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Building the Dream

Transformational Resistance, Community-Based Organizations, and the Civic Engagement of Latinos in the New South

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Abstract

This article examines how a group of Latino youth living in the Southeast experienced, adapted to, and resisted oppressive social structures within their community through their involvement with youth media. Through the content analysis of a teen radio show produced by and for Latino youth, in conjunction with semistructured interviews and ethnographic field notes, the author investigates how five Mexican-born high school students confronted and attempted to transform the educational practices that served to keep them subordinate. The study posits the community organization that sponsored the radio show as a pedagogical site of resistance and transformation, which provided the students with an understanding of the importance of civic engagement and agency in the fight for the passage of the Dream Act.

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LATINO, FOREIGN-BORN STUDENTS are at greater risk of leaving high school without a diploma and entering the workforce with fewer skills than their non-Latino, native-born peers (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Kochhar, Suro, & Tafoya, 2005; Pew Hispanic Center, 2003). This is in part due to the fact that 58% of foreign-born Latinos are estimated to be undocumented (Pew Hispanic Center Report, 2009) and are more likely not to see higher education as a realistic option. Often they attend schools that espouse an ideology of meritocracy, yet despite their hard work and perseverance, they are left to confront a significant obstacle to higher education: lack of legal residential status. The Dream Act, a bipartisan bill that would allow undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children a path to legal residency if they attend college or perform military service, was first introduced in Congress in

2001. It has been defeated multiple times, both as a stand-alone bill and as an amendment to other pieces of legislation related to immigration reform (American Immigration Council, 2011). In 2012, the Department of Homeland Security authorized the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Act (DACA), which

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provides temporary residency for undocumented youth who meet certain requirements (National Immigration Law Center, 2015). While DACA has had a significant impact on the lives of many undocumented immigrants, it is a temporary fix, and immigration activists continue to fight for the passage of the Dream Act. Given the present pivotal political climate related to the passing of the Dream Act and other controversial legislation surrounding immigration reform, the need for civic engagement on the part of immigrant youth could not be greater.

This study is centered around the activism of five Mexican-born students living in the Southeast whose participation in the community-based organization El Puente¹ awarded them a discourse of resistance and an understanding of the importance of civic engagement and agency. Through a variety of creative community-service projects, the students in El Puente's youth programs, who were marginalized in their schools due to their country of origin, English proficiency, and residential status, developed an identity of engaged community activists.

El Puente was set up in 1995 by a Latina immigrant living in New Hope County who wanted to address the needs of the growing Latino immigrant community and act as a liaison between the newly arrived Latino residents and the local government and other nonprofit agencies. El Puente's mission has been to foster cultural understanding between the Latino community and the other residents of New Hope County while empowering Latinos to overcome the challenges they face as immigrants. According to their mission statement, El Puente has adopted Freire's education empowerment theory to find solutions authored by the community itself (Freire, 1994). This effort is accomplished by creating opportunities for the community to dialogue and solve problems together. Community-wide dialogue has been fostered through the production of two local radio shows: *Nuestra Voz* and *La Conversación*. At the time of its inception in 2003, *Nuestra Voz* was the only student-produced Spanish radio show in the state. When El Puente decided to organize the teen radio show *Nuestra Voz*, the staff recruited students through their connections with Victoria High School. The staff at El Puente welcomed conversations that examined the salience of race, language, and immigration in American society.

All of the students in this study moved to North Carolina as the result of a decision made by either a parent or guardian. The majority of their parents and guardians worked in one of the local chicken processing plants. All the students in this study attended the local high school where they took their studies seriously and hoped to one day attend college. Yet at the time of this study (January 2006 to August 2008), even the local community college² was not admitting undocumented students, and the state's

1 All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the research participants.

2 During the period that this research took place, North Carolina's community colleges did not have a uniform policy regarding the admittance of undocumented residents. While New Hope Community College chose not to allow undocumented students to register as in-state residents, community colleges in more progressive areas did not require social security numbers or any other proof of legal residency.

four-year universities required that undocumented students apply as international students. Given the economic and racial hierarchy of their town, it would have been "common sense" for the students to accept the present political reality of the situation and follow their parents into the chicken processing plants, but El Puente posed another reality: the possibility of social change via political activism. The students, through their involvement with El Puente, were encouraged to challenge their assumptions about their present reality and not only imagine a future that would break from that reality but become socially active and engaged citizens who would push the boundaries of what currently was possible.

Theoretical Framework

This study presupposed that its participants were subjected to significant forms of marginalization (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2007; Wainer, 2004; Wortham, Murrillo, & Hamann, 2002). They attended schools ill equipped to serve the needs of bilingual and bicultural students. Many of the students experienced educational segregation due to their limited English abilities; they came from homes with limited economic resources, and their lack of resources was often exacerbated by an undocumented residential status. In addition, they were confronted with an acrimonious reception from many of the native-born Americans they interacted with in their schools and community. Unaccustomed to a large immigrant population, the native-born population viewed both the language and the culture of this new population as problematic (Murrillo, Jr., 2002). Not only was there no existing Latino community into which to meld but long-standing ethnic communities, so prevalent in other parts of the country, were also sparse. As increasing numbers of Latino children entered the public schools and more Latino families made small Southern cities their home, Latinos began to be seen as the source of much of the community's problems, from crime to overtaxed social services, such as crowded and underfunded schools (Murrillo, Jr., 2002; Villenas, 2002).

Tension between the newly arriving Latino immigrants and native-born Americans has been perhaps the most intense in the more rural counties and small cities that experienced growth rates in the Latino population that were substantially higher than that of the state. The site for this study serves as a prime example of such a place. In 1998 the county commissioner presiding over Victoria City sent a letter to Immigration and Naturalization Services asking that they deport the undocumented Latinos residing within Victoria City and the outlying towns of New Hope County (Yeoman, 2000). In April 2000, David Duke, the former Louisiana state representative and onetime Grand Dragon of the Klu Klux Klan, came to Victoria City with the objective of further igniting the growing animosity that many felt toward the Latino community. Duke held a rally outside the town hall with about 400 people in attendance. At that time, the city's population was estimated to be 6,000.

Theories of Resistance

Reproduction theory, the theoretical predecessor to theories of resistance, aims to explain how class and racial hierarchies are

reproduced in the schools. Reproduction theories credit the larger social structure for perpetuating the poor academic performance of marginalized youth (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976), whereas theories of resistance argue for an interpretation that balances human agency with social constraints (Giroux, 1983, 2006; Macleod, 1987; McLaren, 1989; Willis, 1977). Rather than focus on how inequities are determined by social structures, theories of resistance focus on how students respond to and oppose these social structures. Resistance theories represent a move away from theories of reproduction in that they acknowledge the role of human agency in the larger context of social inequities. Resistance is viewed as a way for subordinated students to employ their agency, albeit, often to self-defeating ends.

Resistance and Minority Students

Many later scholars, who drew upon the earlier work of reproduction theorists by examining resistance as it relates to minority students, tend to view resistance to schooling more as an expression of ethnic solidarity than as a response to class domination (Fordham & Ogbu, 1987; Hurd, 2004; Lee, 2005; Ogbu, 1991; Valdés, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela (1999) highlighted the ways that Mexican-origin students choose not to care about their schooling as a way of resisting what they deem the “school’s project of cultural disparagement and de-identification” (p. 94). The oppositional behavior of Mexican-origin youth is a response to the school’s implicit assimilationist agenda, which demands that Mexican-origin youth subscribe to a set of values and behaviors not their own. Valenzuela (1999) argued that through the students’ disruptive behaviors, both native-born and immigrant Latinos are able to disrupt the normality of difference that keeps them marginalized, thus achieving ethnic solidarity in a setting that ordinarily fosters alienation.

Transforming Resistance

Many scholars have countered the traditional discourse on student resistance by examining ways in which students employ a positive sense of agency to transform their marginalization and subordination (Hidalgo & Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; O’Conner, 1997; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). These scholars have challenged the implicit notion within resistance theory that marginalized students can have agency only through negative or oppositional behavior. They proposed a more comprehensive sense of agency in which students adopt an academic ideology and a critical consciousness about the class and racial constraints within American society. Noguera and Cannella (2006) characterized acts of resistance in which young people reflect on their lived experiences and work to dismantle the oppressive social structures as a form of strategic resistance that has the power to transform marginalized communities. Within their definition of strategic resistance, youth activists who have developed a critical consciousness have the power to bring positive change to historically disenfranchised communities.

Solorzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) work on transformational resistance was taken up as the theoretical construct for this

study. They defined transformational resistance as being political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change are possible. They outlined four types of student oppositional behavior: reactionary, self-defeating, conformist, and transformational. They argued that only behavior that includes a critique of social oppression and is motivated by social justice meets the criteria for transformational resistance. The four types of oppositional behavior are conceptualized as existing on a quadrant, with no one quadrant seen as a discrete or static entity.

Transformational resistance is not self-explanatory; it requires that the researcher gain the perspective and motivation of the student by delving into the historical and sociopolitical context that formed the behavior before assessing the behavior as resistant. Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) used oral histories taken from Chicano students who participated in the 1968 East Los Angeles student walkouts to demonstrate how student participation was motivated by an awareness of social justice—an awareness fostered by significant mentors. These mentors are defined as transformational role models. It was through working with the staff at El Puente that the students in this study developed a critical understanding of their social position and developed the skills necessary to be activist in the fight for immigration reform.

Undocumented Students and Resistance

In new gateway states like North Carolina, Mexican undocumented migration increased fivefold to sixfold during the 1990s (Van Hook, Bean, & Passel, 2005), and in 2004 it was estimated that 45% of Latinos living in North Carolina were undocumented (Nguyen, 2007). Children, far from being immune from this detrimental legal status, were estimated to make up 16% of the undocumented population nationwide. Another 3.8 million children, who were born in the United States and were thus citizens, were living in households headed by undocumented persons (Passel, 2006).

Adolescence is a crucial time for identity formation as children begin to make sense of the adult world they will soon enter. For many undocumented youth, this is a time when they grasp the full significance of what it means to be considered “illegal” in U.S. society (Gonzales, 2011). Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, and Suárez-Orozco (2011) drew on liminality theory, or the idea that an individual is neither here nor there, to explain the experience of undocumented youth coming of age in the United States. They stated:

Liminality theory becomes a particularly useful frame for understanding how their formal entry into adulthood is complicated—while on the one hand, they are inevitably propelled into adulthood, on the other, they are denied participation in state-sanctioned rites of passage, like getting a driver’s license or passport and facile entry into college or legally sanctioned passage into the work force. (p. 454)

For undocumented youth, coming to terms with their blocked entry to higher education and the legal economy can be a crushing realization, particularly after attending U.S. schools where the importance of obtaining a college education is repeatedly stressed. As immigration reform continues to be put on hold by elected

officials, some undocumented students are resisting their denial of higher education by returning to their countries of origin to acquire postsecondary degrees, which may later be used to gain entry to the United States as authorized residents (Cortez Roman & Hamann, 2014). Others have joined the Dreamer movement, a path of resistance that challenges the public's depiction of them as "illegals," confined to the margins of society. As the youth in this study were learning what it meant to be considered illegal, they were also learning to be "unafraid and unapologetic activists" (Nicholls, 2013, p. 122) who were ready to call upon elected officials to fix a broken immigration system.

The aim of this study was to examine how these students constructively resisted the myriad oppressive societal structures that they faced. I argue that they were able to challenge the anti-immigrant discourses prevalent in their community through their access to community organizers and their own civic engagement. Furthermore, their participation with El Puente awarded them a sense of agency and helped them to construct an identity based on their activism, not their lack of documentation.

Methodology

This article draws on data from a larger study that examined the acculturation process of five Mexican-born students. All of these students lived in a small city of North Carolina that experienced a pronounced demographic shift beginning in the mid-1990s. This is a qualitative study in which the author acted as a participant observer (Glesne, 2006; Hargreaves, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and kept descriptive field notes throughout an 18-month period. Data were collected through ethnographic field notes, open-ended interviews, and the content analysis of the local radio show *Nuestra Voz*.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethnographic Data

The first phase of data collection was the ethnographic field notes that were taken while attending the weekly pre-broadcasting work sessions and accompanying the students to the local radio station for the program's broadcast, which I attended consistently for three months. I also provided the students with transportation to and from the radio station, which provided an informal setting in which to get to know the students better and observe their interactions with one another. After dropping off the last student at his or her home, I would write analytic memos (Saldaña, 2013) in which I reflected on my observations and questions for further investigation. In March of 2006, El Puente, the community organization that sponsored the radio show's production, began preparations for a state wide immigration rally. The needed preparations required that the students of *Nuestra Voz* have a series of additional meetings and work sessions, which I also attended. It was at this point that I became a participant observer with specific duties related to the rally's preparation (Glesne, 2006).

It was through the process of "logging time" with my research participants that I was able to gain entry into their lives (Glesne, 2006 p. 45). I learned a great deal from the students of *Nuestra Voz* by participating in community events with them and engaging

with them in a variety of social contexts over a span of 22 months (Hargreaves, 1999; Lerum, 2001; Spradley, 1979; Wade, 1984). The ethnographic data was essential in creating my lens for understanding the radio show's content and shaping the questions I asked in the semistructured interviews.

Content Analysis of Nuestra Voz

Because the radio shows were recorded at the time of airing, the first step in the data analysis process was to review the recordings of the 58 radio shows. I first listened to all 58 shows, transcribed, and translated them from Spanish into English, and precoded particularly salient segments of the shows (Saldaña, 2013). After I listened to all 58 shows, two themes began to emerge: the risks or dangers found in the host culture and the behaviors and attitudes that *Nuestra Voz* promoted in an attempt to slow the process of assimilation. After I conducted a lean descriptive coding of the shows' content (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2013), the following broad categories emerged: the importance of the Latino community and culture, *familismo*, educational perseverance, and educational and political challenges. Since this research comes out of a larger exploratory ethnographic study on the process of acculturation for Latinos living in the Southeast, shows pertaining to cultural maintenance and educational and political challenges were the primary focus for this article. Shows that contained content related to these categories were revisited and transcripts were back translated. The coding process was recursive and categories were revised throughout data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Table 1.1 is the list of shows that were reviewed for this study.

Table 1.1. Nuestra Voz Radio Shows Reviewed

	<i>Date of Broadcast</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>English Translation</i>
1.	4/15/2003	"La Influencia de la Música"	"The Influence of Music"
2.	4/29/2003	"Las Drogas"	"Drugs"
3.	5/6/2003	"Enfermedades Transmisión Sexual"	"Sexually Transmitted Diseases"
4.	5/27/2003	"Oportunidades de Estudio"	"Opportunities to Study"
5.	6/17/2003	"Cómo Ayudar a Tu Comunidad"	"How to Help Your Community"
6.	7/1/2003	"Cómo Tener Confianza en Tus Padres"	"How to Gain Your Parents' Trust"
7.	7/8/2003	"La Abstinencia Previene Consecuencias"	"Abstinence Prevents Consequences"
8.	7/22/2003	"Las Bebidas Alcohólicas"	"Alcohol"
9.	8/5/2003	"Christian Carrillo"	"Christian Carrillo"
10.	9/4/2003	"El Racismo"	"Racism"

	<i>Date of Broadcast</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>English Translation</i>
11.	9/16/2003	“Las Pandillas”	“Gangs”
12.	10/7/2003	“Complacencias”	“For Your Pleasure”
13.	10/21/2003	“Dream Act”	“Dream Act”
14.	10/28/2003	“Saludos y Complacencias”	“Shout-Outs and for Your Pleasure”
15.	11/4/2003	“Avisos y Música”	“Announcements and Music”
16.	11/18/2003	“Alpha Omega Grupo de la Iglesia Católica”	“The Church Group Alpha and Omega”
17.	11/25/2003	“Retos en Nuestra Comunidad”	“Challenges in Our Community”
18.	12/2/2003	“Cómo Aprovechar el Tiempo Libre”	“How to Take Advantage of Your Free Time”
19.	12/9/2003	“Oportunidades con Progress Energy”	“Opportunities with Progress Energy”
20.	12/16/2003	“Nuestra Navidad”	“Our Christmas”
21.	12/30/2003	“El Cáncer”	“Cancer”
22.	2/24/2004	“La Salud”	“Health”
23.	3/2/2004	“Drogas en General”	“Drugs in General”
24.	3/9/2004	“Abusos a Menores”	“Child Abuse”
25.	3/16/2004	“La Marihuana”	“Marihuana”
26.	3/30/2004	“Las Pandillas”	“Gangs”
27.	4/6/2004	“Mala Alimentación”	“Bad Nutrition”
28.	4/13/2004	“Los Derechos y Responsabilidades de los Jóvenes”	“The Duties of Young People”
29.	5/25/2004	“Violencia Doméstica”	“Domestic Violence”
30.	6/15/2004	“Fiesta Latina”	“The Latin Festival”
31.	9/21/2004	“Elecciones 2005”	“The 2005 Elections”
32.	9/28/2004	“La Depresión”	“Depression”
33.	10/5/2004	“La Universidad”	“College”
34.	10/12/2004	“Oportunidades como Voluntarios”	“Volunteer Opportunities”
35.	10/19/2004	“El Cáncer”	“Cancer”
36.	10/26/2004	“La Organización Caring Communities”	“The Organization Caring Communities”
37.	11/8/2004	“La Bacteria Ecoli”	“Ecoli Bacteria”
38.	11/16/2004	“Violencia Juvenil”	“Juvenil Violence”
39.	11/23/2004	“Invitación al Campeonato Estatal”	“Invitation to the State Championship”

	<i>Date of Broadcast</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>English Translation</i>
40.	11/30/2004	“El SIDA”	“AIDS”
41.	12/7/2005	“Bulimia”	“Bulimia”
42.	12/15/2005	“Los Jóvenes y Nuestra Tradiciones”	“Young People and Our Traditions”
43.	1/2/2005	“La Adicción a las Drogas”	“Drug Addiction”
44.	1/8/2005	“El Noviazgo”	“Dating”
45.	2/28/2006	“La Depresión”	“Depression”
46.	3/7/2006	“La Sensualidad”	“Sensuality”
47.	3/21/2006	“La Deserción Escolar”	“Dropping Out of School”
48.	3/28/2006	“Complacencias”	“For Enjoyment”
49.	4/18/2006	“La Marcha del 10 de Abril”	“The April 10th March”
50.	4/25/2006	“El Equipo de Fútbol Jets”	“The Jets Soccer Team”
51.	5/6/2006	“Charla Directa”	“Straight Talk”
52.	5/13/2006	“Los Jóvenes en las Escuelas de NC”	“Young People in NC Schools”
53.	5/23/2006	“Cómo Aprovechar el Tiempo Libre”	“How to Take Advantage of Your Free Time”
54.	7/11/2006	“Actividades del Verano”	“Summer Activities”
55.	8/1/2006	“La Amistad”	“Friendship”
56.	8/8/2006	“La Rebeldía”	“Rebellion”
57.	8/15/2006	“¿Qué Planes Tiene para este Año Escolar?”	“What Plans Do You Have for this School Year?”
58.	8/22/2006	“Las Decisiones Correctas”	“The Right Decisions”

The Interviews

After the transcription and translating were complete, I chose 11 salient segments from 10 different shows that reflected important recurring themes related to the radio hosts’ resistance to the assimilationist agenda of their schools and the larger host community (see Table 1.2). Each segment represented issues that were recurring throughout the production of the radio show and contained subjects that I wanted to explore further. I set up interviews with the research collaborators. The research collaborators were composed of three of the original five students I had worked with on the radio show. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview either of the female students who had worked on the radio show during my involvement with *Nuestra Voz*.

In these interviews, I played back chosen segments of the radio shows, and after listening to each segment, the collaborators were asked open-ended questions about what they had heard. The

goal of these interviews was to have the students elaborate on the topics and share their ideas about what the radio show's hosts were trying to convey. The majority of the segments were from shows they had played a part in producing and broadcasting. This phase of data collection was a collaborative process with three of the original five members of *Nuestra Voz* in which the students' voices and understandings would play a significant role in the final data analysis (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, Jr., 2004; Lassister, 2005).

Table 1.2. *Nuestra Voz* Radio Shows Used for Interviews

<i>Date of Broadcast</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>English Translation</i>
4/15/2003	"La Influencia de la Música"	"The Influence of Music"
9/4/2003	"El Racismo"	"Racism"
10/21/2003	"Dream Act"	"Dream Act"
11/25/2003	"Retos en Nuestra Comunidad"	"Challenges in Our Community"
4/13/2004	"Los Derechos y Responsabilidades de los Jóvenes"	"The Duties of Young People"
9/21/2004	"Elecciones"	"Elections"
9/28/2004	"La Depresión"	"Depression"
1/8/2005	"El Noviazgo"	"Dating"
2/28/2006	"La Depresión"	"Depression"
5/6/2006	"Charla Directa"	"Straight Talk"

Student Participants

Throughout the production of *Nuestra Voz*, the number of students involved in its production fluctuated from three to eight. As students graduated from high school, new students took their place. The majority of the students involved in the broadcasting of *Nuestra Voz* emigrated from Mexico at a young age. Although the students' residential status ranged from naturalized citizen to undocumented resident, the majority of the students were not legally authorized to be in the country. During my involvement with *Nuestra Voz*, there were five students who were primarily responsible for its production.

Carlos. Carlos immigrated to Victoria City in 1998 when he was in the fourth grade. Up until that point he had lived in Mexico with his father and siblings. His mother, who had come to the States when he was a small child, had been living in Victoria City prior to Carlos's arrival. When I first met him in February of 2006, he was a sophomore in high school and was living with his mother and older brother. He spoke English with a thick accent and often was difficult to understand on account of a speech impediment and his insufficient command of English syntax. Of all the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz*, Carlos was the weakest academically. He often struggled when reading a segment of writing on air and frequently searched for basic words in Spanish and English.

Ramón. Ramón immigrated to the United States from Mexico in 2000 when he was 12 years old. During my

involvement with *Nuestra Voz*, he lived with his mother, his seven-year-old sister and four-month-old brother. He was not sure where his father was living. For all practical purposes, Ramón was the man of the house. He was very active in his church and hoped to attend a ministry college. Ramón was an excellent athlete and a well-respected student.

Gabriel. When I first met Gabriel in 2006, he was 14 and in the ninth grade. He had emigrated from Mexico in 2003 where he had been an A student. He lived with both his parents and an older brother. When I met him, he was still in the process of learning English and liked to practice using new English phrases with me. He was the most recent immigrant at the time of my involvement with *Nuestra Voz* and had an I-am-just-along-for-the-ride demeanor.

Gabriel was the only member of *Nuestra Voz* who did not deliver a speech at the April 10 immigration rally. He considered himself Mexican, not Mexican American, and repeatedly stated that if he were unable to go to college in the United States, he would simply return to Mexico to attend university. He proudly stated that his parents had not come to the United States because they had to but rather because they wanted to. As he put it, "We had it good over there."

Zelda. Zelda was a highly active member of *Nuestra Voz* and played a prominent role throughout my research. Of all the students from *Nuestra Voz*, Zelda had been in Victoria City for the longest period of time. Originally from Mexico, all of her formal schooling had occurred in the public schools of Victoria City. She was the student most likely to slip into Spanglish, and when speaking in English, her dialogue was peppered with the ubiquitous "like, you know what I mean?"

Elena. My involvement with Elena lasted for less than four months. She was 17 when I met her and was one of the newest members of *Nuestra Voz*. After losing both her parents at the age of 14, she and her younger brother immigrated to the United States to live with her uncle and aunt. Considering her life circumstance, she showed enormous resiliency. She was an honors student, despite the fact that she had entered Victoria High with very minimal English skills. She was involved in several extracurricular activities and appeared to get along well with her peers.

Discussion

Nuestra Voz: The Creation of a Counter Narrative

Nuestra Voz's first broadcast was in May of 2003. Although there were periods when the program was broadcast sporadically, *Nuestra Voz* was on the air until February of 2008. Students met weekly at El Puente to brainstorm and research various topics that were being considered for upcoming shows. After a work session of approximately two hours, students were driven five minutes across town to Victoria City's local AM radio station, from which the show was broadcast. A typical show would begin with the hosts introducing themselves and the topic of the evening's program. The hosts would discuss the topic and ask listeners to call in with questions and comments.

It was not by chance that the members of El Puente chose to work with students on the production of a radio show. An important

principle of critical pedagogy, which is at the heart of El Puente's mission statement, is the dialectic construction of knowledge often associated with the work of Freire (1970). In accordance with this epistemology, educators and students collaborate to make sense of the world around them (Gay, 2000; Giroux, 1997; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Sleeter, 1995). Students' everyday lives and experiences are seen as legitimate terrain for examination and meaning making. When *Nuestra Voz* was first being conceptualized, the students and staff saw it as a venue for adolescents in the community to share and make sense of their varied experiences. They recognized that their experiences as immigrants acculturating to a Southern city was unique. The following is an excerpt from the first radio show, in which the students outline the show's objectives.³

"Our Voice" is a program that was created so that you would have the opportunity to express your ideas, problems, doubts, experiences, and feelings. In addition to this, it is to provide information to all the young people about the dangers that we run into in this society.

This segment was played back to the three research collaborators four years later, and they were asked what they thought the dangers were that these earlier hosts were referring to. With little hesitation, the collaborators all replied, "Racism." When they were asked to expound on this, their answers reflected a complicated understanding of the dynamics of race and how their racialization in the United States affected their experience as immigrants. The following is a conversation with two of the collaborators, Gabriel and Carlos, in which they elaborate on their answers.

Eleanor: What are the dangers that she is talking about? What have you experienced?

Gabriel: I think she is talking about the racism between the communities. Yeah, that is a major part of it.

Eleanor: When you say racism between the communities, you mean the white community, the Latino community, the African American community?

Gabriel: It's all of them, altogether. Some black people don't like Mexicans, some whites don't like Mexicans. Mexicans might not like whites or may not like blacks.

Eleanor: How is it being in the schools? Are there fights?

Gabriel: There used to be lots, but now everybody has just stopped and gotten used to the idea of having Mexicans in this country.

Carlos: My experience was kind of weird. There were like only six or ten people who were Hispanic when I arrived, and everyone else was white or African American. And my problem was we couldn't speak English. There was one Hispanic teacher. It was kind of weird because we would be in a regular class, an art class, and then they separated us. We would always be in the library with the same teacher. I didn't like it. Even though I didn't understand English, I didn't

always want to be in just one class with one teacher and always in the library.

Eleanor: Was that the same for you, Gabriel?

Gabriel: No it was different for me because when I got here, it was like 2002–2003, so whenever I went to school, they gave me ESL classes, and they put me in regular classes with everybody, but it was really, really hard because I couldn't understand what the teachers were saying and what the other students were saying.

Eleanor: Did the teachers try to include you?

Gabriel: No, they always put you like you don't speak English so you cannot do any work, so you will just sit there and stare at the board or whatever they were writing on.

When Ramón was asked to interpret what dangers the hosts of *Nuestra Voz*'s first show were referring to, he had this to say:

Ramón: Probably the racism that we had in the schools. Probably the services that they denied us, and the things that we wanted that we were denied. Probably that we are Hispanics, and some Hispanics do things that they shouldn't, and everyone thinks that we are the same.

In these three answers, racism is stated as being the primary danger, but it is enmeshed in language differences, rapid demographic shift, educational segregation, student alienation, indifference on the part of teachers, stereotypes of Latinos, and a lack of access to resources. The students recognized that their "otherness" was the source of their difficulties and that Victoria's high school was not a neutral setting for Latino students. By encouraging students to host a radio show in which they were able to unpack their experiences as "other" in the public schools, El Puente validated their experiences and insights.

Throughout the show, students were quick to identify myriad issues that had a negative impact on the academic success of Latino students, ranging from the paucity of Spanish-speaking translators to an inability (or unwillingness) of the school to accommodate parents' and students' work schedules. The students were adept at identifying the factors that contribute to keeping racial, linguistic, and economic hierarchies in place within the school walls; however, the largest impediment they saw to their academic success was the inability of many Latino students to attend college because of their undocumented residential status. Both in individual interviews with the students and throughout the radio programs, this was repeatedly cited as the biggest barrier confronting Latino students in North Carolina.

In the fall of 2003, just months after the first airing of *Nuestra Voz*, the cofounder and president of a prominent statewide organization for professional Latinos in North Carolina was invited to talk about the Dream Act. After giving an in-depth explanation of the Dream Act, he was asked by one of the hosts why he was so interested in seeing the Dream Act pass. He replied:

This law would give opportunity to many Hispanic students. Right now, recently I have heard a lot of students saying, 'Why should I

³ All excerpts from the radio show have been translated from Spanish to English. Only the English version is included due to space limitations.

continue my, finish my schooling if I can't go on to a university or a community college? I see this as a bad excuse, because a lot of good things are going to happen, and one of these is the passing of the Dream Act.

This show received a lot of attention from its listeners. Students called in with specific questions about the Dream Act and how it could impact their educational opportunities. This particular program and the information that it provided about the Dream Act was referred to regularly in the four years of shows that followed. The Dream Act became the guiding political hope that these students focused their activism around. In a show in which the students discussed their duties and responsibilities, the Dream Act was seen as a guaranteed force for change. The students felt strongly that their major obligation to their community and to themselves was to continue their education and *seguir adelante* (“to move forward”). Their potential for educational advancement was juxtaposed against the sacrifices that their parents had to make in coming to the United States. The following dialogue from this show, which was aired in April of 2004, suggests that the students saw the passing of the Dream Act as both certain and essential to their futures.

Ramón: We have the responsibility to move forward for ourselves and for them [parents], too, to move with our heads always up and break the barriers. Yes, this is a real responsibility.

Carlos: Don't worry about your immigration status. Things are going to change. Don't worry.

Ramón: Things are going to change in a year, three years, with the Dream Act, with this, things are going to change and work, my friend.

Transformational Resistance: The Politicizing Effect of the Dream Act

The students' decision to become politically active in their community grew organically out of their involvement with the radio show. As the radio show's message became more concretely solidified around the pursuit of an education, the students of *Nuestra Voz* focused keenly on the passage of the Dream Act. The self-assured tone of earlier shows when discussing the passing of the Dream Act transformed into a cry for political action. Coupled with this cry was a growing sentiment that barring Victoria City's undocumented Latinos from community and state colleges was an expression of the prevalent racist attitudes directed toward Latinos. In the following excerpt, two student hosts discuss the structural inequality that existed for undocumented Latinos, which they connected to more overt forms of racism directed at the Latino community.

Zelda: What are some of the barriers that you have seen that confront Hispanic students?

Ramón: Well, right now the most important or the strongest is our immigration status because right now Hispanic students who don't have or haven't gotten legal papers are being charged as international students. They would probably

charge me as a Mexican student who has come here to study, and this costs a lot of money.

Zelda: Out-of-state.

Ramón: Yes, out-of-state. Also, it is like, I told you, the racism of some of the students who do not want us. It has been in the news that there have been strong conflicts between blacks and Hispanics.

This discussion suggested that the students viewed their inability to attend college within the larger national dialogue concerning the need for immigration reform. Although Ramón cited racism as playing a role in how Mexicans are being depicted in the media, his focus was on the greater structural barrier of his nonresidential status. Because the students viewed their marginalization in terms of a much larger political issue, which as members of the Latino community they needed to address, they chose not to partake in self-defeating (i.e., dropping out of school) or conformist (i.e., helping undocumented students find non-federal and state scholarships for college) forms of resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Instead, they chose to bring attention to this issue through political organizing and protest and thereby resisted their subordination in a manner that was transformational for their peers and larger community.

Nuestra Voz provided a public space for the youth of Victoria City to better understand what it means to be undocumented in the United States. Gonzales (2011) wrote, “The transition to illegality brings with it a period of disorientation, whereby undocumented youth confront legal limitations and engage in a process of retooling and reorienting themselves for new adult lives” (p. 606). By hosting shows that explained and emphasized the importance of the passage of the Dream Act, *Nuestra Voz* provided the undocumented youth in their community a means by which to constructively resist their legal marginalization through civic engagement and activism. For many undocumented youth, the process of understanding the significance of their lack of authorization can be defeating and lead to self-destructive behaviors (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2011). For the students of *Nuestra Voz*, it was a time of heightened political engagement and activism.

The culminating act around the importance of the passage of the Dream Act was the students' organization of and participation in the April 10 march for immigration reform. April 10, 2006, was designated a national day of action for immigration justice. Across the nation students and workers alike were marching to protest the unjust treatment undocumented immigrants receive in the United States. El Puente planned to host a rally at the town hall to voice the Latino community's dissatisfaction with the city's treatment of immigrants. Initially, the expected number of participants was estimated in the hundreds, but with the national attention around immigration legislation, as well as a rising movement galvanizing around immigration reform, what had been seen originally as a small town rally grew into a statewide demonstration which would fill the streets of Victoria City. While the staff at El Puente was busy organizing the demonstration, the five students who were responsible for the broadcasting of *Nuestra Voz* at the time of this study were working to organize a student march that would begin at the

high school and end at the town hall. In collaboration with the staff at El Puente, the students worked tirelessly after school and on the weekends helping to organize their community's first public show of dissatisfaction with the status quo. They made signs for the protesters to carry and mock graduation caps for students to wear; they helped to publicize the immigration rally in their school and community, and they wrote and delivered speeches on the importance of the passage of the Dream Act.

April 10 March

Standing outside Victoria City's High School, one could hear the final bell ring. As the doors opened, a slew of students clad in white shirts rushed out. Seeing the sea of brown faces as students called to one another in a mix of Spanish and English produced a sort of geographical disorientation. Even the white shirts the students wore as a symbol of the peaceful intentions of the demonstration evoked images of the mandatory school uniforms so prevalent south of the U.S. border. Had it not been for the half a dozen or so teachers and administrators calling out directions in pronounced Southern accents, an onlooker would have had a hard time placing this scene in a small city in the American South.

The crowd of students began to proceed toward town with a few teachers taking up the rear and three or four students in the lead calling out chants, which were echoed back by the marchers who followed. The students marched less than a mile to one of the chicken processing plants, whose promise of jobs had been the reason so many Latino immigrants had come to this particular city in the first place. A middle-aged Latino couple walking hand-in-hand joined the student marchers, while workers, mothers with children in tow, and community activists coming from all directions converged at this meeting place. A large crowd of adults had already gathered. Signs that the students of *Nuestra Voz* had spent weeks making were being distributed to the marchers with slogans like *Ningun Humano Es Ilegal* ("No human Being Is Illegal"), *Todos Somos Inmigrantes* ("We Are All Immigrants"), *Our Future Is Your Future*. Volunteers were passing out blue cardboard hats meant to look like graduation caps to the student marchers. After twenty minutes of making sure that everyone had a sign if she or he wanted one and a bottle of water if he or she needed one, the students from *Nuestra Voz*, carrying the blue-and-yellow banner of El Puente, led the marchers through the streets of Victoria City toward town hall.

Once the students arrived at the town hall, they were greeted by more demonstrators from outside communities. In the weeks that preceded the march, interest in immigration had grown so intensely that the officials of Victoria City had decided that only the residents of Victoria City could march but that anyone could participate in the immigration rally, which was held outside the town hall. Some estimates place the total number of demonstrators in attendance as high as ten thousand. As the marching students joined the crowd at the rally, one could hear the voice of the executive director of El Puente bellowing from the podium, "Shame on you, Victoria City!" as she cited a list of infractions committed against the Latinos of Victoria City by the police department, housing authority, and local public schools.

The Students' Speeches

The students had prepared to present their speeches as one coherent message that was divided into four sections and split between English and Spanish. Each student was responsible for delivering a portion of the speech, and the students were to alternate between Spanish and English, with Carlos and Zelda giving a portion in both languages.

Ramón, who by far was the most charismatic speaker, was to begin in Spanish. As he took to the podium and began reading his part of the speech, he became visibly charged by the enthusiasm of the crowd and abandoned the written words. Instead, he delivered his own on-the-spot, impassioned speech on the urgency of the Dream Act. Although slightly less charismatic than Ramón, all of the other students ended their speeches with a vociferous cry that the future of Latino youth, documented or not, was inextricably tied to the future of this nation. The following is Ramón's transcribed and translated speech.

Ramón's Speech

We aren't going to stay quiet, right?

Because we always have to fight!

And this is so that we can move forward.

Because of this, we have come here together to get what we want, and what we want is the Dream Act.

The Dream Act is a dream of ours as students that everyone working together could make a reality. Dream Act!

Let the students lead! Let the students lead!

We also need the help of the government to pass this act and turn it into a reality. Our dream!

[The crowd chanted, "Yes, we can! Yes, we can! Yes, we can!"]

We are young people with a lot in front of us.

Our dream is the Dream Act, and we are the future.

We are talented young people, and we can show this country and our families who live in poverty . . .

It is very emotional being here and asking the support of the government, but we will show everyone that we will work and succeed in this life! Dream Act! Our future! Your future!

Much of what has been written about student resistance has focused on self-defeating behaviors that serve only to further marginalize an already marginalized and oppressed student population. Solorzano and Bernal's (2001) work on transformational resistance represents a marked turn from these earlier theories of resistance. As proposed by Solorzano and Bernal, the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz* exhibited a form of resistance that was political, collective, conscious, constructive, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change are possible. Through their involvement with the community organization El Puente, these students were able to honestly acknowledge the obstacles that lay before them and confronted them in a way that served to better their community's standing in the broader society. The students in *Nuestra Voz* understood that their chance to continue their education was part of a much larger national debate. Rather than give in to a sense of victimization and defeat, they believed it was their duty to keep fighting. This belief is clearly

articulated in the following discussion that was part of the radio show broadcast soon after the April 10 march.

Zelda: Do you think the march was worth the effort?

Elena: In my opinion, it was all worth it. I mean, all we do in the community is worth it, especially the Hispanics. We are very united.

Ramón: This march was worth the effort because with this we are able to make a change. It can help in other ways. Even if the Dream Act does not pass, [the march] could help so that these students continue to fight for their future, for their ability to go forward.

Ramón was astute in recognizing that it was not just the passage of the Dream Act that was at stake but the opportunity that the march offered to his fellow students to assert their agency and fight for reform. The Dream Act has yet to pass, but by marching in the streets and leading one of the state's largest demonstrations for immigration reform, the students publically rejected the imposed identity of "illegal" and collectively constructed an identity of activists. They also dismantled the shame that can accompany being undocumented and presented the issue of blocked entry to higher education and the legal economy as fundamental to the well-being of the entire Latino community, thus disrupting the false binary between "legal" and "illegal" immigrant (Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2011). None of this would have been possible had it not been for the space provided by *Nuestra Voz* for students to collectively unpack the dangers they found in U.S. society that began with the show's first broadcast in 2003.

Transformational Mentors

The staff at El Puente embraced what Chávez and Soep (2005) termed "a pedagogy of collegiality," whereby "novices develop skills, understandings, tacit forms, and habits of knowledge through joint activity with more experienced others" (p. 420). The director of El Puente's youth programs, when working with the students on *Nuestra Voz*, provided guidance and encouraged students to make changes if she considered something inappropriate or underresearched; however, she approached her role as the director of youth programs as that of a mentor, not a supervisor.

There was recognition among the staff at *El Puente* that the students needed to be active and equal participants in the fight for equitable educational policies because the students were the ones being denied access to higher education as a result of their residential status. The staff offered opportunities for students to find their own agency. As community organizers and activists, El Puente's staff were well connected with other community-based organizations throughout the region. They placed a high value on networking and collaboration and saw their work in Victoria City as part of the larger goal of improving the lives of Latinos statewide. As part of the students' involvement with El Puente, they were invited to attend an annual forum sponsored by a nonprofit, statewide advocacy and public policy organization dedicated to strengthening the Latino community in North Carolina. Leaders and advocates from across the state were in attendance, and the agenda

consisted of seminars, workshops, discussions, and activities designed to develop leadership skills among young people.

The students from *Nuestra Voz*, with the help of the director, Maria, facilitated a workshop on youth and public radio shows. The students were responsible for sharing their personal experiences with the audience and answering questions about *Nuestra Voz*. Maria talked mostly about the history of Victoria City and the challenges faced by the Latino community living there, while the students described the process of radio production and broadcasting. Not only did this workshop provide the students with an authentic opportunity for public speaking, it also granted them the experience of collaborating with an adult and well-established community activist as a peer. By providing opportunities for students to network with members of the Latino community engaged in social justice work, the staff at El Puente nurtured an activist identity while acting as transformational mentors (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Conclusion

The students of *Nuestra Voz* had an understanding of the obstacles that stood before them. The ideological and political clarity of El Puente's staff made them strong mentors in helping the students of *Nuestra Voz* name these obstacles and place them within the larger framework of social justice. El Puente nurtured a proacademic identity among the students in an effort to combat the allure of street culture. However, unlike many classrooms, where the myth of social equality and meritocracy are promoted, the staff at El Puente engaged the students in candid dialogue about the structural, economic, and social obstacles that lay before them. As bilingual/bicultural students who experienced significant marginalization on account of their language, ethnicity, and residential status, they were at risk for adopting self-defeating behaviors (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, 2006). *Nuestra Voz* provided a space for students to name the racism and xenophobia so prevalent in the host community. Their work with the staff at El Puente helped them to place the roots of their subordination into a broader historical and social context.

Through the guidance of El Puente, the students developed a sense of agency that would be a vital asset in their continued fight for social justice. As activists, El Puente's staff recognized the importance of networking and building social capital for the students. By exposing students to strong leaders deeply grounded in the Latino community and culture, they helped mediate the assimilationist agenda of the schools. Working alongside seasoned community organizers to help empower the Latino community in overcoming the challenges they faced as immigrants, these students experienced a transformation in which they saw themselves as essential agents in the dismantling of social and political inequities. After the march, the students all commented on how surprised they were to witness the overwhelming support they had from older Latinos in the community. Zelda discussed the pride that her father—with whom she had quite a contentious relationship—had displayed at seeing his daughter lead the marchers through town and take to the podium outside city hall. And it was the youth activists who were highlighted in the local

press coverage of the event, sending a strong message that they were well positioned to lead the movement for immigration reform.

Schools genuinely interested in improving the academic performance of their Latino youth would be wise to borrow from the practices of El Puente. Candidly addressing larger social inequities with students would aid in deterring their marginalization within the classroom. *Nuestra Voz* provided a space for Latino students to express themselves in their own language about issues they were facing on a daily basis. The content of their discussions was grounded in their own cultural landmarks. Providing bicultural role models who do not require that students abandon large swaths of their cultural fabric could also lessen the marginalization felt by so many Latino youth (Trueba, 2002). Creating spaces where Latino youth can support one another and develop positive peer networks would provide a positive social resource that is missing for so many Latino youth in our schools (Stanton-Salazar, 2004).

In 2015, even as we continue to wait for the passage of the Dream Act, organizations like El Puente are well positioned to critically address issues that directly impact students' lives: They are not held to the same measures of accountability by the state; they generally serve a smaller and less diverse population; they can focus primarily on the sociocultural issues that impact academic performance. And yet community-based organizations and the roles they play in the lives of students are too often left out of the educational discourse. Heath and McLaughlin (1993) recognized over two decades ago that community-based organizations could be the essential anchor in the lives of low-income minority children who face repeated adversity. By understanding the ways in which community-based organizations successfully serve marginalized youth, schools would be better informed when implementing their own programs aimed at these populations.

Critical pedagogy, which is concerned with righting social inequities, was at the core of the El Puente's instruction (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 1989, 1995; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). The students who passed through their doors were given access to community activists who were not afraid to charge the politicians, law officials, and educators in their community with being discriminatory. The staff at El Puente modeled effective ways of working for social change and inculcated the students of *Nuestra Voz* on how to be activists. The students were made aware of the political and social battles before them and taught how to fight for social justice, not against learning.

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