

The Journey from De-Culturalization to Community Cultural Wealth: The Power of a Counter Story-Telling Curriculum and How Educational Leaders Can Transform Schools

P. Antonio Cuevas

Downtown College Preparatory El Camino

Abstract

Generations of Latino students have been negatively impacted by de-culturalizing policies, epistemologies and pedagogies in the U.S. educational system. This article examines the impact of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the classroom. In this article I give my *testimonio* documenting my educational journey and how I have been transformed as an educational leader by conducting research on the power of CRT in practice. My research demonstrates a revolutionary way to engage Latino students. By exploring their personal counter-stories, their *testimonios*, Latino students were able to 1) tap into their Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), 2) provide insight of their social context, and 3) repair some of the wounds caused by a racist and oppressive educational system. Replication of this curriculum could redefine educational leadership with disenfranchised *Raza* youth by creating academic opportunities for Latino students that would counter the racist and oppressive educational system.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, counter-storytelling, de-culturalization, Hegemonic Educational Paradigm, Youth Participation Action Research, Counter Educational Approach

Introduction

I stood over his casket and could not believe how atrophied his once powerful body had become. I am haunted by the sound of his mother's uncontrollable sobbing and the sight of his younger brothers standing by helplessly. Antonio (a pseudonym) was just 15 when he died from a bullet to the head from a rival gang member. He was a former student of mine that was pushed out of school because he would not conform to the de-culturalizing forces of the

United States educational system. Antonio was like many Latino youth that are not engaged by the traditional educational curricula and dominant ways of thinking. Many Latino students drop out of school because they are unwilling and unable to navigate the culturally oppressive educational system, many times to destructive ends.

As a member of the Latino community I have experienced firsthand the impact of the de-culturalization of the U.S. educational system. Like Antonio, I struggled with the cultural oppression of our subtractive schools that try to eliminate our culture (Spring, 2010). I was involved with crime, violence, and drugs. I was fortunate to survive my turbulent adolescence and get a second chance at an education and life. I discovered that I did not have to succumb to the low expectations that teachers had for me and I reinvented myself through arts education. I spent five years teaching theatre to incarcerated men and women. While working with incarcerated felons it became very clear that the Latinos in jail were simply the children that slipped through the cracks of the educational system that de-culturalized them and were later caught up in the streets. It was at that moment that I dedicated myself to working with and educating children before the known dysfunctional educational cycle continued. However, my first 10 years working in school systems clearly showed me that the educational system continues to strip away the culture of Latino students with many casualties along the way just like Antonio.

I have since re-committed my life to creating a revolutionary pedagogy of engaging and educating Latino students. I have created a Counter-Storytelling Curriculum (CSTC) and this article is based on my research of that curriculum and the impact that counter-stories have on Latino youth. My research illustrates the transformative power of *testimonio*, in the form of counter-storytelling, in education and demonstrates an alternative and creative way for educational leaders to address the academic disparities facing disenfranchised *Raza* youth. I am now the Founding Principal of a school in San Jose, California and implemented this curriculum as a core class for all students. This article illustrates the impact of my research and how it can be implemented at an institutional and systemic level illuminating a revolutionary path for educational leaders.

Educational and Historical Context

As previously mentioned I began my educational journey 19 years ago teaching theatre to convicted felons and incarcerated youth. While behind bars it became very clear to me the disproportionate numbers of Latinos. It also became evident that they could not read or write. It was in jail that I had an epiphany and decided to get my teaching credential and work with *Raza* youth before they got caught up in the destructive cycle of the U.S. judicial system. I began teaching in Oakland at a small school that was nearly all Latino and African American in one of the worst neighborhoods I could find. Although we had a lot of success and my classroom was particularly successful, after several years it became clear that most other classrooms were not engaging all the students, and I was very aware of many of the students that were unable or unwilling to conform to the de-culturalizing forces and pedagogies. It was during this time that I met and began working with Antonio and his family. He did well in my class but was continually in trouble in all his other classes. Ultimately he was forced out of our school and turned to the streets, which led to his untimely and tragic end. It was also during this time that I began my journey as an educational leader searching for a new way to engage disenfranchised *Raza* youth. I began the creation of my CSTC in order to tap into the CCW of our students and families because what was being done was failing many of our students.

A new way of educating Latinos is desperately needed because Latino youth in the United States educational system are in crisis (Covarrubias, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2005). The “educational pipeline” shows us that Latinos that do not navigate, or are unable to navigate the educational system, exhibit grave academic disparities. Only 44 out of 100 Latino students entering elementary school can expect to graduate high school, only seven out of these 100 will graduate with a bachelor degree and less than one will receive a Doctorate (Covarrubias, 2011; Yosso, 2005). The educational pipeline clearly shows that Latinos are among the most poorly served of all racial communities and are pushed out of school with some of the highest rates of racialized groups (Covarrubias, 2011). There are many reasons for Latino underperformance, of which I will briefly address three. Specifically, I examine 1) the historic de-culturalization of Latino students, 2) the hegemonic Eurocentric epistemologies and lack of culturally relevant curriculum, and 3) the impact that de-culturalization has had on Latino students’ identities and engagement.

The de-culturalization of Latinos in the United States has inflicted a mental, emotional and spiritual wound on Latino youth as they try to navigate the educational system (Carrillo & Tello, 2008; Spring, 2010). This de-culturalization includes the loss of language, values, and ancestral wisdom in the pursuit of whiteness and forced assimilation, which has been reinforced by a series of laws targeting Latinos such as California's Propositions 227 and 187 and Arizona's HB 2281 and HB 1070 (Spring, 2010). These laws show the dominant culture's continued effort to de-culturalize Latinos through legislation and policies that strip away the language and culture of Latinos; a subtractive process which is manifested in the classroom setting (Valenzuela, 1999). As Delgado Bernal explains (2002), "For too long, the histories, experiences, cultures and languages of students of color have been devalued, misinterpreted or omitted within formal educational settings" (p. 105). This Eurocentric epistemology creates an environment that makes Latinos feel inferior and I refused to be a part of system that continued to de-culturalize our *Raza* youth. My own personal experience and my early experiences as an educator made this very clear to me and was the driving force of my transformation as an educational leader.

Eurocentric epistemologies are the basis of knowledge and justification of beliefs that place White values and the English language in a superior position to all other ways of thinking (Anzaldúa, 2007; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Freire, 2000; Smith, 2008; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). These destructive Eurocentric epistemologies, which portray Latinos as backward, broken and unable to transform their communities, manifest themselves in current educational policy, pedagogies, curriculum, and assessments (Tuck, 2009). Students express disappointment at the lack of culturally relevant curriculum and the school system's focus on a Eurocentric history that denies the history of students of color (Delgado Bernal, 2002). These Eurocentric epistemologies reinforce the subtractive element of our educational system that strips away the culture of Latino students (Valenzuela, 1999). Valenzuela (1999) describes subtractive schooling as a process that divests Latino youth of vital social and cultural resources, which leaves them vulnerable to academic failure.

Many Latino students are negatively impacted by the loss of culture experienced in our subtractive educational institutions (Spring, 2010; Valenzuela 1999). This de-culturalization manifests itself in the stripping away of cultural identity, which leads to a lowered self-esteem, a

lessened connection with community, and a loss of family history. The Eurocentric epistemologies that dominate schooling make many Latinos feel inferior because of the domination of White values and language in the curriculum, pedagogies, and assessments. As Valenzuela (1999) clarifies, “Schools are organized formally and informally in ways that fracture students’ cultural and ethnic identities, creating social, linguistic and cultural divisions among students and between the students and staff” (p. 5). These fractures result in a loss of cultural identity, perpetuating a destructive cycle that leads many Latino students to become lost and disengaged in their educational journey (Valenzuela, 1999; Tello, 2008). The loss of cultural knowledge, connection with ancestors and understanding of their familial counter-stories creates a cultural vacuum and forces many Latino students to search for something to fill the void, many times to destructive ends just like Antonio. I have outlined and created a visual representation of the dysfunctional cycle of the Hegemonic Educational Paradigm (HEP) (Figure 1) that demonstrates the de-culturalization process going from macro policy and legislation to micro implementation and the impact it has on Latino student identity and engagement.

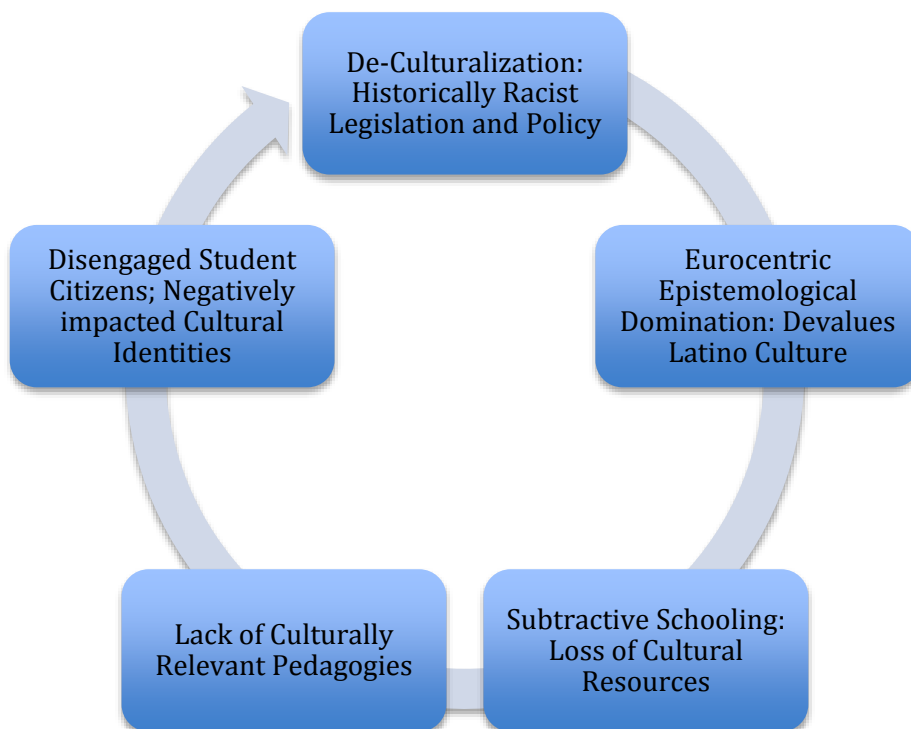


Figure 1. Hegemonic Educational Paradigm

It was during my first several years that I experienced going to the funerals of some of our lost youth. I was also an advocate and support person for many of my families when their children got arrested and went to court. These children would excel in my class and I constantly strived to create opportunities for them to use their voice about their lives which led to them doing well and being engaged in my class. I would also spend much time in the homes of their families and created powerful connections and relationships with my students many of which continue to this day. However, many of the other teachers would continue to struggle and blame the students and their families for their lack of success. These teachers would complain and not reflect on their practice. It was during this time that I began my journey as an educational leader and left the classroom, which was a hard time for me because I enjoyed my time as a classroom teacher. When I began my journey as an administrator I implemented and researched my CSTC and the impact it had on Latino identity and engagement. In the next section I will briefly discuss the process of the study, but will focus mainly on the impact of the CRT on the students as framed within their action steps. The results of the study are important because it was the process of the students giving their *testimonio*, which allowed me to give my *testimonio*.

Implications: Our Stories Do Matter!

I'd like to thank everyone for their time, devotion, cooperation, but most importantly their stories. I would have no sense of direction and no path paved for me. Every story they told, every rule they broke, every obstacle they surpassed only to get me the education and life everyone deserves but few achieve. I have to take advantage that my education has been given to me for free unlike my ancestors that fought so hard but still were ignored. Their voices however still live in me, in my culture in my history and in my future. I want...no I need to prove that their struggles weren't all in vain and that our voices will not be silenced. Just as my mother worked for her children, I will work for my future. Just as she was forced to quit school for work, I will force myself to stay and achieve my goals and aspirations. She is my inspiration, she is my warrior and I will not let anything my warrior did for me be forgotten and only spoken in

the whispers of the wind. Now that I have portrayed an event that someone else lived I feel privileged to be who I am so I walk like I only have one life to live and stand like I have nothing to lose. I stand here as a proud Latina looking ahead to my future (Esperanza).

The above reflection was written by Esperanza (a pseudonym), one of the student/co-researchers as a monologue that synthesized the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) action steps and integrated the data analysis of her reflections. The monologue/research was performed at the world premier of *La Guerra Cultural: A Culture Clash*. She performed in the play and recited her monologue at the conclusion with her mother in attendance. It was a powerful moment with not a dry eye in the audience. All of the student/co-researchers wrote monologues using the same process and had opportunities to do the same when their parents were present. It was the intersection of research and performance and was amazing to behold. Esperanza's monologue contains some of the answers to the YPAR action steps and illuminates the impact that a CSTC has on Latino students. Her monologue also contains some of the components of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) as she describes her inspiration and resilience to overcome obstacles she is connecting resistant, aspirational, and familial capital.

This study relied on the student/co-researchers as holders and creators of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002), tapped into their CCW (Yosso, 2005), and implemented YPAR as an aligning methodology. Since so much of the study depended on the student/co-researcher voice, leadership, data generation, and data analysis, I frame the findings based on the action steps created by the student/co-researchers. Four interconnected stages of data collection shaped this research (Figure 2).

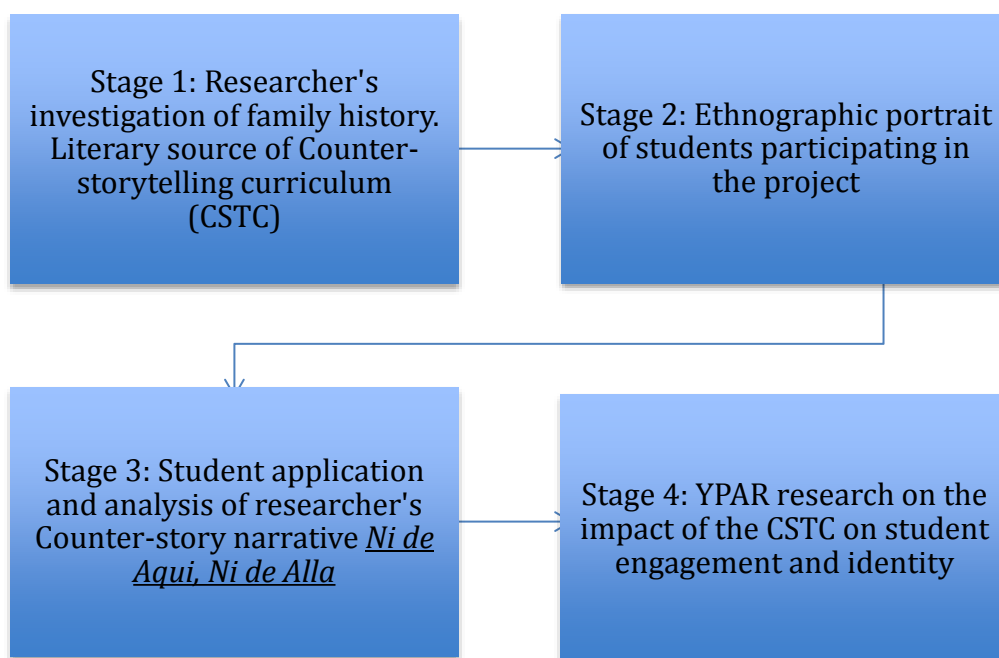


Figure 2. Theoretical Construct of Methodological Stages

I highlight stage 4 due to its relevance to the results. My research questions were based on the impact that CSTC would have on Latino student identity and engagement. Stage four was the student's/co-researcher's YPAR study of the impact of counter-storytelling on their identity and engagement. Stage four was the most important because it was the stage that answered my research questions and gave the student/co-researchers the opportunity to answer their co-created action steps. My research questions served as the guide to the research. As the students engaged in the curriculum they became my co-researchers and developed their own actions steps, which then became the co-researcher/iterative process that framed the entire process.

The student/co-researcher action steps are as follows:

1. Examine the impact of our stories on my motivation towards my education.
2. Examine the impact of our stories on my racial cultural identity.
3. Examine the impact of our stories on my relationships with my family.
4. Examine the impact of our stories on my self-confidence.

In the next four sections I focus on a small group of participant reflections because although the data on the questions was very similar, some students went into much more detail in their written reflections. I will provide some of the findings of the YPAR-generated data and discuss the intersection with CCW (Yosso, 2005). I begin with a section that includes the impact on their motivation towards education then a section on the impact on their racial/cultural identity. Next, I discuss the impact on their relationships with their families and conclude with the impact on their self-confidence.

Motivation Towards Education: *Sacrificios, oportunidad y agradecimiento*

The first action step created by the student/co-researchers was to “Examine the impact of our stories on my motivation towards my education.” Using journals, the student/co-researchers reflected regularly on the impact that the CSTC was having. In the analysis that follows I rely upon the student/co-researcher definition of motivation towards education: *Continuing to get educated and inspired to do well. A yearning to want to accomplish something.* These journals capture some of the student journeys that demonstrate a transformation in motivation towards their education

During in-class reflections student/co-researchers shared findings with the group. During the analysis of motivation towards education, two things became clear: 1) the student/co-researchers were not aware of the sacrifices made nor the challenges and oppression that their parents endured so that the students could get a quality education and, 2) once the student/co-researchers made this connection and understood the difficulties their parents faced, students shifted their view on education for the better.

All of the students relayed conversations with their parents in which their parents would tell them to do well in school because they themselves never had the opportunity to go to school. However, the students also expressed that many times this became a lecture that fell on deaf ears. The student/co-researchers explained that the lectures did not provide the context or counter-story that explained the reason why it was so important to their parents. Through interviewing parents, writing them into stories and creating a performance, the student/researchers were able to connect with and understand what their parents were trying to communicate.

As we went through the process, their reflections became deeper as their understanding of their parent's journey deepened. Esperanza elaborated on the impact shortly before our world premier by writing:

I'm much more motivated to continue my education because I know who I'm representing when I receive that diploma. I yearn for a fulfilled life and I've learned that it begins with an education. Through these stories I've gained a unique understanding of exactly what our ancestors had to go through for my success. I feel a strong need to defend what they fought for (Esperanza).

In this reflection, Esperanza connected sacrifices that her mother made with deep empathy and tapped into both familial and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). She explained that through gaining a deeper understanding of her ancestors, in this case her mother, she wanted to do better. She also demonstrated a level of resistance in wanting to defend the progress made by her mother. Esperanza described how she was at first unaware of her heritage and did not even realize the importance of exploring her culture. Through the interview process, reflections on the co-researcher's action steps, analysis of data and staging of the final results she was able to reclaim her cultural heritage and also tapped into Yosso's (2005) resistant capital. Her transformation also demonstrated her courage and resistance against discrimination that she knows she will have to face, but now knows that she can.

Reyna was another young Chicana that articulated the impact of her journey when she reflected:

These stories made me think and realize that my ancestors and family members could not have this experience. So I need to take responsibility for my actions in school and take opportunities that others were not able to have and make them proud. When I realized this, I figured out that I need to push myself to work my hardest and be successful in life to be somebody important not as somebody who joined a gang and took drugs (Reyna).

Reyna was able to reflect on the transformation the CSTC had on her motivation towards her education through not only showing how she understood her parent's sacrifices, but what learning this meant to her. In this reflection Reyna also directly addressed intervening obstacles such as: gangs and drugs, which many of them face on a regular basis with a newly found

resistant capital. Her reflection and transformation demonstrates the integration of familial capital, aspirational capital, and resistant capital. Her newfound connection to her family and the hopes and dreams found through investigating her counter-story shines in her and through her motivation towards her education. It also gives her the navigational capital to be aware of the obstacles and the resistant capital to engage and resist.

Racial and Cultural Identity: What You Don't Know Can Hurt You!

The second action step created by the student/co-researchers was to “Examine the impact of our stories on my racial/cultural identity.” Student/co-researchers defined this action step as: *Special languages, rituals, food, celebrations and values that make you, you. Makes you special and unique and defines where you come from and who you are. Your roots.* Student reflections based on the action step show a transformation in racial and cultural identity. In this section, I discuss how student/co-researchers transformed themselves as they engaged with their families’ counter-stories.

As with the previous action steps, in-class reflections and findings were shared with the group. During analysis of racial/cultural identity three things became clear: 1) the student/co-researchers had been de-culturalized and did not even know it, 2) once the student/co-researchers made this connection and understood their loss of culture and the importance of their culture they became determined to reclaim it, and 3) the parents of the student/co-researchers experienced profound racism regularly and now the student/co-researchers were aware of the racism they faced in their lives as well. As a result of this discovery the student/co-researchers became resolute in their role to fight against discrimination.

In a written reflection Esperanza described the impact that her mother’s story had on her cultural/racial identity by reflecting:

Before I learned about my family’s story I never felt a need to learn who I truly am and who’s blood flows through me. What heritage that is engraved in my skin, lungs, and heart didn’t matter but now I feel foolish that I ignored all the stories written on me when I look in the mirror, I’ve learned that my race gives me another reason to stand tall and brace against any obstacle in my path. Being Latina gives me a sense of fear of the discrimination that I will face but with that

it also brings a sense of courage because I know I am not standing alone. I'm standing with many Aztec and Mexican soldiers (Esperanza).

Esperanza described how she was at first unaware of her heritage and did not even realize the importance of exploring her culture. Through the curriculum she was able to reclaim her cultural heritage and also tapped into Yosso's (2005) resistant capital. She explained how learning about her race helped her develop internal fortitude to "stand tall brace against any obstacle in my path". It is also an example of Esperanza tapping into her familial capital and how that elevated her aspirations, which also allows her to resist oppression.

Reyna also described her transformational journey of engaging with her counter-story in a written reflection:

Before these stories I was kinda ashamed that I was Mexican because people thought that we would be 16 and pregnant, in gangs or on drugs. But also they think that Mexicans cannot succeed or do well but after reading these stories I realized that I am MexiCAN not MexiCAN'T, so now I can go into the world and say that I am Mexican and proud. These stories help me understand my culture and why it's important because if I do not know my culture than I don't know who I am (Reyna).

In this reflection Reyna directly addressed how important it is for Latinos to know their culture. She explains how knowing a culture helps define who a person is and in doing so taps into a resistant capital to succeed. Reyna transformed from feeling ashamed to being proud. She also reinforced the importance of knowing your cultural self in order to withstand the intervening obstacles that stop many students from achieving their goals. Her journey tapped into resistant capital and familial capital as described by Yosso (2005) by proclaiming that now that she has regained her culture she will be able to overcome the negative stereotypes and succeed.

Relationships with My Family: Empathy and Understanding

The third action step created by the student/co-researchers was to "Examine the impact of our stories on my relationships with my family." Student/co-researcher's defined this action step as: *How we get along with and understand our parents.* Student reflections based on this action step show a transformation in their relationships with their family. In this section, I

discuss how student/co-researcher's relationships were transformed as they engaged with their family's counter-stories.

Esperanza demonstrates the impact and transformation that the curriculum had on her relationship with her mother by describing her shift in perspective as she learned of the daily sacrifices, discrimination, and abuse her mother had to endure. In her final reflection she explains how it made her more grateful:

Before this experience I wasn't grateful of every day-to-day sacrifice my mother makes to lift me up and bring forth success. Like how she faced discrimination and abuse from her own family. I now feel a sense of pride because I have a mother that went through hell and back and still stands tall with her head held high. She still works for her family and everyday I look at her in awe of how much courage and strength she has (Esperanza).

Esperanza discusses how the CSTC transformed her relationship and put her in touch with a familial capital that she was unaware of at the beginning. Her mother's story was made more profound because she played her own mother and portrayed the difficulties she endured as Esperanza elaborated: "It was a really challenging experience since most of the roles I played I was being abused. It was mind blowing every time I thought of how much struggle they went through." Through her exploration and subsequent portrayal of her mother she was able to understand her mother's sacrifices which ultimately led to Esperanza being more grateful for her mother. Her newfound empathy of her mother's struggles allowed her to access the familial and resistant capital that her stories reclaimed. Her improved self-confidence showed in how she carried herself and by carrying the weight of portraying her mother on stage. Both during the show and after the tears shared by her and her mother were the tears of healing and newfound strength.

Dulce also explained the transformative impact of exploring her mother's story when she elaborated in her final reflection:

My relationship with my family has changed dramatically. I never respected my mom and dad. I always questioned why did they push me to the extremes? Or why did they treat me this way? I always discouraged their feelings. Then that night it was cold and seemed like the perfect night to surprise them with the

feeling of me being curious. The memories and the feelings just exploded from my mother's mouth. The energy and excitement in her voice made me realize that I was wrong all along. I didn't believe that I can miss out on so much. After that our relationship was so entwined. There was no way I was going back to my old life. I no longer question her authority (Dulce).

Dulce's journey demonstrates the transformation that the CSTC had on her relationships with her mother. Before she explored her mother's story, Dulce did not respect or understand her parents. After going through the process of researching her mother's counter-story, Dulce understood her parent's motivation and decision-making. Her journey was so similar to many of the other participants. They simply did not know the struggles and obstacles their parents faced on a daily basis just so their children could get the opportunity their parents never had. By transforming their relationships and opening the lines of communication the student/co-researchers were able to tap into familial and aspirational capital. It also allowed them to feel empathy towards their parents and anger towards the racism and oppression so that they have that capital as they too become young adults and begin navigating a racist world, but now they also have the requisite resistant capital to overcome any and all obstacles.

Self-Confidence: *Fuerza, orgullo and resistencia*

The final action step created by the student/co-researchers was to "Examine the impact of our stories on my self-confidence." Student/co-researcher's defined this action step as: *Stand up for who you are. Proud, not afraid to be yourself. Speak up for yourself and what you believe in.* Student reflections based on this action step show the impact that the stories had on their self-confidence. In this section, I discuss how student/co-researcher's self-confidence was impacted as they engaged with their family's counter-stories.

José's journey demonstrated a transformation in his relationship with his grandfather. This improved relationship had a great impact on his self-confidence and gave him access to his familial and aspirational capital. As a result of the curriculum and specifically his grandfather's story, José explains the impact that it had on his self-confidence:

I feel extremely confident now and feel like I can do great things. These stories have given me the knowledge to keep fighting for what I believe in. I am not

afraid to change stereotypes because they are wrong and for me that's enough to fight back. I have the courage to stand up and fight back. I am proud to be Mexican, knowing my cultural background has released my mind because I know where to go now. These stories have inspired me to be brave and persist because my grandpa did. He was brave so should I (José).

José's self-confidence was transformed, his relationship improved and the understanding of his cultural background deepened. This transformation was buttressed by aspirational, familial, and resistant capital. When he began the leadership program he was quiet and reserved, but at the end he played several different characters and wanting to do more. By accessing his family's counter-story he was armed with a newfound confidence. He became a very vocal leader within the group and took on more and more responsibility on the project.

Policy and Teacher Training Recommendations

The following is a letter written by one of my student/co-researchers, Maria, to an organization in order to secure funds so that the Leadership program continues. In it she explains why the program is so important to her and the other Latina/o students:

Leadership is a necessity to our school! We have guiding principles, such as having integrity or being compassionate, and high expectations for each student to lead them to a bright future. Leadership clearly makes it easier for students to achieve something beyond what they'd originally do in a classroom. It opens doors to new experiences as well! Seventh and eighth grade is where students have to make that sudden change from toys to tools. This program really brings out their maturity. It would be a great gift if we had this beneficial program for generations to come and we'd like you to be the people who help us get to this goal. Thank you for your time.

This letter highlights the impact and importance of the Leadership program. Maria also began the conversation about why this curriculum is so important. She also demonstrates the beginning of how this curriculum can be replicated in schools with Latino students without betraying the standards that teachers need to adhere to in order to be in academic compliance. The impact is very clear and now the curriculum has been studied by those with the most to

gain from engaging in this type of research. In Maria's words, "Leadership is a necessity at our school!"

I expand on Maria's thoughts by providing policy and teacher training recommendations, though it is difficult to reduce such complex issues into bullet points, and I do so with hesitation. Each of the following policy and professional development recommendations are very large and complicated issues that must be implemented within already established structures and systems. For my part, I hope that this study and the voice of the student/co-researchers becomes one of the pebbles necessary to create a ripple effect that helps change the course of our toxic, dysfunctional, and failing educational system. I begin with macro level policy changes and conclude by listing teacher professional development recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

1. Increase parent and community engagement components for all schools.
2. Provide parent trainings and workshops that educate parents on the policy-making process and pressure points in which they can influence decision-making processes.
3. Organize parents and families to advocate for legislation that empowers Latino communities and against laws that strip marginalized communities of their rights.
4. Grant school districts and schools more autonomy in order to choose curriculum that allows teachers to implement curriculum based on the student demographics they teach.
5. Extend the hours of all schools to provide adequate wrap around services and create more opportunities for family and community engagement. This would include homework help, counseling services, enrichment programs, and adult classes.
6. Foster partnerships with outside organizations dedicated to equity and social justice.
7. Create systems that share best instructional practices across district and charter schools.

Teacher Professional Development Recommendations

1. A realignment of teacher credentialing programs that shifts the epistemological lens to CRT.

2. Professional development opportunities for all teachers on the practice of CRT, which I have implemented at the school I recently founded.
3. Invest money for professional development opportunities on cultural sensitivity and awareness of white privilege, also implemented at my site.
4. Professional development opportunities for teachers to learn the languages of the students and families they serve.
5. Replication of a CSTC for Latino students in all middle school settings. I have centered my CSTC so that all students have access to my curriculum and have begun researching its impact.

Educational Leadership: *Adelante con la lucha!*

As a professional educator, this research illuminated my role and not in a way that made me feel good about my practice. I was participating in an educational system that was contributing to the de-culturalization of Latinos and I did not even know it. Even though I was experiencing success as first an instructor and later as an administrator, there was something not quite right. The schools that I was working for were experiencing success in the Academic Performance Index (API) which was the measurement of academic performance, graduation rates and college acceptance rates, but I was still witnessing large numbers of our young Latinos being pushed out of school and the blame always on the students and their families. Through this research I have found that there is so much more that we can do to reach every student. This research has shown me that there is a way to tap into a strength that comes only from the community and culture of the students. My CSTC is a way to tap into their CCW and can provide some of the missing ingredients for them to navigate the racist and oppressive systems. While engaging in the CSTC the students were given the space to be leaders in co-creating the curriculum. I trusted in them to research their stories and in doing so the student/co-researchers tapped into a strength that can only come from their stories. They began the process of reclaiming their culture, language, history, and identity, which allowed them to take ownership of their educational lives.

My research demonstrates a revolutionary way to engage Latino students. By exploring their personal counter-stories Latino students were able to 1) tap into their CCW, 2) provide

insight of their social context, and 3) repair some of the wounds caused by a racist and oppressive educational system. Replication of this co-created/iterative curriculum could create academic opportunities for Latino students so fewer youth end up like Antonio, the student of mine that dropped out of school and later died as a result of gang violence.

This research also contributed to my departure from the institution where it was conducted. This journey made me understand how dangerous and frightening this type of work is to the status quo. Upon completion of the initial year of CSTC implementation, the response was incredible. Many teachers, administrators, parents, and students talked about how important and special this work was. I felt that the time was ready for me to push this work and get wider implementation within my former institution. However, I believe that this increased pressure to expand on this work made many people feel threatened and contributed to the non-renewal of my contract. Anderson (2007) describes how this work can scare some educators: "It is political in the obvious sense that asking critical questions about one's practice, classroom and school can offend those with a stake in maintaining the status quo" (p. 5). The year following the initial implementation of the CSTC was very difficult. It began with my removal as director of the Leadership program that I founded, developed, and researched, followed by the elimination of my position from the school. Ultimately, I was able to complete the second year of CSTC only because some of the teachers spoke up on my behalf and on the importance of the program to this community, but I was still let go from the school. My former school was not ready for such a different approach of educating Latinos. Students, staff, and family members were devastated by my departure and the way I was treated by my supervisors. My last few days on campus were filled with many tears and sad goodbyes.

The year that I spent with my student/co-researchers was the most profound year I have spent as an educator. It has completely changed my views on education and I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to work with such amazing students. Despite good intentions, despite coming from the community I served I was simply another piece of the U.S. educational system that de-culturalizes Latino students. However, the results of this research have demonstrated that there is an alternative way to teach Latino students that shifts the epistemological lens. This epistemological shift allows for the culture of Latino students to be

placed in the center of a pedagogical approach that taps into the homeland culture of Latino students that increases engagement and has a positive impact on their racial/cultural identity.

Through the implementation of a CSTC, the student/co-researchers demonstrated that they were able to directly tap into their vast CCW. This enabled them to heal old wounds attributed to a loss of culture, reclaim their racial/cultural identity, improve their relationships with their families, experience a heightened sense of self-confidence, which all led to the student/co-researchers being motivated to do better in school. They reported a transformation in their attitudes as a result of understanding the sacrifices, challenges, and racism endured by their family members. The data showed that when students are denied their culture they are missing the very component that makes them who they are, but by engaging the CSTC they were able to reclaim their culture and history. As stated previously, my year implementing the CSTC was the most profound year of my 15 years as an educator. I set out to examine the impact that the CSTC had on Latino student identity and engagement not realizing that I would be transformed and tested along the way. As a member of the Latino community, one thing I have learned is that our stories, history, language, and culture are incredibly important. Without them we are nothing. This journey has had a significant impact on me both professionally and personally.

As the student/co-researchers were transformed by the journey, so was I. Being dismissed and disrespected from the job I had and losing the opportunity to continue growing the Leadership program that I developed and researched was devastating. However, I too now had access to my own CCW and was not going to simply go away. As previously mentioned I embraced my departure as an opportunity to overcome and do something special. I am now working with an organization in San José, California. Our mission is to prepare first generation Latino students for college. They believed in my Leadership program and the research I have done and I am now a Founding Principal of a new middle school where my Leadership program has been implemented institutionally and ALL students have access to the curriculum. So now all my current middle school students have the opportunity to reclaim that which was rightfully theirs from birth and it happens daily as a core class. As our program grows and as I grow as an educational leader I am working on taking this curriculum and implementing the CCW and CRP aspects into all that our school does. I will begin the research on institutional

implementation of this curriculum in all content areas in the fall of 2016. My transformation and journey as an educational leader continues as I strive on with the implementation of this curriculum and pedagogy institutionally and organizationally as I prepare for more widespread implementation systemically.

References

- Anderson, G. L., (2007). *Studying your own school: An educator's guide to practitioner action research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press A Sage Publications Company.
- Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new Mestiza* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Carrillo, R., & Tello, J. (2008). *Family violence and men of color: Healing the wounded male spirit* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.
- Covarrubias, A. (2011). Quantitative intersectionality: A critical race analysis of the Chicana/o educational pipeline. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 10(2), 86-105.
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 105-126.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th ed.). New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- Smith, L. T. (2008). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (12th ed.). New York, NY: Zed Books Ltd.
- Solorzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2001). Critical race and LatCrit theory and method: counter-storytelling. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(4), 471-495.
- Solorzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23-44.
- Spring, J. (2010). *Deculturalization and the struggle for equality: A brief history of the education of dominated cultures of the United States* (6th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill Higher Education.
- Tello, J. (2008). El hombre noble buscando balance: The noble man searching for balance. In R. Carrillo & J. Tello (Eds.), *Family violence and men of color: Healing the wounded male spirit* (2nd ed) (pp. 37-59). New York, NY: Spring Publishing Company.
- Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending Damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3), 409-424.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring* (1st ed.). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.