

# Critical Education

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## *La Batalla Continua:*

### *Latina/o Educators Democratizing Educational Practices*

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#### **Abstract**

*This journey analysis shares the counterstories of practicing bilingual Latina/o educators teaching predominately Latino youth. The study is situated in a bi-national (US/Mexico) tri-city (El Paso, Las Cruces, Juarez), and tri-state (Texas, New Mexico, Chihuahua,) context. When teachers of color voice their concerns about oppressive institutional policies and practices, a counter-story is produced. One way to bring Latina/o students' and their teachers' counterstories to the center of schooling policies and practices is to create intentional spaces to examine the realities of how these policies and practices are oppressive in nature. These intentional spaces offer self-reliance and solidarity. Solidarity can lead to mobilization, an important aspect of the inherent praxis of this critical intentional space.*



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## **“La Batalla”**

This study shares the counterstories of practicing bilingual Latina/o educators teaching predominantly Latina/o youth. The study is situated in a bi-national (US/Mexico) tri-city (El Paso, Las Cruces, Juarez), and tri-state (Texas, New Mexico, Chihuahua,) context. A counterstory is a concept embraced in Critical Race Theory. Tara Yosso (2006) states, “counterstories challenge the façade of the “truth” by showing the perspective of racialized power and privilege generating this truth” (p.13-14); thus, when teachers of color voice their concerns about oppressive institutional policies and practices, a counterstory is produced. These counterstories being produced, however, does not imply that there will be changes in institutional policies and practices; on the contrary, they usually fall on deaf ears (Gándara, & Contreras, 2009). However, practicing teachers and their students who are resisting these oppressive institutional practices and policies must find ways for deaf ears to listen to them. One way to bring Latina/o students’ and their teachers’ counterstories to the center of schooling policies and practices is to create intentional spaces that allow us to examine the realities of how these policies and practices are oppressive in nature. This ‘intentional space’, as a strategy, offers a two-fold result. First, it creates a sense of self-reliance. Self-reliance in this context is theorized as Anisur Rahman (1993) posits,

...as a state of mind that regards one’s own mental and material resources as the primary stock to draw on in the pursuits of one’s objectives, and finds emotional fulfillment not only in achieving the objectives as such but also in the very fact of having achieved them primarily by using one’s own resources. (p. 19)

Self-reliance is that energy that actors gain, i.e. an inner urge, as a result of knowing that they are being oppressed, which knowledge fuels the action to be taken. Second, this strategy builds solidarity amongst educators and their students who are actively resisting oppressive institutional policies and practices. Solidarity can lead to mobilization, an important aspect of the inherent praxis of this critical intentional space.

Our work is aimed to advanced Patricia Gándara and Megan Hopkins (2010) research on language policies. They tell us that “Unfortunately, the focus of most studies related to these policies have been almost exclusively on student academic outcomes; there has been relatively little written about the impact of these policies on teachers” (p. 221). The counterstories presented will bring light to how school policies restrict the work of Latina/o/bilingual teachers.

## **Methodology**

Using the metaphor of journey, the researchers and its participants documented the process that took place in a university seminar. The seminar format was transformed into a cultural circle. Paulo Freire (1998), tells us that in the circle

...teaching is not transmitting knowledge for the act of teaching is constituted as such, the act of learning must be preceded by or concomitant with the act of learning the content or noble object which the learner also become producers of knowledge that was taught to them. Only in so far learner become thinking subjects and recognized that they are much thinking subjects as the teachers is it possible for the learner to become productive subject of meaning or knowledge of the object. It is in this dialectical movement that teaching and learning become knowing and re-knowing. (p. 89 – 90)

The cultural circle yields a process, the journey, it was untidy, non-linear, and complex, in order to document this process the researchers adapted Hal Lawson (1999) journey analysis methodology to develop a chronology of the key steps or stages of the process that evidenced in the cultural circle. *Testimonio* (Beverly, 2000) was used to document the oppressive and undemocratic practices, which also evidenced in the seminar. The inquiry strategy of testimonio “intertwines the ‘desire for objectivity’ and ‘desire for solidarity’ in its very situation of production, circulation and reception...its unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (Beverly, 2005, p. 547).

Testimonios are not always used as a method of telling the story of the oppressed. However, when told in this manner testimonios becomes counterstories. It is important to note that sometimes testimonios are used to tell a stock story. Bell (2010) says that stock stories are stories that help to support hegemony. Stock stories, for example, are stories supporting the American Dream or “pull yourself up from your bootstraps”. In this article testimonios and counterstories are used interchangeably since students were asked to question their thinking and stories in order to gain *concientización* and to get to the core of a counterstory.

Given that it was impossible to fully understand our journey as a linear or step-by-step process, we then used the metaphor of a loom, built on Mayan concepts of *utzil* and *pixab*, to interweave our testimonios to help define our reality and give meaning to this journey.

## Theoretical Framework

As critical pedagogues, we used the Freirean (1970, 1992, 2000, 2005) concept of *cultural circle* as a strategy to create that intentional space to uncover and gain conscientization of the inherent injustices in the institutions of schooling that violently attack Latina/o students and educators. A fundamental dimension of the cultural circle is dialogue; it was through dialogue we began to think critically about the realities of how schooling policies and practices were oppressive in nature to Latina/o students and educators, consequently generating further critical thinking and leading us to tell our lived experience through stories of how these schooling policies and practices oppressed and many times dismissed us. As a strategy, this process served as a medium to organize the emotional identification of the participants with the collective purpose of studying the realities of the oppressive nature of school policies and practices. The dialogical character of this journey was captured in testimonio. The journey resulted in endogenous themes that named the hegemonic schooling policies and practices, enabling us to develop solidarity and projects of resistance.

In addition to Freirean work, the authors employed counterstories to “build community, challenge the perceived wisdom of those society center, nurture community cultural wealth memory and resistance, and can facilitate transformation in education” (Yosso, 2006, p. 14-15). The inquiry strategy of testimonio was used to document the participants’ counterstories that were endogenous to the cultural circle.

## The Journey

### *Point of Origin*

The journey commenced in the academic fall of 2009 in a Bilingual Education Internship course, with 9 graduate students—2 males and 7 females—who also worked in public school that use multiple forms of bilingual education programming. All teachers in this study, including the

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instructor and co-researcher, are bilingual educators. The course professor/researcher (female) and co-researcher (male) collectively decided that the course would expand its objectives to include the study of the students' and the instructor's experiences in dealing with the oppressive nature of schooling policies and practices. It was decided to conduct an inquiry into the realities of Latina/o's perspectives of working in public schools across the borderlands. All members identified as Latina/os in the course were also practicing educators in schools with high percentages of Latino students. The course readings included Critical Race Theory, critical pedagogy, Freirean pedagogy, and scholarship related to the struggles of Latina/o education which included tracking, foundations of bilingual education, and the marginalization of Latina/o youth and their teachers. As the Latina/o graduate students began to read, reflect, and dialogue about the many issues surrounding their practice in public school bilingual education, many concerns surfaced, including: ignorance about bilingual education and the racist practices that still plague borderland schools and educators. Utilizing the Freirean concept of cultural circle the course instructor role transformed into the role of a facilitator. The facilitator's role was to create a safe environment for participants to dialogue and as an animator ensuring that participants' voices were honored. As the students dialogued about their lived experiences as bilingual educators and identified the underlying oppressive practices the facilitator encouraged them to reflect on what they were saying and then invited them to think about strategies for action against those oppressive practices. Among those racist practices identified at the start of this journey were the marginalization, criminalization, and segregation of Latino youth and English Language Learners in light of denying Latino students' equal access to more challenging courses such as college preparatory, advanced placement (AP), language arts, calculus, and chemistry. Our cultural circle decided that it was appropriate and a moral obligation as Latina/o educators working in public schools to address these issues that contribute significantly to the creation of an undereducated Latino population. Rebecca shares her story,

*As a Latina educator, I feel my profession has become a continuous struggle to provide students with a greater opportunity to succeed academically. I became an educator because I wanted to be the voice that my students and their parents needed to feel comfortable and welcomed inside the classroom. Many times, I felt like I did not belong in the school setting. As a student, I encountered situations where I was oppressed because of my first language. When I entered the university, I realized that doing well in my classes was going to be a big challenge. I did not have a well-developed academic language. Consequently, some of the comments I got from professors were unkind and even made me complain about my culture. I will never forget a conversation I had with a professor, where she asked me to see her about an assignment I had just turned in. The first thing she said to me when I approached her was, "Second language right?" She continued to talk about all the errors in my paper and with each one saying, "This isn't English." I began to think I wasn't as intelligent as I thought I was. Language has been the primary reason Latino students have been marked as inferior. Her comments harmed me very much. I began to protest against my language and wished English to be my first language. English, as my first language wouldn't cause me to struggle to do well in school. I also questioned the idea of staying in school. Gándara (2009) talked about how high-achieving Latino students usually have less confidence in themselves and are less capable than their white or Asian peers. I felt I wasn't meant to pursue a higher education.*

*After taking several bilingual education classes I realized that it was my duty to be a bilingual teacher. The knowledge that I have gained as a bilingual student has helped me become a better teacher. My two cultures assist me when it comes to knowing where my students come from. I know how to teach them because I was just like them. As a teacher, I can identify with my students. Many of them are living through the same things that I experienced.*

The aforementioned theme of bilingualism was prominent among the majority of the members of our cultural circle, who all had a shared set of experiences which prompted a shared understanding: the realization that speaking another language other than English would be interpreted by teachers to mean that you were stupid, not intelligent, and would be marginalized. Many members of the group had internalized this message from their experiences in education. Valenzuela (1999) argues that schools are subtractive spaces for Latina/o youth. Schools divest Latina/o youth worldviews to the subaltern spaces in addition to their language (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

As the seminar progressed, Latina/o graduate students discussed the many issues surrounding bilingual education as points of entry into the inquiry. A foundational question of great concern was: How do society's ignorance about bilingual education and the racist practices continue to plague our public schools and its educators? Topics that surrounded our overarching question included: those racist practices which serve to marginalize, criminalize, and segregate Latino youth; also, the issues confronting English Language Learners and educators who address or fail to address them were highly debated in this journey point of origin; in addition, the racist practices that continue to oppress and deny students equal access to more challenging courses such as college preparatory, advanced placement (AP), etc. were brought to the table. Listen to the voice of one culture circle member, Nayeli, regarding a racist practice:

*Being a Latina bilingual educator in a secondary setting comes with a lot of societal misconceptions and ignorance about bilingualism. As an undergraduate student, I was working on my student teaching in a regular monolingual class with a much older, white cooperating teacher. Her views about bilingual education and Hispanic students were extremely racist. She loudly proclaimed that bilingual education was nothing more than a crutch that our students expected to use for the rest of their lives, rather than learn English. She felt that because of bilingual education, students expected to be spoken to in Spanish in all settings, and therefore would never bother to learn English. It was implied that our students were a bunch of stupid, lazy, free loading immigrants here to milk society of her hard-earned tax dollars. She had no reservations about offending me, a child of Mexican immigrants, nor did she at least disguise her disgust and pretend to be somewhat politically correct. She spewed her racist ideologies like it was her job to educate me and let me know that providing bilingual education was useless. There are a lot of racist ideologies in our public schools. At another campus a Physical Education teacher, who is now an administrator loudly proclaimed how offended she was when she went shopping in El Paso, Texas because the clerks addressed customers in Spanish. She demanded that because El Paso, Texas is in the United States that all clerks learn to speak English and that those who could or would not speak English should not be given a job. She is obviously a supporter of the English-only initiative, in a 97% Spanish speaking community.*

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*Those are two examples of the discrimination our Latino students are exposed to daily in our public schools. Like the students, bilingual instructors are also seen as inferior. It is assumed that we are not very bright and that we are in bilingual education because our skills are not good enough to function in a regular monolingual class. In addition to our perceived deficits, we are also not very good teachers. We haven't done our jobs. Because of us, the school and our students cannot make AYP. I told a teacher I was working on a master's of arts in education with a specialization in bilingual education, her response was; "there is a lot of job security in that field." I did not know whether to thank her or avoid her. It was a compliment but not really. Her comment had some negative undertones that made me uncomfortable. I wondered if she assumed I was in this field for the job security, or because the school was flooded by immigrants. Whatever the case was, she was sadly mistaken, as cuts in bilingual education programs are all too common these days. Overall, I feel there is a negative stigma attached to being a bilingual educator.*

The hegemonic push of English monolingualism is rampant in the borderlands. It is important to know and understand that this hegemonic posture on English is instrumental and serves a purpose. In this era of English-only legislation, as Macedo, Gounari, and Dendrinos (2003) point out, the politics of intolerance lead to the colonialism of English, which is supported by the majoritarian thus colonizing Latina/o youth language. Gándara and Hopkins (2010) argue that these national policies movements hurt Latina/o youth and their teachers.

Our seminar transformed as the dialogue continued and the circle gained consensus that it was appropriate and a moral obligation for Latina/o practicing educators working in public schools to address those issues that they believe contribute significantly to the under-achievement gap and the creation of an undereducated Latina/o student.

The participants of the cultural circle engaged with literature related to critical pedagogy and bilingual education to gain a language that would help in deconstructing the public schools' policies and practices to uncover the oppressive discourses inherent in them as well as contributing to the process of *concientización* (Freire, 1972). The engagement of deconstructing schools' policies and practices and the gaining of participants' *concientización* focused the circle in a study of the distressing trends affecting our community and its' Latino population. As critical educators concerned with challenging the status quo, the cultural circle moved into a praxis stage of education for social justice. One outcome of this inquiry was the development of a shared awareness that the participants could no longer be silent witnesses from the sidelines and do nothing, but could – and would – move into action by reporting dismal, and alarming facts about Latina/o youth as a population falling further behind as illustrated in Julia's story:

*It has come to my attention that many people from different races and ethnicities have at one point or another felt oppression; this is the implementation of power in a troublesome, unkind, or unreasonable manner. It is through social oppression that different social groups have dysfunctions and discrimination against an identified group that is being pushed not only by an "outsider" but also by someone in their own race and ethnicity. To some extent I realized that I as a second grade bilingual teacher I have not only stereotyped but also oppressed my students to the point of fear, intimidation, and sarcasm in a cruel manner. For example: I speak loudly and drastically slowly to my Spanish-speaking students. This makes them feel small and inferior to me. The tone of voice that I use makes*

*my students feel like they are mentally challenged. Sadly, I have been oblivious, insensible, and completely unaware of the pressure and oppression my students go through not only in my classroom but also at home. However, through careful observation I also noticed not only myself as an oppressor but also a victim of oppression.*

*As a Hispanic woman, I can now reflect back on the experiences of oppression that I have gone through my whole life. These quiet experiences have passed by in a subtle yet powerful manner in which I now teach what I have learned in an unjust way. It has come to my attention that oppression is a form of psychological abuse in which race and ethnicity take a toll on a person mind and soul. At some point it begins to feel like not only is my ethnicity a problem but also my home language.*

*Luckily, I come from a supportive family who encouraged bilingualism. But even as a child, it was embedded in my brain that Spanish was to be spoken only at home while English was the language to be used at school. This ideology has till this day remained the same and somehow I feel it affected the way I learned and was a form of oppression. I am teaching in the borderland area of Mexico and the U.S. I come across daily with students who are fresh from Mexico. However, they are U.S citizens entering the American system of public education for the first time. In my school, these new students come with only their native language on their backs and the Mexican education they received. Gándara and Contreras (2009) state the following,*

*“Because American schools are so fundamentally monolingual, students with strong education backgrounds but who are not English proficient cannot demonstrate what they know in the classroom and so are assumed to have a weak educational background” (p. 211).*

*Unfortunately, I have seen and heard teachers underestimate, undermine and humiliate the knowledge and wisdom these new students come with.*

The realization of this teacher, that she was the oppressed oppressing, was an eye opener as she engaged in the study. She realized that she was upholding majoritarian story of deficit thinking about bilingual students. Through reflection and dialogue the teacher became *concientizada* leading to the discovery of her oppressive practices and their transformation. The cultural circle afforded her and all the members an intentional space to dialogue, reflect and act as per Freire (1972) theory of pedagogy of oppression. The outcome is the powerful reality of knowing that we now know how the insidious oppressive practices reproduce and how they animate genes rationally.

Another inquiry outcome emerged: that of the realization that the combined experiences of the participants would be of particular interest to future generations of Latina/o educators as well as mainstream educators of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds working in our public schools. As participants continued to engage in studying the realities of Latina/o practicing educators in public schools, another inquiry outcome became evident. It became clear that due to the lack of research from the field, useful information that could apply to Latina/o students' and instructors' experiences is lacking; this realization led the circle to conclude that not only recognition of collective experience, but also discourse developed from analyzing these experiences, will be essential to lure scholarly, political and social attention to the perspectives of Latina/o educators.

The project's journey point of origin rested in dialogue, collaboration, and a continuous study of the realities of Latina/o educators and their students' discriminatory practices and behaviors that contribute to the oppressions they face. The journey point of origin was enlightening and transformative as well as essential. In this collective, individuals possessed an identity with the cultural circle which registered emotionally in the consciousness of its members as part of their "individual" interest; this shared consciousness helped the participants in turn realize the collective objectives which in turn gave fulfillment to each individual member. The sense that the participants were bilingual practicing educators coming together to advocate and transform public schooling for future Latina/o practicing educators and their students in the wake of English-only movement/initiatives was exciting and propelled the participants to continue in the journey.

### *Preliminary Mapping*

As the participants grappled with studying the realities of Latina/o youths' realities in public schooling, they came to the awakening of critical consciousness and various themes emerged from the cultural circle. This critical awakening led into cultural action by beginning to chart the circle's destination. What was spawned first in this journey was the desire for the circle to study the theories of anti-dialogical and dialogical action as proposed by Freire (2005). This desire led the circle to learn that anti-dialogical theory is categorized as conquest, divide-and-rule strategy, manipulation, and cultural invasion all which its intent is to continue to enforce power over Latina/o practicing educators and their students and lead them to fear freedom. Knowing this, the circle opted to the theory of dialogical cultural action, which espoused cooperation, unity for liberation, and cultural action for an education that is responsive and free. Participants came to understand that in order to do this they had to engage critical friends who would act in solidarity with the practicing educators' emancipator political project. Emma shares her story:

*As a language arts teacher in a monolingual eighth grade classroom, I have been an oppressor by asking the students to practice their English rather than speak Spanish. I have over-corrected their language mistakes. I ask students to stand for the pledge of allegiance. I remind them that in other countries, not standing for the pledge of allegiance could get them thrown in jail. I have pressured students to learn English. I have also questioned student's abilities and wondered how they got to middle and high school when their abilities were so low. At the time, I did not see my actions as being oppressive, I meant well. I never meant for my requests to speak English to devalue my student's language and culture. I can see why my comments, especially coming from a Latina were oppressing my students. I thought I was giving my student's strategies for acquiring the English language. Forced assimilation is never good. It leads to resistance. At the secondary level, the resistance is intimidating. Students are big and the body language screams, "leave me alone." Most of these students have mentally dropped out and refuse to learn. How do you undo all the damage that has already been done? Shamefully, I did nothing other than remind students they were failing and needed to do their work.*

*There are other issues that tend to make me an oppressor. About three years ago I was house shopping in the area next to the golf course. In Anthony, this is a very nice and somewhat upscale neighborhood. During the construction phase all of the lots across the street were sold to the Tierra Del Sol housing corporation. That company provides homes to low-income families using sweat equity in lieu of a*



*down payment. Immediately the entire neighborhood was upset and people who had just bought homes put their homes on the market and refused to live there. I also felt that a Tierra Del Sol development would bring down property values of the homes on that street. I did not buy a home there.*

*Other times I have joined in the ridiculing of the Electronic Funds Transfer card (EBT) for the food stamp program. To my husband and a lot of people I know it is the Eat Better Tonight card. At times I resent having to just get by, not qualifying for benefits while I see EBT clients buying all kinds of junk food at the Pick Quick.*

*I have made negative assumptions about the parents of my students based on their appearance. I feel neck tattoos are vulgar and praise prison culture. I was in no position to judge that parent but I did. I have made negative comments about writing off incarcerated people. Many of my student's have a parent, sibling, baby's daddy, or other family member who is incarcerated. I have been insensitive. I advise young ladies to "lose that loser." Two of the campuses I work at have a zero tolerance policy for a number of things. I have to enforce the rules and do my job. I have contributed to criminalizing our students. I have to assume that Hispanic boys that look a certain way will tag the bathroom, textbook, or table. Although I have never searched a student, I have checked that they did not tag the area they occupied.*

*The most oppressive thing I have done as a teacher was to blame the victim (the student) for not making AYP. It is very frustrating to spend a lot of time on a lesson and in the end have the students not master what I had worked so hard to teach. I now know that standardized testing is flawed, unrealistic, and that monolingual students cannot pass either. After reading and learning about NCLB I now realize that English language learners are not flawed; the tests are flawed.*

*I have confessed my oppressive behaviors. I am still a work in progress but I do try to constantly educate myself to stop being oppressive and stereotyping my students.*

The engagement with anti-logical and dialogical theories enables members of the group to pursue a new understanding of their teaching practices, especially those which serve to maintain oppressive structures in schooling. Reaching a level of consciousness is the start of any movement toward resistances to oppressive actions. Andrade (2007) posits that inquiry study groups do impact teacher practices. At the start of mapping our journey, we became cognizant of how important it was to come to an awakening regarding our oppressive acts and more importantly how we became servants to these dominant discourses. From this *concientización* work, we charted our course knowing that it could always have detours, intentional spaces for reflective practice, and a place in the journey where voices and stories could be celebrated. Framing this preliminary mapping included attempts to answer the following questions:

- What does it mean today to be a Latina/o teacher?
- How do we as Latina/o teachers oppress students?
- How do we as Latina/o teachers resist oppressing students?

### *Critical Friends*

Through this journey, we discovered that it takes more than one person, element, or strategy to carry out transforming visions of Latina/o practicing educators and their students' public schooling. The circle realized that their goals could not be reached without those key elements necessary for supporting Latina/o practicing educators and their students. An inquiry outcome that emerged, at this point of the journey, was the awareness that for true efforts to be achieved, every participant must make a further commitment to this journey. Participants had to own their worldviews and the sense that they were decision-making subjects. This realization, the circle's essential elements, and critical friends became the pillars of our journey. The members of the circle were cognizant that although there might be obstacles along the way, their solidarity united them through their experiences and desires to make the profession of educators a positive influence for our Latina/o students; they realized a shared, lofty transforming vision.

Critical friends of the circle included members of the communities in which the Latina/o practicing educators lived in and taught. Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras (2009) tell us, "Certainly, teachers and administrators from the students' own community are more likely to understand the issues that students and their families face, and to be familiar with both problems and resources in the community" (p. 109). Participants in the circle were familiar with the issues Latino families face, making it critical that they be involved in this journey. Violeta shares her story:

*To be a Latina/o means to be willing to stand up. As working class Latina/o we have had a lived experience of discrimination because of language, race, ethnicity, poverty, and gender. This helps us connect to our students. But one thing I have realized is that we help to perpetuate racism, classism, and sexism when we do not stand up for youth rights. Fear immobilizes many of the teachers because they fear losing their job. Capitalism makes us need our job and to defend it and keep it some believe we must do as they say even when I know it is not right. But as a Latina educator after my second year teaching I decided I was going to do what was right even if it meant losing my job. I fought alongside with my high school students. I remember crying with them because they told me: "You are our Raza, you are suppose to defend us. You talk social change and justice y que!" They were right, and so I decided then that I was going to stand with my students. I stood up against the school and their discriminatory ESL practices. It won me not getting tenure. In another school it won me not being re-hired. But it won me a reputation that I would not exchange for anything of La maestra who is not puro blah blah blah but one who tries to walk the talk. I have to say I have never been without a job offer. Because just as there are people in the school that love obedience there are others who love the youth and will hire you in a second. I am not going to lie and say I did not fear losing my job, especially after the first experience. But working in predominately people of color students the students themselves will push you to say: A ver, si esta maestra es puro pedo o si se va mover".*

It is evident that this teacher is aware of the plight of many Latino students; for her, this awareness resulted in advocating for them. Although the participants' students' and parents' voices were not represented in the circle, it was felt and decided that participants could speak on their behalf. The fact that the participants have similar experiences to those of students and parents as Latina/o practicing educators was enough to empower circle participants to do so. The realization that all stakeholders in this experience have lived through oppression, and have nothing

else to prove but growth as individuals, created solidarity and the need to rely on each other to commit to being actively involved at all times in this quest. This “*aja*” moment created a sense of community and built trust among the circle members. Everyone’s experience was validated, thus creating a collective sense of belonging to the experience.

At this juncture in the journey, it became evident that the support from administrators is necessary to break the cycle. The understanding that without support of administrators, the struggle to overcome obstacles will be greater became paramount. The circle acknowledged the need for administrators to support school policies and practices that are fair and just and to believe that all students and teachers are capable of reaching goals, and should be at liberty to speak up for themselves and each other without the constant threat of being reprimanded. This administrator support is imperative to allow change to happen. Priscilla shares her story:

*As I graduated college and received my teaching degree, I felt that I was equipped with the right tools and knowledge to make a difference. I felt that as a Latina teacher, I had so much to offer to a school district and especially to students. As I sat on my first interview, I quickly realized that college had not prepared me for the real world of teaching. The school was not interested in my personal philosophy of teaching; they just wanted to know if I fit the criteria and personality of the school. Needless to say, my first teaching job was in a school that didn’t promote or validate multicultural/bilingual education. I was the only Hispanic teacher in the whole school and that’s where I started to feel oppressed. I knew my long-term goal was to eventually transfer to an elementary school where the population is 95% Hispanic and they have a dual language program, but I had to get my foot in the door and in order to do that I had to teach there first.*

*I was determined to make the best out of working there and I still felt that I could expose my students to a multicultural way of thinking. I felt that was my chance to make a difference and at least my students would be in a classroom where differences were validated and discussed. But I quickly realized that was never going to happen because the environment didn’t lend itself to thinking critically about issues. My students were raised with certain beliefs that were too strong to challenge. At one point one student said, “we live in the United States, we should all speak English.” A teacher once asked me if I spoke “Mexican”. As a Latina teacher at that school, I felt that the battle was too huge for me to battle alone so I had to assimilate and teach how the school expected me to teach and put aside what I believed teaching should be and just wait for the moment to get out of that situation.*

*I feel that being a Hispanic teacher is a constant battle of assimilating and fighting for what you believe. It’s very easy to get caught up on the everyday testing, teaching reading and math, staff meetings, etc. But I have found that as teachers we have to reflect and ask ourselves the “why’s”. As a teacher, I feel that I don’t ask enough questions, and it’s easier to just go with the flow and not advocate for our students or our beliefs; we don’t challenge power, probably because of the fear of losing our jobs.*

Too often teachers find themselves in similar situations to that which the aforementioned teacher shared. The absence of administrative support for teachers teaching Latina/o youth is rampant. In the face of this lack of support, Latina/o teachers are forced to choose one of two

paths: they either end up resisting oppressive schooling practices and policies or resign themselves to go with the flow. Foucault's (1977) insights to power structures informs us that systems exercise power via discipline and punishment in this context it means that teachers are constantly being servile to ensure that we follow the prescript policies and school practices leading to teacher choices of "going with the flow."

This journey has been truly remarkable, as it has afforded the circle members the ability to reflect not only as individuals, but also collectively. At this point in the journey, circle members second-guessed their expressions, attitudes, expectations, and hopes for the successes and possibilities for this journey. As the circle reflected on this second-guessing, an "aja" moment emerged. The circle began to think about barrier busting, and realized that not only the Latina/o students must go through this process, but also their Latina/o teachers. Everyone is underneath the administration's oppressive policies and practices. In addition, the circle members realized how oppression is a silent method of shutting people down and likened it to a disease. However, like most diseases, this too has a cure and that cure can be reached through self-reflection, self-evaluation, and responsiveness to our own actions.

### *Essential Elements*

The essential elements of this journey to be considered important include: (a) desire for change; (b) unconditional dedication and a clear focus; (c) a continuous search for new knowledge; (d) the skill of listening; (e) a willingness to change; and (f) strong leadership. These elements clearly interplayed in this circle of educators, resulting in a stronger desire for continuous change. With change comes growth. With growth comes a never-ending cycle of new ideas. As a result of the collective experience of the circle, every Latina/o educator present has since consciously brought all of these elements, which will aid this chapter in our lives, to the table. Samuel shares her story:

*As a Latino and educator I believe that being critical of oneself is essential for professional growth. In this process I have acknowledged that I have also oppressed. Although the question is not whether I have done it willingly, knowingly or not, the end result remains that I too am an oppressor. I have done this through a series of things; as an educator I have followed the school curriculum as instructed to do so. For fear of retaliation, I have not modified my lessons to better fit my student's cultural wealth in their lessons. In addition, as a member of community I have assumed that I knew the problems in the community. Although I live in the same community I teach, the problems, much like the community, have changed. So therefore, I have failed in meeting and aiding my community in its essential struggle.*

*The process of transformation from oppressed to the oppressor is not a difficult one. In my personal situation, my transformation was fed through our system of education and professional atmosphere. Certain systems of education, particularly federal and state guidelines, have teachers jumping through hoops, to meet this new era of "master" teachers. In the process, they ask you for a large amount of data that is neither valid nor useful, to prove that "quality" education is transpiring. In the meantime, students continue in this cycle of inadequate education, and continue the process as teachers are re-taught to teach according to the district mandates. Yet, many fall into the belief that the community is to blame; they fail to see that the system itself is faulty and in need of reconstruction.*

*As a Latino teacher, I have observed that this lack of understanding is not just in homes of Latino students but also in school systems today. It is easy to see that most teachers don't acknowledge that Latino students are at a disadvantage. Most assume that the American dream of being able to succeed despite any odds is true. In addition, transitional curriculums in schools add to the disadvantage of Latino students by not setting equal expectation. Curriculums such as these are tracking and moving students to better suit the growing testing era rather than student productivity.*

Finn (2009), in his book *Literacy with an Attitude*, encourages teachers to embarked in a crusade of progressive education which put youth lives and their struggles at the fore front From the aforementioned story, we can learn that this teacher has come to an understanding of the tensions between the oppressed and the oppressor (Freire, 1992). By becoming critically conscious as teachers in these situations, one can resist becoming a part of, or contributing to, the oppression the students they work with face. It is imperative that Latina/o teachers become aware of these situations in order to create resistance strategies that will serve the needs of the students, by finding ways for students to speak their language.

### *Reflective Practices*

It is important to recognize the components of reflective practices. The first and most important component is *dialogue*. With this component, students have the ability to discuss and share any given activity/task within their groups. On studying the realities of oppressive schooling practices and polices, class participants agreed that instruction should be formalized and facilitated in a manner that consists of having specific questions leading the discussion to trigger a dialogue within the students. Through this process the counterstories, acts of resistance, and the transformation of oppressive schooling practices and polices are broadened. Cristina shares her story:

*As a Latina educator, I relate with my students on a personal level. This has allowed me to be more sensitive to oppression against my Latino students. I have witnessed students being reprimanded for speaking with an accent and did not have the courage to stand up for them. I have been oppressed by my superiors for speaking my mind. I am constantly fighting oppression for my students. Being Latina is not only a privilege, but also an obligation to serve and educate my students to obtain the highest level of achievement possible for them. My words and actions have the ability to weaken or inspire future generations.*

*During my first year of teaching, my school was in search of an assistant principal. The monolingual administrator asked if we had any special recommendations or suggestions for the candidates. I commented that we were in desperate need of a bilingual administrator, considering the community where I teach is predominantly Latina. Gándara and Contreras explains that "...Latino parents also have less access to information about schooling and other social resources because of more limited social networks and language difference..." (2009, p. 83). A large percentage of our families are immigrants from Mexico and up to that point, our administrators were unable to communicate with parents during meetings, Open House, or festivals. My comment was taken as an offense by my administrator. He advised me that making recommendations such as the one I made could cost me my job.*

In our collective experience, most students are not given the opportunity to work in a cultural or linguistic setting where dialogue or an interaction involving responsiveness is experienced. The second component of reflective practice is *lessons learned*. With this component, students have the opportunity to reflect on the curriculum that was just taught. Teachers also have the opportunity to pay attention to what is working or not working for the students. Reflection on the part of both teachers and students requires a lot of patience and the aptitude to think outside the box. This strategy for teaching engages not only the students, but also demonstrates to teachers that collaboration when done amongst students is hard and rewarding work. Rebecca shares her story:

*As a Latina teacher, I push my students to do well in school. I try not to discourage students, yet it is really hard not to do so because of the way the reading program is set up at our school. Recently, my first graders were learning about the elements of a non-fiction book. During independent reading, I asked them to look at the different elements we had just studied during the mini lesson. I gave each student a non-fiction book. The high readers received books that contained many of the elements we were studying. These books had a table of contents, photographs with labels, a glossary and an index. Students that are struggling with reading in my class received a short book with very few elements. As I was passing out the books, I noticed that the high readers' faces were eager to begin reading the book, whereas, the struggling readers were not as enthusiastic. A little boy then asked me, "When will we be able to read the nice books?" Another student told him "You cannot read those books because you are not a good reader." At that point, I realized that I was doing the same thing to my students that the professor in college did to me. She made me think I was not intelligent. I was making my students feel they were not very smart. After I realized that I was not giving my struggling students the same opportunities that I was giving my high readers, I gave them a book just like everyone else in class. As they were reading the books, they felt excited about reading. At the end of the day, I reflected on what had happened during Reading time. I redirected myself to what my role in education should be.*

Freire (1970), in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trumps the pedagogy of problem posing for transformation. Latina/o educators must engage with their students and understand the contexts from which they come. It is at this juncture that learning can become action for social justice education for Latina/o youth and their teachers.

### **Barrier Busting**

As part of this journey, the participants engaged in a barrier busting exercise deemed necessary to ensure arrival at our destination. In this study, barrier busting was essential, because as Latina/o educators, we face daily challenges evident in stereotypes, low expectations, lack of support, oppression, hopelessness, and many more obstacles posed and sustained by administration, administrators, teachers and even our own families. Priscilla shares her story,

*As a Latina teacher, I have oppressed in so many ways. I drill my students on curriculum that they need to know for the state test. I have emerged students to English-only curriculum. Every morning we say the Pledge of Allegiance in English and Spanish. Because of our reading and math program, we are forced to track our students and level our students based on their learning ability. At times, I forgot that my students are kids and we put so much pressure on them to meet AYP.*

*I feel that we want our students to solve our district problems but in reality we are sending a wrong message to our students about school. A huge oppression is not allowing our students to construct their own learning and disregarding the fact that they have their own brain and forgetting that they are human beings that need the opportunity to explore and construct their own thinking. The opportunities to think critically are very limited because of the AYP.*

*I feel that as a teacher, we do resist against the norm but not enough. We assimilate and get by but we don't fight and stand up for what we believe. Instead, as a teacher, I tend to talk to individuals that believe like me and I try to put myself in settings where I feel accepted. But the greatest challenge is fighting for individual rights and getting to the point where we stand up and say "enough". As a teacher, I truly try to get my students involved in thinking critically, but at the end of the day, I'm still tracking them and teaching them what the district has adopted as our curriculum.*

Barrier busting is a very hard thing to do. We must reflect on our own attitudes, assumptions, stereotypes and influences as a place to start. The realizations prompted by our reflection can affect our ability to change our self-inflicted ways. Through careful observation, we must investigate ourselves collectively as educators. It is through testing, No Child Left Behind-driven programs, English-only and required curricula, and top-down decisions that we are not only oppressed, but subtly becoming the oppressor. How can we change this conclusion without sacrificing our much-needed work? The answer is through self-observation, dedication and motivation to change. As cultural workers (Freire, 1998) teachers embrace the growing process, which result in new practices that intervene majoritarian schooling policies and practices. "Knowing has everything to do with growing. But the knowing of dominant minorities absolutely must not prohibit, must not asphyxiate, and must not castrate the growing of the immense dominated majorities" (Freire, 1998, p. 95). This act of reflection is continuous in examining our attitudes, assumptions, and stereotypes, to not engage in this reflection of "knowing" we stand risk of continuing oppressive practices. As we examine ourselves/practices we encounter great pain, the seed of change and growth.

## **Conclusion**

### *Temporal Destination Arrival*

Through this journey, the participants in the study came to the consensus that its temporal destination was to create a "paradigm shift" that will allow Latina/o teachers to have a voice in resisting oppressive schooling practices and policies. Once Latina/os have a voice they will be able to advocate for students, bilingualism, multilingualism, and social justice in schools. By having a consciousness of the injustices practiced by the dominant groups, we can dialogue with other colleagues, reflect on our practices, and generate solutions to facilitate our students' best learning. With dialogue, we can empower other educators with knowledge and practices, and guide them to teach in a humanistic manner. We need to embed compassion for the oppressed in society and become revolutionary leaders to stop sub-oppressing our own people. Our destiny is to commit to reflect on our practices and our daily actions, and to then take action to make change. Our determination to make this borderland "paradigm shift", in which equity, fairness, and social justice reign, is our daily motivation for success. This journey was completed in a semester; however, the commitment is maintained for years and there is a possibility that this battle will

never end. Nevertheless, we are willing to continue the fighting for what we believe is best for our students, our future generation. Our hope in sharing this journey is to make a difference by building solidarity, especially amongst our fellow Latina/o colleagues who struggle daily with not having a voice in their schools. Our journey has opened our hearts; we have shared our classroom experience, and found a common ground in order to strive to become better educators and facilitators for the children of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Our journey has led us to the realization that we will always oppress in some form or another. Therefore, we must always reflect on our actions, dialogue with others and act consciously in order to empower more and oppress less. Until oppression fades away from our classrooms, schools, community, county, state, nation, and world we will always engage in some sort of oppression. This knowledge has saddened but not defeated us. We have the hope, vision and commitment that we will work endlessly for a world free from oppression through the empowerment of youth, their families and the community as a whole. We know the work to free ourselves from oppression is never-ending, and that some days we will feel defeated, but we also know that we as a community need to keep the fire burning through supporting each other's work as educators of revolution, not social reproducers of oppression. The lessons learned through this journey include:

1. Cultural circles create opportunities for bottom-up teacher/practitioner research. Traditional research "others" teachers/practitioners work. In this type of inquiry, the strategy affords the endogenous voices of teachers at the margins of schooling to speak for themselves versus enabling researcher to "other" research participants.
2. A theory of convergence i.e. academic knowledge and teacher praxis became evident to the researchers when they witnessed the inquiry participants new knowledge resulting from this convergence. It became evident that inquiry participant used a bi-discourse to make meaning. In a Freirean sense this would mean theory informing praxis, and praxis informing theory.
3. This inquiry study created a forum for bottoms up teacher/practitioner to create counterstories, which help to build community, solidarity with others who struggle with similar plights of Latina/o youth. For the purpose of this research bottom-up refers to "el pueblo", the voices of subaltern which are used to create counterstories against the hegemonic oppressive practices that bilingual educators face in public schools.
4. Through the engagement of this research, the researchers have reflected deeper into the construct of counterstories and have renewed commitment to transforming schooling policies and practices toward a social justice practice.

We conclude this journey with a quote from Ernst Bloch (1959) *The Principle of Hope*:

It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what maybe allied to them outwardly. The work of



this emotion required people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. (p. 3)

The authors wish to say that hope is driven by love and fuels our passion for a social just education: *La Batalla Continua*.

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