pp. 111-129). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Villenas, S. (1996). The colonizer/colonized Chicana ethnographer: Identity, marginalization, and co-optation in the field. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(4), 711-732.
- Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*. 8(1), 69-81.