

A Pedagogy of Community Building: Re-imagining Parent Involvement and Community Organizing in Popular Education Efforts

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Abstract

Where dominant models of urban school reform often regard immigrant communities as obstacles that must be managed or reduced, the two projects analyzed in this study (*Alianza* and the Project) regard the community as a powerful source of knowledge and as partners working towards educational improvement (Nygreen, 2009). This paper analyses the ways in which Latino parents involved in these projects, come together to learn about their communities and engage in a process of community building that strengthens their capacity to resist, if not overcome, dominant ideologies and institutions. Latino parents in these projects do more than simply challenge the narrative of reform that continues to position them at the margins; they establish their own spaces of learning and solidarity that enable them to crystallize their perspectives and become agents of change in their local context. We posit that community building is key to creating sustained long-term relationships that can survive and withstand the struggle towards institutional change and open doors for Latino community empowerment in schools and the broader society.

Introduction

The education reform efforts of recent decades have made little impact on improving school outcomes or broader social realities and opportunities for youth from low-income, racially, culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Anyon, 1997; Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001). The “achievement gap” reflects neither the innate capacities nor the demonstrated abilities of these youth, but exposes an “education debt” that mires their schooling experiences within rote instruction, alienating curriculum, inadequate facilities and co-curricular programs, and lack of access to academically rigorous classes and high-quality teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The “education debt” disparities in schools for low-income, racially, culturally and linguistically diverse (LI/RCLD) students get multiplied by the inequitable out-of-school learning and development opportunities available for these youth (Rothman, 2007). Sadly, the LI/RCLD students who ‘succeed’ in the ‘college for all’ competition and enter post-secondary education must contend with the bitter irony that the structural “education debt” that they imagined they had transcended gets passed on in their personal school loans, with often devastating and far-reaching consequences for their individual lives (Glass & Nygreen, 2011). Scholars have thus started to look beyond the school to explore ways that families and communities, and their relationships with schools and school culture, could become a fulcrum for equitable and sustainable school reform to change outcomes for LI/RCLD youth (Shirley, 1997, 2002; Warren, 2001, 2011).

In this essay we extend the work of scholars focused particularly on Latino parent involvement in school reform (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Dyrness, 2011; Hurtig & Dyrness, 2011; Villenas, 2001) and unite findings from two studies of separate Paulo Freire-influenced popular education projects (*Alianza* in Los Angeles, CA, and The Project in Watsonville, CA). We examine some ways that Latino parents come together to learn through a process of community building that strengthens their capacity to resist dominant ideologies and the oppressive aspects of schools and other institutions. Both projects operate outside strictly school-centric domains of activity, but focus part of their work on reimagining and recreating the schools meant to serve the needs of their children. In both case studies we documented Latino parents investigating their social worlds, contesting deficit frames about themselves and their children, and creating counter-narratives that recast possibilities

for improving their lives. As the parents engaged these challenges, they creatively built relationships and a united vision of change. We argue that these dynamic processes of community building and ethical and political engagement suggest transformations in conceptions of parent involvement in school reform that could support meaningful and sustained change for schools in LI/RCLD communities.

In our analysis, we adopt a decolonial feminist perspective on popular education's theoretical frame in order to situate community building as a local and process-based pedagogy (Lugones, 2003). We position community building in spaces outside of school as a form of resistance that moves beyond reaction, and as an empowering process independent of reform outcomes inside schools. In this theoretical framework, we can begin to see how The Project and *Alianza* parents collaborate within their organizations to build community; they creatively examine preexisting values and principles in a collective process of remembering counter histories, recognizing individual subjectivities, and making knowledge together. The data show how the local and process-based community building experiences within these projects' spaces strengthens the parents' capacity to form participatory collectivities, a crucial step to being able to challenge and alter power structures; further, the achievements of these community building experiences do not hinge on actually mobilizing for structural change within the public sphere¹. We argue that the participants in *Alianza* and The Project develop substantive competencies that are foundational for self-determination in their individual and collective lives, and although the transformations we witnessed are not often recognized in the research literature, they provide an opportunity to rethink what community organizing, parent involvement and school reform can look like and accomplish. In addition, we suggest that re-conceptualizing community building as a pedagogy could unlock new ways of understanding how people come together and build the capacity to change themselves and their environments.

Situating the Studies

Alianza. In January 2008, a Los Angeles community-based organization named *Centro de Educación Popular* (CEP) initiated a family literacy program called *Alianza* aiming to engage students, parents, and community members in critically analyzing their own educational development within the context of their socio-political reality. The ultimate goal was to enable the participants to become active agents of social change. *Alianza* became a base for grassroots parent and youth organizing on issues of educational equity when the participants attempted to seize an opening created by the introduction of a "pilot school" reform in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). LAUSD agreed to launch a limited number of small autonomous schools that would operate somewhat like charter schools but remain an integral part of the school district, and the *Alianza* parents and community members tried to secure this opportunity to establish a liberatory school for their children. Their decision to start a pilot/charter school emerged from deep concerns about the quality of education their children had been receiving and from parents' shared frustration with feeling silenced and excluded from mainstream public schools. These were not new concerns for Latino/a parents (Dyrness, 2007; Nygreen 2009; Snell, Miguel, & East, 2009; Villenas, 2001), but few such parents have had opportunities to take the initiative to construct semi-independent public schools (Baker et al., 2009). CEP started organizing and working with parents to establish their own pilot school, beginning with parent leadership workshops that prepared parents to be critical advocates for their needs in educational reform. One element of these workshops was *dinámicas*² that explored participants' everyday experiences as immigrants and parents, and this essay draws on ethnographic data related to those elements in particular.

The Project. Formed in 2006, The Project grew out of a conversation among leaders from community-based organizations, including the teachers union and other labor groups, and university faculty members who were exploring ways to address the systemic and extreme pressures confronting the low-income residents of the community. and sub-standard housing, poor health, unstable and exploitative employment, substance abuse, and crime, and The group began with the assumption that the community's very high rates of poverty, transience, overcrowded very low rates of educational attainment, political participation, and civic engagement were

1. Delgado-Gaitan (2001) explains the importance of seeing community empowerment as a non-linear process that is not dependent on actions of success or failure for the empowerment to have effects. We suggest empowerment happens independent of failure or success through a pedagogy of community building.

2. *Dinámicas* translates roughly as 'icebreakers.'

interconnected, and that any successful effort to transform them had to build from those interconnections and not focus on the issues in isolation. The Project sought to shape a broad strategic response, one based in active public learning processes that build critical consciousness, organizational coherence, and the capacity for transformative action. Drawing on Paulo Freire's theory (Freire, 1970), The Project decided to utilize digital stories³ as codifications of everyday experience to focus structured community dialogues on an analysis of the limiting conditions of their lives and on strategies for change; The Project also adopted a slogan: "Another School and Another Community are Possible!" The digital stories were grounded in generative themes that emerged from a series of focus groups with ~125 school parents and community members, ~50 youth, and ~25 teachers, and they were crafted in intimate story circles facilitated by some of The Project members. The community dialogue circles were shaped by a series of questions intended to guide a participatory, collective investigation of the life experiences depicted in the stories. This essay draws on ethnographic data and interviews of storytellers and Project members collected during the period when the community dialogues were being developed.

Although the ethnographic studies of The Project and *Alianza* were undertaken separately and in relationship to different primary research questions, we have joined the studies in this essay in order to illuminate a similar theoretical contribution they make. While each arose under somewhat different principles and circumstances, they are both Freire-influenced reform efforts that employ the basic framework of popular education, they are situated in predominantly Mexican and Central American immigrant communities, and they implement processes designed to elicit LI/RCLD parents' engagement not only in school reform, but in broader civic struggles for equity.

Methodology

Our findings draw from two distinct preliminary studies that were "snapshot ethnographies" (Cruz, 2011); data were collected during either one year (The Project) or three months (*Alianza*) of long-term community-based efforts to build capacity for strategic change in the schools and broader communities. We undertook extensive observations and artifact analysis, and in the study of The Project, the researcher also conducted three semi-structured interviews with parents who were Project members and storytellers. During the data analysis from the two studies, we discovered similar themes focused on the deconstruction of deficit framing of immigrant and LI/RCLD parents and families, and on the construction of counter-narratives; we also discovered the need to analyze the physical and dialogical spaces for both projects in order to elucidate their significance. We argue that these processes of de/construction collectively represent important elements to the experience and space of community building as a pedagogy with transformative possibilities.

Deficit Frames and Counter-Narratives

Parent involvement has largely been defined by participation in within-school activities, but this excludes the variety of ways that Latino parents engage in their children's schooling at home (Snell, Miguel, & East, 2009). Dominant approaches to urban school reform often regard immigrant communities as presenting problems that must be managed or reduced and little attention has been given to how Latino parents actually embody parental involvement (Zarate, 2007). The belief that low-income Latino parents do not value education reflects historically embedded deficit theories that cast Latino family culture as responsible for their children's low test scores and low graduation rates; that is, some claim that LI/RCLD students "fail in school because they and their families have internal defects, or deficits, that thwart the learning process" (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 83). This 'blame the victim' ideology fails to acknowledge the structural barriers that inhibit the participation of low-income Latino parents in their children's education and the cultural differences that shape more informal styles of participating in the home. Nonetheless, far too often, deficit theories influence teachers' and school administrators' perceptions, and thus immigrant parents are "frequently subjected to parental involvement practices that are primarily designed to change or "educate" them" (Olivos, 2006, p. 49). In contrast, The

3. Digital stories are brief, 3-4 minute, personal narrative videos.

Project and *Alianza* productively resisted these normative constructs of parent involvement, and built forms of engagement that operated outside school-centric domains or frames. This occurred through activities in which participants investigated their social worlds, contested the deficit frames that limited them, and created counter-narratives that positioned them as historical subjects.

Alianza leadership workshops fostered capacity building that enabled parents and parent organizers to challenge deficit constructs of Latino immigrant parents and to work towards building parent empowerment by redefining their involvement in their children's education. While the workshops were designed to convey specific content or knowledge that was needed in *Alianza's* campaign to launch its own public pilot/charter school, they also had both deeper and broader objectives, from preparing parents to organize the creation of Parent Centers at their respective schools to taking district-level leadership. The workshops consistently re-framed immigrant parents as both teachers – *Los primeros maestros son los padres y nuestros abuelos. Entonces reconocer la importancia del rol de los padres en la educación de los niños.* [The first teachers are parents and grandparents. Thus, we need to recognize the important role of parents in the education of children.] – and as classroom partners and educational leaders whose voices and experiences matter:

Entonces queremos... nada más se incluyen los padres que están allí tomando notas, o haciendo copias, sino que ustedes tengan un rol en la clase como maestros, que pueden ser maestros igual que los maestros...Y la segunda parte es el involucramiento de liderazgo de los padres, como los mismos padres se convierten en los propios abogados de sus niños, al saber sus derechos, al ser informado, al desarrollar su liderazgo. Pueden tomar un rol más activo en mejorar la educación, no nada más para sus niños, o los niños de nuestra escuela, sino para [los niños] del todo distrito.

[So we want to ... not just have parents taking notes or making copies, but rather that you also have a role in the classroom as teachers, and that you can be teachers just like school teachers...And the second part is parent leadership. So that as you learn about your rights, become more informed, and as you develop your leadership skills you become an advocate for your child. You can take a more active role in improving education, not just for your children, or the children in our school, but for all [the children] in the district.]

One key pedagogical component was the use of *dinámicas*, whose interactive experiences, critical dialogues, and self-reflection exercises facilitated the parents' investigation of their social world. A *dinámica* often introduced a new topic, or served as a transition from one topic to the next during a workshop. For example, in one *dinámica*, parents formed into groups that used art, songs, *dichos* (sayings) and games to reflect on their own childhood learning experiences. The groups then came back together in a large circle to share responses to or reflections on the exercise; parents laughed, and some cried, as they listened to the others recount emotion-packed personal narratives about their childhoods. Each group then picked a game, song, or *dicho* with which to engage all the other workshop participants in dialogue. The workshop facilitator (a parent who was also employed by CEP) elicited key similarities and differences among their experiences of learning and socialization within their families and Mexican schools versus the learning and socialization that their children were currently undergoing in the family and in LAUSD schools; thus the personal stories became opportunities for critical reflection on their immigrant experience and on how schools served the needs of their children. The facilitator also fostered discussion about the importance of the parents getting to know one another, and of building the relationships that provide a sense of community and collective identity. *Nosotros creemos que el aprender no es nada mas una cosa de uno como individuo, sino uno aprende de los alrededores y de la gente que está allí.* [We believe that learning is not just done alone as an individual, but rather we learn from people and our surroundings.] The *dinámicas* provided a pedagogical tool for parents to center their own histories and begin to recognize and develop positive self-confidence about their skills and cultural resources.

The central tenet that drove CEP's work is the empowerment and participation of parents, not just in circumscribed "parent roles" (like fundraising and volunteering), but in all aspects of school governance, curriculum, and vision (Nygreen, 2009). As one CEP leader argued, they needed to "break the paradigm that [Latina/o] parents don't care about education" and challenge the standard approaches found in many parenting

interventions in schools and in Title I programs responding to the legislation's demand for parent involvement. The tendency thus becomes to quantify parental involvement by the amount of time parents spend attending their child's extracurricular activities, volunteering in the school or classroom, or reading to and doing homework with their child. For many LI/RCLD immigrant parents, however, these measures ignore the substantial time and economic constraints they face as well as their (and their extended family's) many non-measured modes of engagement with the development of their children. In contrast, CEP and *Alianza* acknowledge the culturally specific ways that low-income, immigrant parents and families engage with their children at home, and recognize the values and knowledge that LI/RCLD students and families possess, and thus they work to integrate these "funds of knowledge" (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) throughout their programming. In addition, CEP and *Alianza* directly include the parents and families in the workshop designs and implementations, enabling them to practice leadership skills as they learn them and to become active agents and decision makers. By challenging the deficit framing of parents that prevails in dominant discourses that rationalize the marginalization of LI/RCLD parents, and by constructing spaces for the parents' own learning and leadership, CEP and *Alianza* build capacity for extending parent engagement far beyond the boundaries of the school.

Similarly, The Project positioned itself at the nexus of school and community change, and built capacity among immigrant parents and LI/RCLD community members by facilitating pedagogical processes that critically examined everyday life, the limits imposed by dominant orders, and the transformative possibilities residing in the power of the parents. However, unlike *Alianza's* use of *dinámicas* as a codification of reality, which have the drawback of being ephemeral, The Project developed digital stories that could have a curriculum developed to accompany them and could therefore be used repeatedly in different contexts. In one story, which in part explored an immigrant mother's relationship with her children's schools, Claudia⁴ explained her fear of talking to her children's teachers. She felt shame going to school with dirt on her clothes from working in the strawberry fields, and with her limited English, she felt uncomfortable and had difficulty speaking with the teacher to explain her perspective about her children's learning experiences. Claudia did not simply name the barriers of shame, class and language differences, and emotional distress; her counter-narrative re-centered her power by also detailing her refusal to be defined by those limits. Her story problematizes dominant perspectives on parent involvement from the perspective of a Latina immigrant mother who works long hours in the fields simply to provide subsistence living for her family. Using the digital story as a curriculum tool enables other parents, teachers, students and community members to explore multiple ways to overcome these barriers and to resist the way that Latino parents are positioned by dominant ideologies. This exploration can disrupt the stereotypes, create alternative narratives, and open spaces for more positive constructions of Latino parental engagement in their children's learning and schooling. Graciela, an undocumented immigrant parent learning through The Project how to support her daughter's education and to advocate for herself, explained why she decided to tell her own story:

Otros padres pueden o podemos hacer algo con mi historia pues de ayudar a más personas a dejar de ser tan tímido, de que hablen, de que no importa si no tenemos papeles o porque más que nada de hablar en las escuelas de que no se quedancallados en lo que es injusto porque muchas personas se quedancalladas

[Other parents can do something with my story to help more people to not be so timid, to speak that it doesn't matter if we don't have papers because, more than anything, to speak at the school and not sit silent in what is unjust because many people are silent.]

Graciela's and Claudia's counter-narratives resonate in a different register than that typically found in dominant constructions of immigrant parents, and offer voices that are productive, positioned and powerful. Through the investigation of their social worlds and their articulation of their experiences, Graciela and Claudia can initiate a generative process of exploring alternatives not only for themselves, but also for their entire community.

4. All names used for The Project participants are pseudonyms.

Physical and Dialogical Spaces

Resistance takes place on a terrain always already defined by and permeated by dominant ideologies, by white, patriarchal, middle-class imaginaries; on this terrain, it is difficult for conversations to arise that are not tainted by inequitable power relationships that re-inscribe dominant/subordinate subjectivities and thus constrain the transformative potential embedded within the situation. This can occur even when schools or education authorities are explicitly trying to reach out, to be inclusive, to provide spaces for parental involvement. We witness these dynamics in studies by Andrea Dyrness and Sophia Villenas that describe the ways school-sponsored forums, activities, and outreach projects can continue to position LI/RCLD and immigrant parents as problems to be addressed, or as disruptive to the processes of reform; in these spaces, it seems that the authentic voices and concerns of parents can easily become too loud, noisy, questioning, and assertive to be contained and reinscribed in the dominant order, and so the very parents who are 'included' and 'involved' get re-marginalized, and only those parents who are docile and fit the prescribed roles are welcomed into the process (Dyrness, 2007, 2011; Hurtig & Dyrness, 2011; Villenas, 2001).

In order to move beyond spaces defined by dominant ideologies, *Alianza* and The Project held meetings and conducted their work outside of the confines of school, in spaces that privileged the local knowledges of the community. *Alianza* parent leadership workshops took place in the second floor offices of CEP, a community non-profit organization located in the Pico Union neighborhood of Los Angeles. The location was symbolic to many of the parents because the space represented years of community grassroots organizing and activism efforts. In this space, parents felt comfortable with personal sharing, with learning new things, and with working together in new ways; parents embraced this space as an opportunity to re-tell their stories of frustration and exclusion from schools. As one parent said in a workshop:

Ese es el tipo de cosas que es muy importante, que ustedes den el espacio cuando van a trabajar con padres, que los padres tengan la oportunidad de expresarse verdaderamente. No sabemos, cuando vamos a dar los talleres, y luego como decían el otro día verdad, allí en la [escuela], tenemos como 20 años de conocernos y no me sé tu nombre ni si quiera. Porque eso pasa y mucho menos sabemos el problema que está viviendo alguien. Es bien importante, cuando una vez que los padres expresan sus problemas, sus preocupaciones, lo que nosotros podemos hacer es revisar la tabla de los derechos

[These are the types of things that are very important, that you provide the space when you work with parents, so that parents have the opportunity to truly express themselves. We don't know, when we attend a workshop at the school, like they said the other day, we have known each other for 20 years and I don't even know your name. Because that is what happens, we know even less about the problems that person is experiencing. It's very important, once parents express their problems and share their worries, what we can do is turn to the Parents Rights Table⁵.]

The parent contrasts the physical and dialogical space that they collectively created, one founded on trust and solidarity and in which they listen to and support one another, to the school space in which they could 'know' each other for twenty years and not even know one another's name. His comment illuminates the importance of a space defined and controlled by the parents themselves, a 'home' space that elicits alternative imaginaries to the dominant parent involvement methods and offerings, and that escapes the exclusionary and unwelcoming confines of the school itself.

The Project also met outside official school spaces in places that were 'home' to various project members: a community center, or a community college classroom, or a parent's house. Occasionally, school-based allies provided space in the widely respected Migrant Education program, or in the safe stronghold of the local teachers' union offices.⁶ The Project's evening meetings included potluck meals and convivial conversation

5. The Parents Rights Table listed parents' rights with regard to the schools and their children's education, and was used as a reference by the parents when discussing the problems they faced in the schools.

6. The union president and several other members of the union executive committee were widely recognized supporters and active members of The Project; similarly, several teachers in the Migrant Education program were Project activists.

about the intimacies of members' lives as they analyzed the digital stories and developed questions to use as dialogue guides with groups in the community. Project members would compare themselves and their worlds to the life represented in the digital story being analyzed, repeatedly linking their seemingly personal experience with various social realities. As they talked about the contrasts and connections, they re-centered their own histories, and supported each other in reclaiming and reinventing their heritage. Claudia, a mother and grandmother who had been in the U.S. for two decades, reflected on her experience of watching her own story as a codification of the social reality of the community: *I know that it was my life, but I didn't really see it until when I saw my [digital story].* She was well aware of her life story, but she acquired a deeper, more structural knowledge of her life through The Project's processes.⁷

Others who watched her story were able to make connections to their own lives, and to untangle the ways that they were shaped by historical, cultural, and economic forces. Omar, a second-generation Mexican-American in his early 20s, re-imagined his parent's stories through Claudia's, envisioning their struggles as similar to hers. In her story, Claudia recounts being left alone without a mother at a young age, needing to care for her siblings, and marrying and starting her own family at fourteen years old, all before facing the many difficulties of migrating to the U.S. and establishing a life here. Omar reflects on his own mother's isolation from her mother: *su mamá no estuvo allá con ella porque estaba trabajando* [her mom was not there with her because she was working]. Then he imagines his mother's challenges when marrying and starting a family:

... y se caso con mi papá y yo imagino que ellos pasaron por lo mismo de venir siguiendo la ilusión de que iban a tener trabajo y no. Aquí fue muy difícil para ellos y yo me recuerdo cuando estaba pequeño y tampoco teníamos casipara comer. No fue hasta que... mejoraran las cosas, pero no entendía desde pequeño

[...and married my father and I imagine that they went through the same to come here under the illusion that they would have work and they did not. This was difficult for them and I remember when I was young and we had almost nothing to eat. It was not until...things got better, but I didn't understand ever since I was young.]

Omar responded to Claudia's story with "loving perception" and was able to "world travel" between his own experience and Claudia's world, and then also project the insights he gleaned from the themes of Claudia's story to travel into his parents' world in ways he had never done before (see Lugones, 1987). Glimpsing the social realities of the older generation, he was able both to make sense of his parents' subjectivity and to grasp a deeper truth about his own life. He had not previously understood his family's hunger and life difficulties outside the context of their particular day-to-day experiences, but the dialogue and analysis surrounding Claudia's story uncovered the structuring forces of immigration, poverty, farm work, and the struggle for an education. He was finally able to make critical sense of his own subjectivity within the supportive dialogical space of The Project.

Within the intimate spatial contexts of The Project meetings and digital stories, parents, teachers, youth, and community members could dwell in one another's worlds, and try to grasp the structural technologies shaping the contours of their lives. The meetings flowed organically from the conversations and needs of the participants, with agendas responding to those present and to the emergent analyses and tasks. In these spaces, the digital stories opened possibilities for engaging differences through dialogue, free from disciplining efforts to homogenize, discredit, or erase difference (Rutherford, 1990). Hence, the focus was on building relationships or community, on deliberative discussion and active listening, and on learning from one another rather than on the actions or products produced from the meetings.

Homi Bhabha developed the notion of a "third space" to identify an ambivalent space that transects the dialectic of binaries enforced by the dominant ideology; such a "third space" opens up possible futures that break the limits rooted in the realities of the day. The hybridity revealed in these spaces engenders a transformed intersubjectivity that embraces cultural difference at the same time as it yields a solidarity that can reorient

7. Cherrie Moraga (2002), in her piece *La Güera*, explains "click" moments wherein she came to reconnect with herself by breaking through to a deeper level of knowing. Often, through the digital stories, participants encountered these "click" moments where they developed deeper understandings of their lives.

the nature of the public sphere to incorporate a politics “based on unequal, uneven, multiple, and potentially antagonistic, political identities” (Rutherford, 1990, p. 208). We witnessed these dynamics at work in the spaces of The Project and *Alianza*. We thus can begin to theorize parental engagement in school and community reform outside of a product-based paradigm and instead emphasize the meaning making and learning happening in these communal spaces, and see these as building capacity for even deeper transformations, including of the parents themselves.

Significance of Community Building

The Project and *Alianza* worked to establish forms of resistance to dominant ideologies grounded in social relationships that could sustain people and communities for the long haul demanded in social justice struggles. According to María Lugones (2003), “reaction does not add anything creative to the meaning contained in that which is resisted, except some form of ‘no’” (p. 29). Reaction remains within the confines of existing social constructs, merely negating the unjust impositions of the dominant order. In contrast, resistance goes beyond a physical, psychological, or logical reaction to encompass an embodied, cognitive, and reflective response that is a creative, clever, complex and imaginative engagement with “the very intricacies of the structure of what is being resisted” (Lugones, 2003, p. 29). Dyrness (2011) uncovers this form of resistance in a study with Latina women working for school reform. These women do more than challenge the narrative of reform that continues to position them at the margins; they establish their own spaces of learning and solidarity that enable them to crystallize their perspectives and become agents of change in their local context. Hurtig and Dyrness (2011), highlight the work of parents in changing how they see themselves and consequently feeling more able to speak. In our studies of The Project and *Alianza* we found these same dynamics at work.

When resistance becomes creative of new positions and not just reaction, then it becomes possible to understand community building as a pedagogy that enables a collective investigation of the social that is positioned, embedded and reflective (Freire, 1970; Lugones, 2003). As we witnessed in The Project and *Alianza*, in the process of collaborative investigation the participants gained a “cognitive and emotional distance from experience,” (Glass, Ball, & Crain, 2008) and understood more about their dialectical relationship with the world, not only enduring it but creating it. This kind of cognitive and emotional distance is not a move away from, but a “depth into the social” (Lugones, 2003, p. 214) in which participants explore their everyday lives and their community with a critical grasp of how their lives are interconnected not only with one another but with larger social, cultural, and economic structures. They come to understand themselves as embedded and positioned, constrained by the dominant ideological limits, but always with possibilities of acting against and beyond those limits to open up possibilities of transformed futures (Freire, 1970).

Alianza and The Project demonstrate how critical, creative, dialogical spaces can yield more agentic subjectivities and imaginaries. Our research findings push beyond previously conceptualized notions of resistance to name community building as a process wherein community members can operate from their own center. From this new center, it becomes possible not just to sustain the resistance, but to establish the creative processes that build both new subjectivities and new situations. This re-centering space allows participants to open themselves to what is revealed in the *dinámicas* and digital stories, then to re-imagine and re-invent themselves, not only in the space of their work together but in the other spaces of their lives. This community building gathers together the participants’ own center of gravity, giving them a way to operate with integrity and force to change their lives. The community building spaces and processes of The Project and *Alianza* provide an opportunity for a deep re-grounding of their lives, rooting the individuals in meanings and ways of being that reach beyond the dominant discourses toward more self-determined lives. We do not mean to suggest that the participants become wholly free of the distortions in thought, feeling, and action imposed by the dominant ideologies, only that their resistance becomes stronger, and their vision for a more equitable future becomes clearer and more compelling to them. This is why we emphasize the significance of the space of community building that creates a new center from the marginal space allotted or assigned to the LI/RCLD and immigrant participants in The Project and *Alianza*.

Concluding Comments

Through contesting deficit frames and creating counter-narratives, The Project and *Alianza* participants began to feel a sense of agency; even though they were not necessarily actively enacting power in the public sphere in organized ways, they were becoming more powerful. This becoming illuminates the pedagogical processes of knowing and learning that emerge during a collective, participatory and reflective investigation of the social, and through creative responses to the discoveries that result. The critical consciousness that arose in the communal pedagogical spaces of these reform efforts came not from a singular moment, but from the sustained relationships and dialogues that were central to the activities of The Project and *Alianza*. Drawn into these efforts through a desire to overcome the immediate problems their communities faced, participants began to build community as a necessary foundation for any kind of deep change, whether near-term or more long-term and strategic, whether on a personal or social level. Community building thus needs to be explored empirically and theoretically as a site of pedagogical work. We believe that if the transformative and pedagogical power of spaces of community building could be better understood then we might better be able to establish broader movements for structural change. We think it is important to give the micro-political its due; the smaller elements of resistance, of communal solidarity in ‘home’ spaces, should not be overlooked. It is time to expand approaches to school reform and parental involvement beyond the confines of the school or even of community organizing in order to explore possibilities for even deeper decolonial and critical pedagogical work. We hope that our reflections on the inspirational efforts of The Project and *Alianza* can contribute to this new direction for researchers and activists alike.

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