

Liberating Ourselves: Agency, Resistance and Possibilities for Change among Latina/o Students, Educators, and Parents

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Latino communities across the United States are experiencing today the impact of the recent economic collapse in ways that only further exacerbate many of the same social inequalities that have been historically at work for over a century. Mass deportations, increasing unemployment and incarceration, poor health care, severe cuts in school budgets, the vilification of teachers, the silencing of parents and students, and wholesale attacks on ethnic studies are highly prevalent conditions in many neighborhoods where large populations of Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Central Americans reside.

These conditions are just some of the assaults confronting Latino communities, despite the growing number of Latinas/os in this country. And as might be expected, education is at the center of many conflicts and struggles associated with these conditions, given its significant role as one of the few contested public spaces that remain within the ever-encroaching privatization schemes tied to neoliberal objectives. Hence, just as it was in the days of the Lemon Grove incident in the 1930s, the Mendez v. Westminster case in the 1940's, and the Chicano blow-outs of the 1970s, education continues to represent an important arena of struggle for Latinas/os in the U.S.—a place where the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of Latina/o students can be nurtured and supported.

Yet, so often the social agency of Latina/o students and their communities are fundamentally disabled and their academic and civic needs are rendered invisible by the impact of class inequalities, racialization, and other political and ideological forces that effectively obstruct democratic voice and participation—forces of cultural invasion that subsume the histories, language, and future yearnings of Latina/o students. Accordingly, many experience a growing sense of social alienation, left to contend daily with the forces of inequality and growing public disengagement that can result.

In light of these concerns, this special issue of the *Association of Mexican-American Educators Journal* is dedicated to the theme of resistance. We selected this theme because throughout the country educators, students, parents, and communities are rising up to actively resist attacks on our dignity, our expressions of culture and voice, and our right to participate as world citizens. Resistance is a complex social phenomenon that must be understood critically with respect to its meaning and the political intent that portends its rising within human beings. It is not solely a psychological mechanism. Nor is it simply a mindless individual response or a knee-jerk reaction to a perceived attack. Instead, Freire and others who have followed his tradition insist that critical resistance must be engaged as an emancipatory construct of everyday life.

As such, emancipatory resistance is rooted in the evolution of critical consciousness or what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1971), in his elaboration of a *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, termed “conscientização.” As is true in much of his writings, Freire conceived the notion of critical consciousness not as a state of being, but as an active phenomenon born of collective struggle, rooted in the notion that as human beings participate

together in reflection and dialogue about the limiting conditions—many not of our own making—that suffocate our aspiration, we gradually become more conscious of the social, political, and economic policies and practices that constrain and silence our civic participation. As a consequence, through an on-going engagement with that which threatens our self-determination as individuals and a community, we become compelled to take action in order to counter, reconstruct, and transform our world.

As educators, scholars and activists, we draw heavily upon the work of Paulo Freire (and of course many others), as both a source of inspiration and as a conceptual guide for better understanding the limits and possibilities of resistance at this stage of history. Freire's understanding of resistance is closely tied to his understanding of *praxis*, a regenerative process, which he envisioned as the harbinger of social action, critical consciousness, and political solidarity, among those committed to the struggle for democratic life. For Freire, an emancipatory praxis is central to an education that prepares students to become beings for themselves. But more importantly, such a praxis can only be forged within the context of courageous dialogue; for it is only as we come to see the world as subjects who can act upon it—rather than as passive victims of circumstance—that we come to experience for ourselves what it truly means to be human. This is precisely what Freire meant when he wrote and spoke of empowerment as a pedagogical imperative.

There is no question that the contributors to this special issue share this vital understanding of social agency, consciousness, empowerment, and the political commitment that all of this entails. As such, the contributors embrace a commitment to the larger project of education as a means of student empowerment, through creating the conditions for critical thought. This approach contrasts fundamentally with the deeply fragmented, decontextualized, and racialized meritocratic culture of high-stakes testing, which functions, wittingly or unwittingly, to perpetuate the disempowerment and marginalization of the most vulnerable student populations. Inherent in the critical educational approach espoused here is also an uncompromising commitment to community organizing, through critical dialogue and problem-posing strategies, in an effort to achieve a shared understanding of what must be done to confront our own problems and to guide our collective efforts. But, above all, there is a commitment to a humanizing political vision, anchored in the recognition that without active, collective resistance, within schools and society, we run the risk of not only becoming further victimized, but of also becoming more fully marginalized and silenced even within our own communities.

Writing from their unique social locations as Latina and Latino teachers, principals, professors, student activists, and parents, the contributors rightly assert that not only is resistance to the forces that oppress and marginalize Latino communities possible, it is essential. Freire's vision of struggle is again central to this underlying thesis. It entails a pedagogical and political vision that is inextricably rooted in the radical idea that one person cannot act to liberate another, but rather that through dignity and respect for one another, love for all life, and purposeful and persistent dialogue, we together can devise those strategies that make resistance feasible and transformation possible.

As Freire so eloquently wrote, "Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building" (p.52). The authors in this volume embrace this sentiment. They understand resistance, not as a slogan or catch phrase, but as a pedagogical *and* political imperative. Through their writings, they demonstrate how resistance must function as an integral part of the educational process, one that affirms our human rights, nurtures our spirits, and makes possible the fulfillment of our revolutionary dreams.

At a time when policymakers clamor endlessly about the importance of standardization and accountability and educational leaders peddle the latest reform gimmick or instructional flavor of the month—phonics, open-court literacy curriculum, smart boards, common core standards—to "save our schools," such an approach is not only refreshing, it is desperately needed to revive Latina/o pedagogical debates and a liberatory vision of education in this country.

We certainly hope that readers of this special issue will be as inspired as we are, by the excellent questions raised and the empowering possibilities for *liberating ourselves* offered by these contributing authors. We also trust that these writings will inspire readers to embrace education, once again, as a tool for empowerment, a means for disrupting poverty, a place for the building of solidarity, and as the most vital political tool we currently possess for countering ignorance and bigotry. For Latinas/os and for all people, we hope this special

issue of AMAE will indeed make it possible for us all to embrace education as an integral part of the struggle for social justice—a struggle so vital to the future of children and our communities.

The first part of the special issue contains six research studies. Linnea Beckett, Ana Paulina Moreno, and Ron Glass analyze the experiences of Latino/a parents in two popular education projects that engage in a process of community building as a form of resistance. In examining the pedagogical process of community building, the authors present new ways of understanding solidarity and agency. Their article is entitled: “A Pedagogy of Community Building: Re-imagining Parent Involvement and Community Organizing in Popular Education Efforts.” The second study, “Mexican American Studies: The Historical Legitimacy of an Educational Program,” focuses on the process that led to the development and implementation of the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, Arizona. The piece, written by Conrado Gómez and Margarita Jiménez-Silva, pays specific attention to the collective effort of the students, parents, and teachers that “dared to dream big on behalf of Mexican American students” in Tucson schools.

We next hear the *testimonios* of six Latina/o young adults who either left or considered leaving high school before graduation in the piece appropriately entitled, “Latina/o Dropouts: Generating Community Cultural Wealth,” by Rebeca Burciaga and Nancy Erbstein. This article, drawing on the community cultural wealth framework, addresses the low graduation rates of Latinas/os while at the same time provides voice to the experiences and strategies of school persistence. In the next article, Pablo Ramírez and Gustavo González share with readers the voices of four Latina teachers in Southern California who enacted agency and challenged institutional barriers impacting Latinas/os in the educational system. Their portraits, struggles, and triumphs are found in the article, “Latina Teacher Agency in Public Schools: Love, Tensions, and Perseverance.”

Bianca Guzmán’s “Cultivating a Guerrera Spirit in Latinas: The Praxis of Mothering” provides a powerful reflective piece on the ways that Latina mothers can nurture the *guerrera* spirit of agency and well-being in their daughters. Through her own *testimonio*, the author positions mothering as a form of decolonizing education. To conclude the first part of the special issue, a group of co-authors wrote, “Framework for a New Political Praxis: *Respeto, Dignidad y Conocimiento*,” which brings together shared work involving the education of youth and the development of community—all modeled on practices of community engagement taking place in South Texas. The writers of this piece are Francisco Guajardo, Miguel Guajardo, John Oliver, and Lia O’Neill M. A. Keawe.

The second part of the special issue is devoted to reflective essays. The first is by Reynaldo Reyes III, who shares his insights in preparing Latina/o teachers in a border context; he calls for teacher candidates to use their own life stories and sacrifices in the development of their pedagogy. His essay is appropriately called, “Teachers of Latinos on the Margins: Beginning at a Pedagogy from Within.” Anita Fernández and Zoe Hammer follow with their essay entitled, “Red Scare in the Red State: The Attack on Mexican-American Studies in Arizona and Opportunities for Building National Solidarity.” In this piece, the authors provide a perspective of two social justice educators who bore witness to the Tucson Unified School District’s Mexican American Studies program. The authors call for alliances to be built amongst transformative education projects, such as the MAS program, across the country. The last essay, by Belinda Hernández Arriaga, discusses the youth-led collective based in Oakland, California, which is committed to recognizing the 67 percent of undocumented youth and young adults who would not qualify for the DREAM Act, and is called, “67 Sueños: Inspiring a Movement for Undocumented Voices to be Heard.”

Finally, the special issue closes with a set of poems by Marisol Ruiz entitled, “Silencing Resistance,” that speaks to the courage of pushing back the ban against ethnic studies in Arizona and a book review of *Mothers United: An Immigrant Struggle for Socially Just Education* (Dyrness, 2011)—an ethnography of Latina immigrant mothers involved in the small schools reform movement in northern California.

