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Embracing Change

Reflection on Practice in Immigrant Communities

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Abstract

The authors address disconnects that developed within Sin frontera, a program originally designed as an educational program for Mexican and Honduran women. The program gradually moved away from its grassroots origins and culture circles as institutionalized practices gradually informed our curriculum, causing us to implement institutionalized concepts of education, whether through overt or invisible discourses (Foucault, 1980). Initially based on Freirean concepts of conscientization, collegiality, and consensual governance (Freire, 1970), the program gradually shifted to a hierarchical institutionalized model in which we as facilitators subsumed the principal decision-making function that had once been the women's domain. Poststructuralist analysis of narrative evaluations, emails, and field notes revealed that families living in immigrant communities face sociocultural issues that affect program expectations. Analysis also revealed the importance of constant dialogue with participants to minimize asymmetrical power dynamics. We offer this paper as a contribution to the ongoing conversation about adult educational experiences in immigrant communities.

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At the October meeting of Sin frontera [Without Borders], we adjusted the heat to warm up the frigid November evening, but we couldn't get the temperature above 65° in the vast church fellowship hall. Jennifer's plans for the second mom-kid evening used stations so the moms and kids could work together on various activities involving collaborative play and literacy, which they could continue at home. The moms had showed great enthusiasm for the previous moms-kids evening, so we expected similar success.

Not so! Despite the harvest theme incorporating art, music, games, and crafts, a completely disjointed evening ensued. The activities engaged the preschoolers and school-age kids, while the moms stood around in detached poses. The toddlers ran around crying whenever anyone took them to the nursery. Though they shared the same physical space, the moms and kids behaved as if they inhabited different rooms. The moms embodied disinterest, while the kids exuded palpable energy.

At the end of the evening, as the women gathered their dishes from the potluck, Kris saw Nilda[†] standing alone at the side of the room, coat on, shoulders hunched, arms folded over her stomach with her purse tight against her body, head down but jutting forward with eyes looking up. As she stood there, displeasure and discontent emanated from her whole body. What happened to the young woman who joined our program five years ago? What changed her from a smiling, involved participant whose leadership skills led us to rely on her as our Latina liaison between university and community to make phone calls, collaborate in curriculum planning, and provide a community voice for the program? Perhaps Nilda's physical stance represented the growing ennui the rest of the women demonstrated that evening.

Introduction

We address the problem of disconnects that exist between participants from immigrant communities and programs based on institutionalized concepts of education through overt or invisible discourses (Foucault, 1980). Herein, institution refers to generally accepted best practices within educational curricula, not to the institution of the university (Miller, 2008). Institutionalization describes the ways those practices gradually informed our curriculum, moving toward the more rigid structure the vignette describes. Through deconstruction and analysis, we understand disconnects in curricular expectations on the part of the women and the facilitators that led to discontinuing a vibrant women's[‡] program that spanned eight years.

Initially based on Freirean concepts of conscientization, collegiality, and consensual governance (Freire, 1970), we as facilitators gradually instituted a hierarchical model and subsumed the principal decision-making function that had once been the women's domain.

[†] All participant names are pseudonyms.

[‡] Throughout the course of the program, the participants consisted of primarily women and children with occasional visits by the men of the family for special programs. The women referred to themselves and each other as *las señoras* or *las mujeres*. We follow their lead in referring to *the women*, not to label, generalize, or stereotype, but rather to conserve their language and to abandon the impersonality of *the participants*.

Insidiously, institutionalized curricular expectations eroded critical pedagogical foundations until the program was no longer recognizable as the original, robust, consensually governed gathering. Despite our efforts to include the participants in decision-making, we aligned the program with educational standards incompatible with the women's lives and expressed needs and desires.

The vignette represents problems we encountered as participants progressively rejected learning scenarios that ultimately shaped the curriculum. Following that meeting, we, Kris, the faculty member in English as a Second Language (ESL) Education who founded and directed the program; and Jennifer, the doctoral student who served as curriculum planner from 2007-2009, began our critical examination of the change from a grassroots to an institutionalized model. We write as inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) to understand all the factors that precipitated the eventual outcome. In so doing, we respond to Kaufman's (2010) call to examine both the presence and absence of "dialogic experiences and practices" throughout an adult immigrant community-based program.

Theory, Literature, and Methods

Bricolage as Vulnerable Methodology

As we developed our methodology for analyzing data, single theoretical perspectives seemed too narrow. Bricolage incorporates multiple perspectives, allowing us to interpret our own perspectives as researchers and facilitators, as well as the intricacies of the program itself (Kincheloe, n.d.). Bricolage draws upon critical theory and poststructuralism to interpret experiences, providing ways to examine a complex program (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Critical theory informs our discussion of asymmetrical power structures inherent in any program that straddles university and immigrant communities (Camacho, 2004; Darder, 1991), as well as the intersectionality of ethnicity, class, and gender framing the lives of immigrants in the United States. As we trouble our practice, critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and critical pedagogy bring into focus the importance of social, cultural, and political influences on human identity (Kincheloe, 2005).

We examined eight years of historical data to develop an analytical perspective of the present. As we examined and discussed the data, we often shared conversations about the meetings, our relationships with the women, and their interactions with each other. As these conversations continued, we "had no idea how to link some of the data with the knowledge that was produced" (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 180); the data were experiential and had to be acknowledged, regardless of the fact they were recorded only in our spoken words. We conducted a longitudinal, diachronic ("changing over time") examination to analyze changes, transformations, and interruptions (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 24) that resulted in discontinuing the program. Feminist poststructuralism helped critique the program we established and facilitated (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000), allowing us to investigate the program as a structure gradually infused with institutionalized practices. Analysis led us to regard conflicts as "pivotal," or critical opportunities for learning and transformation (Visweswaran, 1994, as cited in Lather, 2007, p. 37). We do not "speak for" participants; we present their words to help make sense of our own failure to listen to their voices despite our assumptions that we listened closely. By positioning ourselves in the research (Behar, 1996) and critically examining our own practices, we created a vulnerable space for deconstructing a program.

Making Sense of the Data

The data come from email correspondence with our community liaison, fieldnotes that include our conversations with each other and with the women, the transcription of a videotaped culture circle, and the narrative evaluations the women wrote at the end of each semester. Analysis consisted of coding, categorizing, and seeking themes in the data. As we coded, we reread all the data, categorizing them into common themes present throughout the categories (Mayan, 2009). Crystallization, the process of examining data through multiple perspectives, granted interpretive authority to each perspective (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), allowing each data source to be examined as part of a complex whole while still maintaining its identity as a separate entity. We deconstructed the themes, seeking political, social, socioeconomic, and cultural explanations for observed patterns. Crystallization challenged our first impressions and forced us to make sense of the disparate and sometimes contradictory nature of the data, helping us understand experiences. However, unanswered conundrums remained despite our prismatic interpretation of participant voices refracting with our practices (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Following the metaphor of crystallization, light refraction, or meaning, resulted in different colors and intensities. Specific interpretations depended on how we examined the layers of meaning in the data: personal stories, socioeconomic factors, and institutionalization. Through self-reflexivity, we became conscious of our own beliefs and experiences (Etherington, 2004) so that we could interact with each other and with the data. We examined issues of power informing our interactions with the community (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009a; 2009b).

Facilitators/Researchers

Kris created the course that first partnered students with community members, leading to the development of *Sin frontera*. She began her work with migrant communities decades ago, through work in various regions of the United States. Her relationships in this particular community had spanned 11 years of serving as interpreter, surrogate mom and grandmother, and friend to participating women.

For two years, Jennifer had supervised student teachers in Kris' ESL teacher preparation program, so her pedagogical knowledge about teaching languages informed her curricular decisions. She brought a wealth of other experiences, including her experiences as a doctoral candidate and as a high school Spanish teacher.

Participants

Participants were women, ages 16-63, and their children, who were infants through middle school. The women's educational levels ranged from sixth grade through first year of university. They represented rural and urban backgrounds in their home countries of Mexico and Honduras. Initially, 25 families participated in the program each semester, many continuing for numerous semesters, often inviting friends and family members to join. By 2008, 10 women remained, including four who began in fall 2001, the first semester, plus two women who joined in 2002. The remaining four joined in 2008. Nilda frequently volunteered to call the women, acting as the liaison to inform them of meetings, potlucks, and so on. She eventually became involved in planning other details, such as meeting frequency, student-family partnerships, and curriculum topics.

Diachronic Snapshot

In this diachronic snapshot, we present the stages through which the program morphed over the eight years of its existence, but true to the meaning of diachronic time, the process involved "changing over time" (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 24), resulting in a messy fluidity regarding when the disconnects occurred. The institutionalization had its genesis in Kris' evaluations of a federally funded family literacy program in 2004, but the process occurred gradually and insidiously, destroying the logic of linear conceptualization of time and events.

Culture circles. When Kris interpreted for the women, they frequently expressed needs for cultural navigation, such as translating bills, making appointments, and interpreting at parent-teacher conferences. Kris designed a university course that partnered students with the women through service-learning (Tilley-Lubbs, 2003; 2007). As friendships developed between the two, the women described domestic violence, substance abuse, and depression as oppressive issues in their lives. They requested support sessions to help them deal with these concerns. Kris recognized similarities between their issues and the ones Freire identified in his work with women in Brazil (Heaney, 2005). She developed a program based on Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1970) to provide a space for women to engage in dialogue and to develop agency to name and deal with oppressive aspects of their lives. *Sin frontera* was born.

With emphasis on dialogue and action, Freire's culture circles served as the model for discussion groups where the women worked together as a peer group, often using texts or props to identify and discuss difficult issues (Freire, 1970). In *Sin frontera,* women participated in culture circles to collectively identify and analyze their own oppressive issues. Collegiality led to reflection and transformative interpretations of their everyday lives, providing critical knowledge to change their self-identified daily oppressions (Heaney, 2005). Conscientization, or critical consciousness, moved them to "reach new levels of awareness" through dialogue, "collective struggle, and praxis" (Heaney, 2005, p. 6). Consensual governance resulted in collaborative decisions regarding discussion topics, affording control of curriculum and programming.

Culture circles created a space to negotiate critical curriculum (Vasquez, 2001) that specifically addressed oppressive issues. Involvement in their own learning led to *convivencia*, flowing moments of collective creation and solidarity (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2004) that created community, reciprocity, and a strong support system. A successful program reflecting input from participants (Gadsden, 2004) resulted through dialogue based on conscientization, collegiality, and consensual governance (Freire, 1970). Interspersed with discussions on oppressive issues, the women requested topics such as healthy cooking on a budget, personal appearance, women's health, banking, personal finances, car maintenance, and household upkeep in a new environment. The women identified all these issues as important topics for workshops, and they referred to knowledge they acquired through these sessions as having helped them develop a stronger sense of self-worth alongside a sense of belonging in a new and alien environment.

The workshops served as an opportunity for the women to develop "meta-awareness" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 42) of the oppressive nature of their own situations that they had hitherto regarded as a way of life to be born and not necessarily questioned. As they "share[d] their experiences, their perspectives, and listen[ed] to other perspectives as alternatives, as a multiplicity of angles, as explanations, collectively engaging in the critical cycle and coming to internalize many of its facets" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 84). Through this process, they gained understanding of themselves and their situations.

After Kris knew they wanted to have information sessions regarding issues in their lives, she categorized the topics they mentioned and domestic violence emerged as the number one issue for the majority of the women. Therefore, for one of the early meetings, she invited Lourdes, a Puerto Rican-Cuban doctoral student who had presented numerous workshops in her diocese on the topic to come and speak with the women. Lourdes began the session by showing a film reenactment of a woman who was experiencing domestic violence. Following the 20-minute film, she led a discussion about domestic violence. The women became animated and began sharing their experiences and those of family members. Leni was the first to speak. Tears streaming down her face, she shared how she had suffered constant beatings from her husband for nine years. She was afraid to leave him because she had obtained papers that granted her legal status through her marriage and she feared that she would lose her legal status if she divorced him. Therefore, she endured his abuse, also convincing herself to stay *"por los hijos"* [for her children]. The final straw for her had been a particularly violent beating on Mother's Day: *"¡El Día de las Madres! ¡Fíjate!"* [Mother's Day! Imagine!] After that beating, she left him and returned to Mexico, where she stayed with her mother until she felt safe to return to the United States. Rather than return to California, however, she moved to southwest Virginia, where she began participating in *Sin frontera*. At that first culture circle about domestic violence, her sharing of personal experiences led to an outpouring of similar situations and memories, and for the first time, several of the women named the abuse they or their mothers suffered regularly.

Following that session, each semester the women requested sessions on domestic violence, and Kris provided experts from the community as facilitators. Cecilia, the Chilean psychologist who had been engaged in dialogue with the women for three years, facilitated the culminating culture circle that focused on domestic violence in fall 2007. Following an interactive presentation that discussed family violence, Cecilia engaged the women in a discussion about what comprises domestic violence. The following translated transcript of the ensuing dialogue demonstrates how the women negotiated meaning to name domestic violence (see Appendix A for the original Spanish version):

> *Leni*: Well, in the past, people didn't talk about it [family violence] because it's shameful even though it isn't. Even today, there are people who get beat up, abused, and they don't say anything.

> *Nilda*: But I think it used to be like that because women's values weren't so … weren't valued. Women's rights weren't valued.

> *Laura*: Women had no rights; that's why.

> *Nilda*: I suffered from domestic violence in my house and I think that even now I'm traumatized. I was listening to what she was saying [Cecilia] about people, that we are victims. They didn't … they didn't … well, they punished me, so …

> *Leni*: Just think, just think, your mom lived in violence with her husband. Then she thought about you guys. You, when you are upset with your husband, it's better for you to say, "I'm out of here and I'm leaving you." What is the first thing you think about?

> *Nilda*: The first thing I think about is my kids.

> *Laura*: But it isn't the same. You know what the first thing you think about is your economic situation. It isn't the same thing.

María Félix: But I say, Nilda, that a man who abuses a woman … I say that … better to stay single with my kids than to be abused.

Leni: Look, think about what Cecilia talked about. Everything, everything that Cecilia talked about, it's all true. Everything. I … I admire the steps she talked about because those are all the steps I lived. Then the stages she talks about.

Lina: My mother never suffered from that [domestic violence] but my father … he never hit her, but my father cussed at her, complete vulgarity, but he never hit her. He shouted bad stuff at her. And we all listened to that.

Laura: But it was psychologically.

Leni: It was verbal [abuse].

As the women negotiated meaning about what constitutes abuse, they problematized their former acceptance of domestic violence as the status quo for women, establishing domestic violence as a generative theme. Leni once again referred to her own situation, but in this instance she first situates abuse in a historical context. Through dialogue, the women acknowledged the injustice of women having no rights. Through dialogue, the women shared their own stories. They respected each other's perspectives by listening to each other, taking turns, and building on the previous speaker's opinion. Thus they negotiated meaning rather than having the dialogue deteriorate into an argument when their viewpoints differed. Through this dialogue, they named domestic violence as traumatic, physical, and verbal. By naming their experiences as domestic violence, they pushed against the perception of abuse as normal behavior that women are expected to endure. Through "meta-awareness," (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 42), they identified themselves as allies with agency rather than as victims with no rights. By naming their world, they took the first step toward transforming their lives (Freire, 1970).

This dialogue evolved from the conscientization and collegiality had been present throughout the phase of the culture circles. Nilda had summed up her conscientization in the following list she included in a presentation she did for the group:

The chats or advice, they help us with a lot.

We share opinions.

We share food.

We talk about our children, our situation here.

How to learn to live in a Country that isn't ours.

We socialize.

We learn about different cultures, customs, etc.

And something that's very important, we are losing our fear and learning to be self-reliant (Spring 2006. See Appendix B for original Spanish.).

Similarly, in their final narratives in fall 2005, the women had described how their thinking had changed due to their participation in the culture circles. Maribel wrote that she had become aware *"que hay otras hispanas en la misma situación que yo"* [that other Hispanics are in the same situation that I am in]. That same semester, Gisela stated that she discovered the importance

of *"compartir emociones juntas"* [sharing emotions together]. Also the same semester, Lina shared that *"[h]emos aprendido a comvibir [sic]"* [we have learned to live in harmony with each other]. These statements, typical of the narratives the women produced during the time the culture circles drove the program demonstrate the conscientization and collegiality that underscored the program.

During the period of culture circles, Kris determined success by the enthusiastic response and engagement she observed in the women, alongside their increasing ability to "read the word" as they "read the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29). They "read the word" by learning to decipher texts and products and their uses, which in turn fostered reading their own worlds. At a deeper level, the women encouraged each other to name and acknowledge oppressive issues, "reading their worlds" and gaining the knowledge and power to resist and transform situations in their lives. Based on their narratives, they consistently referred to meeting their support group goals of learning to *defenderme* [get by, express myself] and to *valerme por mí misma* [be self-reliant]. Initially local grants supported efforts to provide educational opportunities for people living in poverty, so grant reporting consisted of an account of culture circle topics, women's narratives of meeting goals, and numbers of attendees.

Transition to institutionalized meetings. After three semesters, Kris collaborated with the university Service-Learning Center to seek further grant funding for program development. In fall 2002, a small-scale corporate grant funded family literacy efforts. The grant required evidence of family literacy activities, not quantitative assessments and learner outcomes. Kris continued the existing culture circle structure for the women while also providing literacy activities for their children, but the culture circles remained the primary focus of the program. For grant reporting, the women wrote goal-setting narratives at the beginning and goal accomplishment narratives at the end of each semester. They expressed desires to learn English and to be able to help their children to be successful in school.

In spring 2004 and 2005, Kris evaluated a federally funded family literacy program, which caused her to think in institutional terms about programs. Following an evaluation visit, Kris shared her experience with the women, gauging interest in a similar literacy program for themselves and their children. Based on their enthusiastic responses, Kris designed a program focused on biliteracy in Spanish and English. Fueled by educational theory and knowledge of best practices in ESL (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005), Kris felt a need to develop pedagogically sound bilingual/bicultural curricula for the children, all English language learners.

By fall 2006, a federal grant funded a graduate assistantship, and Pam, a doctoral student in Second Language Education, became the curriculum planner for the children's program. During this time, the women continued with their culture circles while volunteer teachers worked to provide activities for the children, using bilingual books purchased through the grants. During the meeting times, the women did not interact with their children in those activities. The program trajectory gradually changed to include informal take-home English activities for parents and children. The belief that developing literacy in the mother tongue could transfer to developing literacy in other languages (Gadsden, 2004; Pérez, 2004) guided the curriculum. Small grants funded the program, requiring qualitative evaluations based on informal interview data regarding topics such as parents reading with their children and helping them with homework.

That same fall, our corporate grant provider offered to double the funding if we infused technology into the program. Based on the women's enthusiastic input, Kris accepted the offer and incorporated an online English language learning program for the women to work on at home.

Another grant provided a used computer for each participant. During the second semester of the online program, the women's initial enthusiasm waned. Eventually they revolted, practicing resistance by refusing to log on to the program. At the end of the fall semester in 2007, Kris sat around a table with the participants and conducted a taped, transcribed focus group. The ten women unanimously agreed that no more grant funding should be designated for the online language program. *"Ay, Kris, es aburrido ese Auralog. No gastes más dinero."* [Oh, Kris, that Auralog (the online program) is boring. Don't waste any more money on it.] In response to the women's criticism of the online program, Kris asked if they preferred a live teacher providing face-to-face weekly classes, a change from existing monthly meetings. The women unanimously shouted, *"Sí,"* so Kris hired an ESL teacher.

During the latter stages of the transitional period, disruptions and dissonances began to occur. Positive culture circles continued, as is evidenced by the dialogue above, but at the same time, we began to have an increasing number of formal meetings in which guest speakers lectured without providing time and space for the co-construction of knowledge to which the women had become accustomed through the culture circles. One such instance of this dissonance is highlighted below in the description of a visit from the Mexican Consulate.

Institutionalized meetings. From spring 2008 to spring 2009, face-to-face ESL classes for the women replaced the culture circles, marking a shift to an institutionalized model that emphasized the values of attendance, out-of-class preparation, and accountability. The teacher provided interactive instruction that involved the women in collaborative and communicative language learning. Her methodology incorporated communication among the women, who eagerly engaged in conversations that revolved around their own cultures, daily lives, and challenges. In addition to the ESL classes, Jennifer began to incorporate parent-child activities, which also moved the program toward a more institutionalized model. However, attendance soon dropped and initial enthusiasm waned. A vibrant community-based program morphed into a program fraught with overwhelming challenges. Subsequently, in 2009 we decided to discontinue the program. Identifying the negative aspects of the program had become the focus of planning meetings as we examined our practice, primarily to discover what we were doing wrong.

Reflexive hermeneutical examination determined our plan of action, as we recognized the need to deconstruct a program designed by university personnel for immigrant community members. Through analysis, problematic intersectionalities within the program structure emerged. We realized the complications surrounding the women's interactions with an institutionalized program. Our initial reactions had been, "Why aren't they attending?" From there, we began to question, "Where did we go wrong?" An analysis of the program and our positions within it revealed complexities that superseded simplistic expectations of parental involvement, parenting education, motivation, and other criteria pervasive in dominant educational discourse. During that process, we returned to the program roots and used bricolage as a lens to examine the tensions between our initial foundation of critical pedagogy and the institutional discourse that encroached upon the program. We discovered that in our attempts to "better serve" the women's needs, as defined through our educators' lenses, we had actually reached a point of ignoring their needs as defined through the powerful lenses of the women's everyday lives.

Deconstructing and Analyzing the Program

Systematic data analysis provided evidence that the program had become incompatible with the sociocultural complexities of the women's daily lives. The complexities related to

depression, class, and gender were always present, but they did not become an issue that affected the program until it became institutionalized. Ethnicity and religion, on the other hand, did not surface as issues among the women until we established a formalized curriculum that created conflicts without providing time and space to resolve those conflicts. Our critical examination underscored the dissonance of a grassroots program that over time had been subsumed by our subconscious acceptance of dominant educational practices (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). In our move to institutionalized educational practices, we lost faith in the women and their ability to identify their educational needs, and without that faith, we lost the ability to even hear their voices, thus converting our dialogue into "a farce which inevitably degenerate[d] into paternalistic manipulation" (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Through our analysis of the data, we did hear their voices, and we realized that families living in immigrant communities face sociocultural issues that often fail to align with institutionalized program expectations. By using the lenses of critical theory and poststructuralism, we further interpreted how institutionalized concepts of education created programmatic structures and measures of success that failed to account for these issues.

Sociocultural Issues

Ethnicity and religion. Whereas we had considered *the women* as a unified group, we realized that diversity, dissonance, and disconnects underscored many relationships and behaviors we observed. Inadvertently we epitomized "'white feminists' use of *women* and *gender* as unitary and homogeneous categories reflecting the common essence of all women" (McCall, 2005, p. 1776). Despite Kris' efforts to avoid categorizing the participants as "Latinas" (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009a; 2009b), in practice we treated the women as members of the same cultural group. Even though Jennifer realized that the women's cultures differed, her carefully constructed curriculum inadvertently suggested a homogeneous culture, inconsistent with the reality of the women's diverse socioeconomic classes, religions, and nationalities.

As time went on, the women more adamantly distinguished themselves as Mexicans or Hondurans, quick to point out regional differences. Depending on the situation, they interacted with interest in each other's cultures or they reacted with discord at the slightest indication of failure to recognize their differences. For example, at the end of each semester, they presented projects focused on topics they generated as a group. For several semesters, they chose to share customs from home countries and families, interspersing stories of homesickness and nostalgia with enthusiasm and great interest. During these sessions, the women demonstrated fascination with learning about cultural customs different from their own. When asked to identify what they had liked in fall 2005, Laura stated *"las culturas diferentes"* [different cultures], typical of comments that occurred every semester.

The women bonded during culture circles about personal crises such as domestic violence and depression, joining together in solidarity with little to no regard for ethnic or national differences. However, once we shifted from programs focusing on empowerment issues and personal sharing, the women challenged our unconscious implications of intragroup homogeneity. Intergroup conflict created rifts in relationships: "[E]thnic differences generate[d] social cleavages, but during crisis periods, they [were] able to temporarily suspend their differences and act as a cohesive group" (Menchaca, 1995, p. 218). Despite unity during crisis periods, volatility occasionally lurked beneath the surface. For example, in spring 2007, Mexican Consulate representatives spoke regarding pertinent issues for Latino immigrants, such as maintaining a low profile in a sometimes unfriendly environment. One Honduran woman spent the evening heckling the speakers, shouting, *"No sabe Ud. que no somos mexicanas? Somos hondureñas."* [Don't you

know we aren't Mexicans? We're Hondurans.] The other women became incensed with her behavior, but thankfully such situations were rare. Since this formal presentation did not allow for dialogue among the women, the conflict was not resolved, and the separation between the Mexicans and the Hondurans deepened.

Ethnic differences collided with the variety of religious practices, also resulting in discord and division. The longer they were in the US, the more involved the women became in religious groups, which subsequently drove them apart. By the time the program became focused on family literacy, the women had become involved in various religious communities: Catholic, Pentecostal, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventist, and Mennonite. Kris knew that Halloween was a taboo topic for several of the families, but in fall 2007, at Nilda's suggestion, we decided to incorporate a bilingual cultural experience based on Day of the Dead, which occurs at the same time as Halloween. Jennifer created a Day of the Dead lesson with age-appropriate readings and activities for the children and a culminating craft activity to complete an altar commemorating deceased loved ones. As former Spanish teachers, both Jennifer and Kris regarded Day of the Dead as a cultural phenomenon. Nilda reinforced this perception when Kris asked if the theme would be problematic for the Hondurans and non-Catholics in the group. Nilda assured her that in Honduras, Day of the Dead was celebrated by non-Catholics as well. Kris checked with the other women and all agreed it would be interesting.

However, the week of the event, Nilda called to remind the women of the meeting. Three Honduran women stated they did not want to participate in pagan rituals so they would stay home. For example, Nilda sent an email (October 25, 2007) reporting that *"Los hijos de Ella [Nuria]de todas formas no iban a asistir por el tema que van a dar hoy. Me dijo que el padre de sus hijos se los iba a llevar a la Iglesia mejor."* [(Nuria's) kids weren't going to attend anyhow because of today's topic. She told me that it was better for her kids' dad to take them to Church.] When Nilda saw Jennifer the day before the meeting, she informed her of the women's discontent, suggesting a change in plans, impossible at that late date. Attendance was low for that meeting, so Kris met with the women and solicited help in determining themes for both their children and themselves for future meetings. The conversation was heated, as each woman voiced her opinion. The majority wanted to follow the United States cultural calendar to provide knowledge regarding holidays. María, whose religious group prohibited holiday celebrations, was extremely vocal in her demands that no mention of any holiday be incorporated into the curriculum. She stated that if holidays were included, she would keep her children at home. Leni and Laura, on the other hand, were angry with María for demanding that holidays be omitted. Their rationale was that both they and their children needed to learn as much as possible about holidays so they would not feel left out in school or in discussions. After we disbanded the program, Laura said, *"Ay, Kris, la religión destruyó el programa. Cuando las mujeres empezaron con esas creencias tan raras, ya no era interesante el programa"* (October 10, 2009). [Oh, Kris, religion destroyed the program. When the women started with their weird beliefs, the program wasn't interesting anymore.] Conversely, in a follow-up discussion with Nilda following the event, she described the fiasco as an ethnic conflict because few people in Honduras observe the day, and many perceived the lesson as "too Mexican." Ethnic identity and religion became increasingly divisive issues. Greater involvement in different church groups created less tolerance of differences in beliefs within the group, creating rifts. In retrospect, we wonder if the culture circles would have provided a space for the women to name their cultural and religious differences as the source of their conflict and whether through dialogue they might have come to understand and respect those differences, which would have allowed them to come to a consensus about the curriculum.

Depression. Another sociocultural issue that emerged as problematic after the program became institutionalized concerned the women's depression, which we present as related to sociocultural factors affecting the women's lives (Hunn & Craig, 2009). Discussions of depression occurred regularly during culture circles on depression or in personal conversations with Kris, Jennifer, or Nilda. Especially during the first few years, depression caused them to turn to each other for support and encouragement. However, after the program moved away from the culture circle structure, they cited depression as the reason for not attending the meetings, a marked change from the times they shared and supported each other during periods of depression.

The root of depression often lay in their immigration status, a situation over which they had no control. Despite the fact the women stayed in regular contact with families by phone, their immigrant status prohibited or limited visits to the home countries. They missed the constant physical presence of female family members and friends who had always provided a tight support network to offer advice and encouragement. Marisol wrote: *"Para mí me ayuda muchísimo ya que aquí no tengo familia y he conocido amigos y aparte he aprendido de cada programa muchísimo y lo más importante que yo padecía depresión y gracias a este programa, logré superarme."* [It (the program) helps me a lot since I don't have family here, I have met friends and apart from that, I have learned a lot from each program (culture circle) and the most important thing is that I used to suffer from depression and thanks to this program, I managed to overcome it] (final narrative evaluation, spring 2006). In her position of friend/surrogate mother, Kris witnessed and heard firsthand their struggles with depression, articulated as homesickness, loneliness, unhappy marriages, substance abuse and domestic violence, along with difficulty in meeting basic material needs (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009a; 2009b; 2012).

However, email correspondence with Nilda provided evidence of depression as a reason for not attending the meetings as they gradually became institutionalized: *"Cuando hablé con Gisela, dice que no quiere estudiar este semestre porque se siente sin ánimos, ni siquiera de salir."* [When I talked to Gisela, she says she doesn't want to study this semester because she isn't in the mood **(**has no motivation**)** to even go out anywhere] (September 8, 2007). *"Guadalupe dijo que no tiene ganas de nada, que su embarazo la tiene muy cansada y no quiere salir de su casa."* [Guadalupe said she doesn't feel like doing anything, that her pregnancy is making her very tired and she doesn't want to leave the house] (April 3, 2007). Depression appeared as a recurring issue in many aspects of their lives with resultant immobilization, in contrast to the time when depression served as a catalyst for seeking out the collegiality and problem-solving they associated with the culture circle.

Class and gender. An additional sociocultural challenge stemmed from employment complexities. Although the women represented a variety of economic situations, they all lived with restrictions imposed by hourly-wage jobs. For example, sometimes women were unable to attend meetings based on work schedules. They talked about lack of control regarding choice of shift and inconsistent, variable hours. Emails provided evidence regarding work schedules' influence on participation: *"Dice Leni que quiere regresar [al programa] y que hablará con su Jefe para poder estar en las reuniones"* (July 16, 2007). [Leni says she wants to come back (to the program) and that she will talk to her Boss to be able to be at the meetings.] Leni later shared that her boss refused to grant her permission to leave work early or to offer her a different shift. Another shared a similar problem concerning her shift work: *"Elena no está segura de asistir porque hoy le toca trabajar en la noche"* (April 3, 2007). [Elena isn't sure of attending because today it's her turn to work at night.] The general instability of schedules made commitment to a defined program time and day all but impossible. In reflection, Kris observed that work schedules

had always created absences, but as attendance dwindled, the absence of one family caused a significant gap. Further factors rooted in traditional gender roles framed many women's lives and informed decisions about attendance. Several who lived with their children's fathers stayed home as homemakers. If they worked an 8-to-10-hour job outside the home, they still worked a "second shift" (Hochschild, 1989; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Romero, 1997), preparing meals, caring for children, and cleaning house while their husbands rested, went out with friends, or worked a second job. Lina stated she could not attend a meeting because her husband was working late and she had to stay home to have his dinner on the table. Gisela could not do anything on her husband's day off because she needed to be available in case he needed anything. On the whole, the women's partners tended to support their participation in the program, but occasionally traditional gender roles prevailed.

Another challenge occurred in regard to mobility. Some drove, but their husbands worked at night, so the car was unavailable. Other husbands did not permit their wives to drive. The police had stopped and ticketed Guadalupe for driving without a license, after which she avoided driving. Lastly, the deportation of one participant following a fender bender caused trepidation within the group about driving. Nilda sent the following emails: *"Guadalupe sí participará pero necesita transporte ya que su Esposo sale muy tarde del trabajo y no llegaría a tiempo a la reunión"* (August 29, 2006). [Guadalupe will participate but she needs transportation since her Husband leaves work really late and she wouldn't get to the meeting on time.] *Lina necesita transporte…igual que Laura* (August 31, 2007). [Lina needs a ride . . . the same as Laura.] At one point we used university vans to provide transportation, but waning attendance and last minute changes in the women's schedules made van service unfeasible.

These gender- and class-related challenges that affected attendance had an impact on a program based on sequential learning experiences. During the time of the culture circles, although regular attendance provided continuity in relationships and collegiality, occasional absences did not cause the women to lose interest in the program. The dialogues could continue, regardless of the number of participants, although the absent women were always missed. On the contrary, absences from formal English classes created disconnects for the women as well as for the instructor. The narratives the women wrote at the beginning and end of the semesters, coupled with numerous conversations during and outside the culture circles, provided strong evidence that the women attended the culture circles whenever they could because they wanted to be there.

In summary, throughout the program, the intersectionalities of ethnicity, religion, depression, class, and gender created complexities in the women's lives, but these complexities did not complicate participation until sequential learning experiences became the norm for the meetings. The women consistently expressed interest in the program and a desire to attend, but outside sociocultural factors precluded attendance, which we initially interpreted as lack of interest and inconsistency between their words and actions. Yet, deconstructing the program showed that the rigid structure implicit in an institutionalized program was inhospitable to the women's sociocultural issues. Critical examination provided evidence of social, cultural, and political influences that shaped the women's individual and collective identity (Kincheloe, 2005). Inadvertently we had created a disconnect between the program and the community. Once we regarded conflicts and misunderstandings as opportunities for learning (Viswesvaran, 1994, as cited in Lather, 2007), invisible power issues infiltrating the program became visible and palpable.

Prismatic Interpretations

Analysis showed that our institutionalized concepts of educational practices gradually intruded on our decision-making and disregarded the sociocultural factors shaping the women's lives and experiences. Rigid program structures replaced a grassroots program based on participants' self-identified goals for learning to navigate in an alien culture and establishing independence and self-sufficiency. Driven by institutionalized demands such as emphasis on parent-child interactions, regular attendance, and sequential learning, power "reache[d] into the very grain" of our beings, and "insert[ed] itself into [our] actions and attitudes" (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). Despite our efforts to use consensual governance (Freire, 1970), asymmetrical and invisible power between university and community (Camacho, 2004; Foucault, 1980), coupled with institutional practices, diverted us from the meaningful program structure of culture circles on oppressive issues or pragmatic aspects of immigrant life that the women embraced with enthusiasm. In retrospect, we realized that, although they agreed to Kris' suggestions to add children's literacy activities and then later, English classes, her invisible power as an educator likely influenced them to accept her ideas in the abstract, whether consciously or subconsciously (Camacho, 2004; Foucault, 1980). The disconnect occurred when they attempted to comply, given their sociocultural circumstances.

Programmatic structures. The culture circles provided intergroup support and information as the women took charge of their daily lives. By problematizing the issues that troubled their own lives, they "position[ed] themselves agentively" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 84), thus developing their own sense of independence and empowerment. However, the institutionalized model of English classes and children's literacy activities failed to address the need for developing life strategies through dialogue. Ironically, issues such as depression served as a reason for attendance at the culture circles; the same issues surfaced as reasons for absenteeism when the program model shifted away from culture circles to an emphasis on literacy.

As the children's literacy curriculum replaced childcare, the program shifted from being for women to being for women and children. When Kris and Jennifer met with Nilda prior to the end of fall semester 2008, Nilda offered a constructive critique of parent-child activities at meetings. She asserted that the meetings were her special time with adults, referring back to the initial purpose of the meetings. Rather than consider Nilda's comment as a pivotal point to examine alternative pedagogical practices (Campano, 2007), we continued English classes and literacy activities, even trying to convince Nilda of the educational importance of such activities. We silenced her dialogue. At that point, we related to the women and children as students, rather than as members and stakeholders in a program based on conscientization, collegiality, and consensual governance (Freire, 1970). Whereas dialogue initially informed our decision-making, the discourse of invisible power now underscored our actions. We had begun to "act upon them" rather than "with them" (Foucault, 1982, p. 220). We insisted on parent-child interaction time rather than following Nilda's advice. Our positions wielded power to override suggestions from someone whose counsel we formerly had heeded.

Our entrenchment in institutional practices and discourse caused us to hear but not listen to Nilda's input (Gadsden, 2004). Our "epistemology of practice" (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 14), or our beliefs about the nature of knowledge and how to teach it, now reflected a "one size fits all" view of "best practices." We failed to take into account the reasons the women first participated and the strides they made in achieving their goals. Curriculum based on reflexive dialogue valued the women's pragmatic knowledge about their needs. The institutionalized model assumed that as experts Kris and Jennifer knew what was best for the women and their children, demonstrating the

invisible discourse of power (Foucault, 1980). To underscore the disconnect between our thinking and that of the women, they continued to call the program *Sin frontera*. Kris and Jennifer now referred to it as the "Family Literacy Program," somewhat reflective of the loose connection our pedagogy had with family literacy values and ideals. However, the women's title reflected their emphasis on transcending collective struggle through dialogue and praxis (Freire, 1970). Our title reflected the shift in emphasis to language acquisition for the adults, literacy achievement for the second generation, and parent-child time, not at all reflective of the initial purpose. The differences in naming also reflected the power we exercised in determining curriculum and program structure. At this juncture, we contradicted our belief in Freirean pedagogy, enacting the premise that the power lies in "naming the world" (Freire, 1970), thus reinforcing the Foucauldian principle that the discourse of power can insidiously infiltrate and determine actions (Foucault, 1980).

Using crystallization (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), we explored our own epistemology and pedagogy in the light of the women's reactions to our practice. Recurring themes of ethnicity, religion, depression, class, and gender provided political, social, socioeconomic, and cultural explanations for patterns we saw (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). As we deconstructed the program to examine encroaching institutionalization (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000), we discovered multiple layers of meaning related to the intersectionality of sociocultural factors (Tisdell, 1998).

Concluding Thoughts

In our analysis, several pivotal points became apparent as missed opportunities for restructuring the program and examining our use of dialogue: 1) the meeting described in the beginning vignette; 2) Nilda's desire for a program focusing only on women; 3) declining attendance; and 4) the disagreements surrounding the Day of the Dead lesson plan. At each point, different decisions would have led us in different directions, causing thoughts of "what could we have done differently?"

We realized the fallacy of simply asking the women whether they wanted to make program changes without adequately explaining ramifications of proposed changes, such as the first change to incorporate children's literacy activities. By "imposing [our] word on others, [we] falsif[ied] that word and establish[ed] a contradiction between [our] methods and [our] objectives" (Freire, 1970, p. 107). Opening a space for dialogue, not just a space for response, would have moved us from "thought to action" (Kaufmann, 2010, p. 460). By so doing, we could have discussed and defined the meaning of children's literacy and adult English classes, including the impact on culture circles. We needed transparency in our language (Bracken, 2011) about how these changes would shift the program to a different purpose and structure for the women, who would no longer be the primary focus as they moved over to make room for an emphasis on children's literacy. Also, before implementing parent-child time, Kris and Jennifer should have clearly explained the activities and purposes involved. Co-constructed examples and clear definitions, combined with dialogue, would have included the women in consensual governance (Freire, 1970). Without dialogue, we began to make decisions for, rather than with, the women, ignoring the issues that framed their everyday lives. In an effort to consistently obtain funding, we shifted away from true consensual governance to institutionalized values despite our firm resolve to maintain Freirean decision making, thus diminishing the women's power and control in making decisions collectively (Bracken, 2011). We realized that we created "an absurd dichotomy in which the praxis of the people is merely that of following the leader's

decisions" (Freire, 1970, p. 107). Sadly enough, our own conscientization occurred too late for us to change the direction of events.

Analysis revealed that institutionalization counteracted a critical pedagogy approach. *Sin frontera* began as culture circles based on topics generated through dialogue among women. Institutionalization, in the form of rigid adherence to sequential learning experiences for adults and children, and a subsequent necessity for regular attendance, imposed problematic program structures and measures of success. By replacing culture circles about oppressive issues with ESL classes and literacy activities for children and their parents, we changed the initial purpose. The sociocultural issues that framed their everyday lives, such as ethnicity, religion, depression, class, and gender, had always been present. What we failed to account for was how the changes we made would be incompatible with the realities of the women's lives. Furthermore, measuring success rigidly by attendance and language acquisition did not allow for alternative meanings of success as defined by the women, who early on defined success as independence and empowerment.

The women's gradual disengagement demonstrated empowerment as they made the choice of whether to attend meetings that no longer met their needs and expectations. Based on recent conversations with several of the women, we also interpret the women's gradual disengagement as evidence they had reached their goals for independence and empowerment. If we had really heard what they wanted and provided learning experiences based on their requests, the program might still exist as a space for women to gather, socialize, and learn collectively from culture circles on a regular basis. However, our later institutionalized goals were incongruent with the women's own personal goals. At this point, we return to the prismatic analytic interpretation (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) to determine that conclusions depend on light refraction, or perceptions of evidence. On the one hand, evidence showed disconnects between our practice and our beliefs, but on the other hand, evidence demonstrated that the women reached new levels of conscientization (Freire, 1970).

Epilogue

Although our analytic interpretations revealed challenges, they still described a program that provided opportunities for a group of immigrant women to create their own independence and empowerment within the context of their own goals. To substantiate this statement, we provide an update of how the women describe their current projects. Ten of the women formed a cooperative business selling herbal products. They have a storefront, which they maintain collectively. They have now grown the business to include 25 people, and one of their goals is to provide employment for and subsequently mentor a group of youth whom Diana described as *"andando por las calles sin propósito o esperanza"* [roaming the streets without purpose or hope]. They talk how they all met and became friends in *Sin frontera*, which is also where they describe developing a sense of self-worth. Similarly, Nilda replicated *Sin frontera* by forming a similar culture circle at her church. She frequently emails Kris to ask for names of guest facilitators. She also serves as church secretary and secretary for the youth program. Marisol became a lay reader at her church, where she also serves on the planning committee for the Hispanic mass and performs with the *ballet folklórico* [folk dance] group. Laura assists Kris in establishing *Plazas Comunitarias*, an adult education program sponsored by the Mexican government, to provide opportunities for adult Spanish speakers to pursue further education, pre-literacy through high school. They have all constructed their own successes, incorporating the initial guiding principles of *Sin frontera*: conscientization, collegiality, and consensual governance.

Appendix A
Original Untranslated Dialogue

Leni: Bueno y la gente de antes no hablaba [de la violencia familiar] porque es una vergüenza y no es porque sea una vergüenza. O sea a este tiempo hay todavía gente que es golpeada, maltratada y no dicen.

Nilda: Pero antes yo creo que era porque los valores de la mujer no eran tan… no se valoraban. Los derechos de la mujer no se valoraban.

Laura: La mujer no tenía derechos, por eso.

Nilda: Yo sufrí violencia doméstica en mi casa y yo creo que hasta la vez estoy traumada. Yo estaba escuchando lo que estaba diciendo ella de las personas que somos víctimas. No me… no me… bueno sí me castigaban por eso…

Leni: Imagínate, imagínate, tu mamá vivía en violencia con su esposo. Entonces ella pensaba en ustedes. Tú cuando te molestas con tu esposo y a lo mejor llegas: "Yo me voy y lo dejo", ¿qué es lo primero que piensas?

Nilda: Lo primero que pienso es en mis hijos.

Laura: No, pero no es lo mismo, pensando sabes en qué, en la situación económica, no es lo mismo.

María Félix: Pero yo digo, Nilda, que un hombre que maltrate a una mujer… yo digo uno… mejor quedarme sola con mis hijos que ser maltratada.

Leni: Mira, piensa en lo que Cecilia habló. Todo, todo lo que Cecilia habló ahí, todo eso es verdad. Todo. Yo este… me admiro de los pasos que ella dijo ahí porque todos esos pasos yo los viví.

Appendix B
Nilda's Presentation

Las charlas o consejos, que nos ayudan en mucho.

Compartimos opiniones

Compartimos comida

Hablamos de nuestros hijos, de nuestra situación aquí,

Como aprender a vivir en un País que no es el nuestro.

Nos socializamos

Aprendemos diferentes culturas, costumbres etc..

Y algo muy importante, estamos perdiendo el miedo y aprendiendo a valernos por nosotras mismas.

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