NUESTRA VOZ: AN ARTICULATION OF TRANSFORMATIONAL RESISTANCE THROUGH THE VOICES OF LATINO/A YOUTH

Eleanor A. Petrone

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Education (Culture, Curriculum, and Change).

Chapel Hill

2009

Approved by
Advisor: Dr. Ryuko Kubota
Reader: Dr. David Levine
Reader: Dr. George Noblit
Reader: Dr. James Trier
Reader: Dr. Xue Rong
Abstract

ELEANOR A. PETRONE: NUESTRA VOZ: AN ARTICUALTION OF TRANSFORMATIONAL RESISTANCE THROUGH THE VOICES OF LATINO/A YOUTH
(Under the direction of Dr. Ryuko Kubota)

This dissertation is a qualitative study that examines how Latino/a youth living in the Southeast have experienced, adapted to, and resisted oppressive social structures within their community. Through the content analysis of a teen radio show produced by and for Latino/a youth, in conjunction with semi-structured group and individual interviews, and ethnographic field notes, the author investigates how a group of Mexican-origin, high school students confronted and attempted to transform the educational practices that serve to keep them subordinate. The study posits the community organization that sponsored the radio show as a pedagogical site of resistance and transformation, and privileges the ways in which the students’ involvement with the organization helped to foster political activism, familismo, and a community ethos.

The study highlights the ways in which the counter discourse of Nuestra Voz, which emphasized the importance of community empowerment and the maintenance of the students’ home culture and values, was closely aligned with Suárez-Orozco’s (2000) bi-cultural strategy for adaptation and Portes and Rumbaut’s (2001) selective pattern of acculturation in which students act as cultural brokers between the home culture and the host culture, maintaining both their cultural affiliations and home language. By repeatedly calling upon young people to work for the betterment of the Latino/a
community, the students of *Nuestra Voz* provided an alternative to the priority placed on individual success so prevalent in white, middle-class America. The students addressed head-on the self-defeating behaviors associated with the resistance of marginalized youth and countered them with a discourse of transformational resistance in which family, community and perseverance were privileged.
To Rhonda and Leo, as essential as the air I breathe.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the students from *Nuestra Voz* for welcoming me into their lives and allowing me to work alongside them. Without their hard work and commitment to their community, this study would not have been possible. I especially want to thank Maria, who from my first meeting with the students of *Nuestra Voz*, made me feel like I was part of the team.

I would like to thank my loving partner, Rhonda. There are no words to aptly describe the level of support you have shown me.

I would like to thank my entire dissertation committee. I thank all of you for your questions, insights, and encouragement throughout this project. I would like to send a special thank you to my advisor, Ryuko, who provided me with the perfect balance of support and patience.

I thank my mother, Jane Muir, who despite her distaste for academic writing, carefully read endless drafts filled with “overstuffed sentences.” Your accomplishments, literary and otherwise, have always given me something to aspire to. I would also like to thank Catherine Wint, James Rice, and Karen Quiana for providing me with invaluable perspective at the most crucial times.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wonderful students at Hall Fletcher and Isaac Dickson Elementary schools for bringing a sense of relevance to this project which was vital to its completion.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Browning of the South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purpose of this study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptual Framework: LatCrit and Critical Race Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dissertation Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>CONNECTIONS TO THE LITERATURE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assimilation, Acculturation, and the Incorporation of Immigrant Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critical Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LatCrit Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postcritical Ethnography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Collaborators and Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Collection and Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reciprocity and the Research Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>RECONSTRUCTING CULTURE: PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS, PEER CULTURE AND GENDER ROLES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction: Acculturation and the role of <em>Familismo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Downward Assimilation and Its Mediating Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Be quiet….shhhhh…. Listen (music begins to play).
Hello to all the young listeners and to all those with young hearts. This is your radio program *Nuestra Voz*[^1] [Our Voice] produced by the young people from Victoria City High and sponsored by El Puente. *Nuestra Voz* is a space to share ideas, experiences and opinions. Our goal is to bring you useful information while entertaining you with music, interviews and advice. Call us and participate. This is *Nuestra Voz* your space for making friendships.

For over four years this is the introduction that listeners heard who tuned into North Carolina’s first Spanish radio show produced by and for adolescent Latinos. Although the introduction begins by asking listeners to be quiet, the fundamental objective of the show was to allow the students of Victoria High School with a place to talk about the issues they faced in their schools, homes and communities. For those wanting to better understand the experience of recently immigrated Latino/a youth, these shows are an invaluable resource. For those wanting to cultivate the talents and ambitions of marginalized Latino/a youth, the practices of El Puente, the community organization that sponsored *Nuestra Voz*, is an invaluable model.

This dissertation is about change. It is about the young people whose lives embody that change. It is about the struggle over the future of the New South and how

[^1]: All identifiers including the names of the town, county, city and school have been changed to protect the anonymity of the research participants.
that struggle has played out in the educational experiences of a group of five Mexican-origin youth. It is about situated social struggles embedded in a longer-standing national struggle. It is about how a group of young people has navigated the change around them while simultaneously working to be agents of change. And, in no small part, it is about that aspect of history which is “constituted in the space that encompasses both social participation and self-authoring” (Holland & Lave, 2001, p.29).

The Browning of the South

North Carolina has experienced a rapid demographic shift. Between 1990 and 2006 the Latino population increased by 600 percent (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2006). Reflected within this unprecedented increase is that the Latino numbers were quite small in the early 1990s. Although the absolute numbers of Latinos living in North Carolina are still relatively small when compared to more traditional entry points for Latino migration, the speed by which this growth occurred has transformed entire communities within a matter of a few years.

North Carolina is one of many new gateway states in the southeast to experience marked demographic shifts in its foreign born populations. Latino immigrants who came because of the economic growth of the region did not join the long established Latino communities such as are found in California, New York, Florida and Texas. Unlike traditional gateway states where Latinos have resided for generations, the majority of North Carolina’s Latino population is foreign born and has recently arrived. The Latino

---

2 Although the students in this study are all of Mexican-origin, I have chosen to use the pan-ethnic terms Latino and Hispanic for two reasons: that is how students referred to themselves; and, the issues addressed in this study also affect members of the immigrant community who are of central and South American origin. The term Hispanic was used when taken directly from the participants’ interviews or radio programs and state and national policy reports, otherwise the author uses Latino/a.
population growth in the new gateway states of the South began primarily with young males from Mexico having comparatively low levels of education. They came because of the robust economy of the South and then stayed, married and had children (Kochlar, Suro, Tafoya, & Pew Hispanic Center 2005; Bump, Lowell, & Pettersen, 2005). North Carolinians, who were accustomed to a mostly migrant Latino population, were taken by surprise when in the 1990s large numbers of Latinos came to work, live, and stay (Bailey, 2005).

A major factor in the growth of the Latino population in North Carolina and in many areas of the southeast was the robust economical expansion of the last decade. Throughout the new gateway states of the South unemployment rates were consistently lower than the rest of the country. While many parts of the country were losing manufacturing jobs to cheaper labor markets abroad, settlement counties in the southeast were adding jobs to the manufacturing sector. In addition to manufacturing jobs, there was an increase in demand for labor in construction, road work and the service industries. Latinos were not the only group to be attracted to the southeast on account of its economic growth; the black population grew by 18 percent and the white population grew by 10 percent between 1990 and 2000 (Kochlar et al., 2005).

Despite the economic expansion that fueled Latino immigration, Latinos in the new gateway states experienced a disproportionate increase in poverty. The poverty rate for Latinos in the southeast jumped from 19.7 percent to 25.5 percent from 1990 to 2000, representing a 30 percent increase. This increase is even more significant when compared to the 4 percent drop in the poverty rate for Latinos nationwide or the 7 percent drop in
the poverty rate for the region’s overall population during the decade (Kochlar et al.,
2005).

The growth in the Latino population was not limited to the labor force; there was
also a dramatic increase in the number of Latinos entering the public schools in the
southeast. Between 1990 and 2000 the number of children of immigrants in North
Carolina PK-fifth grades grew by 153 percent and the number in sixth to twelfth grade
grew by 205 percent (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoro, 2006). It is
estimated that by 2017, 30,000 more students will graduate from North Carolina’s public
high schools, 22,000, or just under three fourths of those will be Latino (Harvey,
Oxendine, & Reid, 2007). Like the overall increase in North Carolina’s Latino
population, the school age population growth followed the same trajectory as the labor
growth, starting out very small and increasing very rapidly. Because it is a population that
presented itself quite suddenly, the schools did not have the necessary programs, policies,
or staff in place to meet the needs of this population who often came with limited English
skills.

**Latino Dropout and Graduation Rates in North Carolina**

Unfortunately, North Carolina has been relatively unsuccessful in meeting the
educational needs of its Latino students. Over the last decade the Latino dropout rate has
consistently increased and was 8.69 percent as of 2005-2006—the highest of any ethnic
group, including American Indians, who have historically held this unenviable rank
(NCDPI, 2006). According to North Carolina State Board policy a dropout is defined as
“any student who leaves school for any reason before graduation or completion of a
program of studies without transferring to another elementary or secondary school” (NCDPI, 2006 p.1). When we consider that schools do not have to report students as having dropped out if they are said to have left the country, the number of unreported dropouts among a foreign born population could be considerably higher.³

The academic performance of Latinos in North Carolina can be better understood by looking at the Latino graduation rate of a four-year cohort. According to North Carolina’s Department of Instruction, the graduation rate for the 2002-2003 cohort of ninth grade Hispanic students was 51.8 percent compared to 73.6 percent for whites and 60 percent for blacks (NCDPI, 2007). While graduation rates for Latinos in North Carolina have declined, the rates for other marginalized groups—Native Americans and African Americans—have been increasing over the last decade (Urban Institute, 2005).

**Undocumented Immigrants**

Much like the increase in the overall population of Latino immigrants, there has been a marked increase in the number of undocumented immigrants who have entered the United States since 1990. As of March 2006 the undocumented population was estimated to be between 11.5 to 12 million with Mexican immigrants making up 56 percent of the total undocumented, and Mexicans arriving within the last 10 years accounting for between 80-85 percent of the total undocumented population. Immigrants from other parts of Latin America account for another 22 percent of the undocumented population (Passel & Pew Hispanic Center, 2006).

---
³ As both a teacher and a researcher in North Carolina, I am aware that school counselors report students as having returned to their country of origin based on hearsay with little or no official follow up.
In new gateway states like North Carolina, Mexican undocumented migration increased five to six fold during the 1990s (Van Hook, Bean & Passel, 2005) and as of 2004 it was estimated that 45 percent of Latinos living in North Carolina were undocumented (Nguyen, 2007). Children are far from being immune from this detrimental legal status; in 2005 the estimated 1.8 million undocumented children made up 16 percent of the undocumented population nationwide. Another 3.8 million children, who are American-born citizens, are living in households headed by undocumented persons (Passel, 2006)—these families are referred to as mixed families among immigration specialists.

Two significant characteristics of the undocumented are their lower educational attainment and their higher poverty levels, each of which synergistically works to worsen the long term economic outlook for the undocumented and their children. Thirty-eight percent of children living in undocumented households are living in poverty, more than twice as many as native families and 80 percent more than children in legal immigrant families (Van Hook, Bean & Passel, 2005). Because undocumented immigrants are unable to attend state and community colleges in North Carolina as in-state residents, and are denied access to federal and state student loans, their tuition, which is based on international student rates, leaves higher education virtually unattainable.

Nevertheless, the businesses and communities of North Carolina have not challenged questionable documents because the agricultural, manufacturing, construction and service industries rely on the labor of the undocumented (Bailey, 2005). The food processing industries in particular, which have sparked a surge of immigration in what is known as the “poultry counties” of North Carolina, have labor demands that they have
not been able to meet through legal channels (Nguyen, 2007). With the growth of Americans’ appetite for chicken and a diminishing native-born work force willing to endure the hardship of low paying and physically debilitating work such as cutting and de-boning chicken carcasses in refrigerated work spaces, the undocumented status of Latino workers renders them a pliable workforce for the “poultry counties” of North Carolina.

Acrimonious Transformation

This rapid demographic shift in North Carolina has been acrimonious at times. Latinos have had to navigate through the rigid racial binary that characterizes much of the Southeast. Unaccustomed to a large immigrant population, both the language and culture of this new population was viewed as problematic by the native born population because of its foreign nature. Not only was there no existing Latino community into which to meld, but long-standing ethnic communities, so prevalent in other parts of the country, were also sparse. As increasing numbers of Latino children entered the public schools and more Latino families made small southern cities their home, Latinos began to be seen as the source of much of the community’s problems, from crime to overtaxed social services, such as crowded and under funded schools (Murillo, 2002; Villenas, 2002).

Tension between the newly arriving Latino immigrants and native-born Americans has been perhaps the most intense in the more rural counties that experienced growth rates in Latino population that were substantially higher than that of the State. Many of these counties are home to manufacturing sites and poultry plants. Victoria City, the site for this study serves as a prime example of a small city situated in New Hope
County, a rural county of North Carolina that experienced a rapid demographic shift due to the town’s poultry processing plants. As of 2005, Latinos made up 52 percent of Victoria City’s population, 80 percent of its kindergarten and first grade classes, and accounted for nearly 70 percent of the city’s labor force (Bowdler, 2005). When we consider that between 1990 and 2000 the Latino population grew by 741 percent in New Hope County (Center for International Understanding, 2007) this shift in demographics can be better appreciated.

In 1998 the county commissioner presiding over Victoria City sent a letter to the Immigration and Naturalization Services asking that they deport the undocumented Latinos residing within Victoria City and the outlying towns of New Hope County (Yeoman, 2000). In April, 2000, David Duke, the former Louisiana state representative and onetime Grand Dragon of the Klu Klux Klan, came to Victoria City with the objective of further igniting the growing animosity that many felt towards the Latino community. Duke held a rally outside the town hall with about 400 people in attendance; at that time the city’s population was estimated to be 6,000. The hostile sentiment of the demonstrators is clearly captured in the following quote by one of Duke’s supporters: “I am mad because there ain’t no Greyhound buses here to load ‘em up and send them back where they come from, every goddamn one of them (Cuadros, 2000 p.1).” Ironically, the county commissioner who just two years earlier had appealed to the INS to rid the county of its undocumented residents, helped to defuse Duke’s efforts. Many of the townspeople saw being associated with the Klan as a step that they were just not willing to take, despite their animosity toward the growing immigrant community (Cuadros, 2006).
With this new wave of immigration in the Southeast, many critical race theorists have focused on how Latinos are being incorporated into the Southern black and white binary (Murillo, 2002; Beck & Allexsaht-Snider, 2002; Villenas, 2002). Murillo and others writing in the late nineties about the new Latino Diaspora framed their work around the question “how does it feel to be a problem?” The framing of “immigrant as problem” still pertains to how many view the growing Latino population, but it has gained significantly in its complexity. The Latino youth in this study have spent a large part, if not the majority of their lives within the United States; they are the 1.5 generation. Unlike their parents, their identities have been shaped as much by their experiences in the United States as by their national and familial ties to Mexico. They are bilingual, bicultural, and now a permanent part of the southern demographic.

**Purpose of this Study**

This is an ethnographic study that examines the ways in which Latino youth have used the creation of a cultural product, the teen radio show *Nuestra Voz*, as a tool to negotiate acculturation and at times resist assimilationist ideologies while working towards social justice. The goal of this study is to give voice to the frequently silenced experience of acculturation and the formation and maintenance of a bicultural identity by exploring the following questions:

- How did the Latino youth who participated in the production of *Nuestra Voz* experience the process of acculturation?
- How did the Latino youth who participated in the production of *Nuestra Voz* resist assimilationist ideologies and maintain a bicultural identity?

---

4 Demographers Richard Fry and B. Lindsay Lowell (2002) define the 1.5 generation as those immigrants who arrived to the host country before the age of thirteen.
In what ways did the Latino youth who participated in the production of *Nuestra Voz* challenge and work to transform the current power relations which keep them subordinate?

This study, which posits community organizations as pedagogical sites of resistance and transformation (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993), privileges the critical practices of the community organization, El Puente, and the ways in which it supported the participants’ articulation of student resistance to assimilationist ideologies. The study is informed through the content analysis of the radio show *Nuestra Voz*, ethnographic field notes collected over a period of 18, interviews with the study’s three male collaborators,\(^5\) who were played back segments of the radio shows and asked to reflect on them in open-ended interviews, and interactions with two female participants who were not interviewed but part of my participant observation. All of the collaborators had been involved with *Nuestra Voz* for a minimum of a year.

I initially began my research for this study by attending the weekly work sessions and broadcasts of *Nuestra Voz*. I also attended community gatherings and fundraisers with the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz*. I met the students’ families and visited their homes, as I was often the one to provide transportation from El Puente. After two months of involvement with *Nuestra Voz*, I was asked to help with the planning and organization of the city’s April 10\(^{th}\) immigration march and rally in 2006. At this point in my research, my involvement and dedication to the students increased significantly. I helped the students write, translate and practice the delivery of their speeches, as well as worked with the staff of El Puente in preparing for the march. On the day of the march, I met the students at Victoria High and marched with them from their high school to the

---

\(^5\) Because the interviews were conducted with the hopes of dialogically making sense of the radio shows, I chose to refer to the interviewees as collaborators rather than participants.
poultry plant, and then through the neighborhoods of Victoria City, until we reached the
town hall where the students delivered their speeches. In the summer of 2007 I attended a
three-day forum with the students hosted by a state-wide Latino advocacy organization.
This study is informed heavily by these experiences, as well as by the content analysis of
Nuestra Voz and the open-ended interviews conducted with the study’s three
collaborators.

Significance of this Study

If North Carolina’s educational community is to better serve this growing
population of students, it is imperative that we understand how Latino youth experience
and negotiate the difficult task of pursuing an education in a system that is relatively new
to serving an immigrant population. Latinos\textsuperscript{6} add a new dimension to the black and white
binary that for decades has defined the racial makeup of the South. How they have
experienced their incorporation into the southern demographic deserves closer
examination.

This qualitative study attempts to provide greater understanding and insight into
the social, political, and economic challenges that Latino youth in North Carolina face in
their pursuit of an education. Having come of age in the United States, the young people
in this study feel an entitlement to the American economic system that their parents may
not share. They attend American schools where they are repeatedly told that hard work
will take them far. Unfortunately, their place in the American economic system may not
turn out to be much different from their parents; twenty-one percent of Mexican

\textsuperscript{6} In addition to the growing Latino population, many states in the southeast currently have large numbers of Asian Americans.
immigrants living in the United States live below the poverty line. Mexican immigrants have the highest high school dropout rates of all groups coming from Latin America (Pew Hispanic Center, 2003). Furthermore, Mexican immigrants are one of the few immigrant groups who do not experience a correlation between their level of educational attainment and their earned income (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). When we consider that the Latino population of North Carolina, which is largely comprised of Mexican immigrants, is one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the country (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2006) it becomes crucial that we better understand the ways in which adolescent Latino immigrants experience and navigate the schools and communities in which they reside.

As a teacher who has been working with immigrant students for over a decade, I strongly believe that the welfare and educational success of immigrant students would be enhanced if American schools recognized their home cultures, values and languages as assets, rather than deficits that must be fixed through assimilation. In order to highlight the positive attributes that accompany Latino immigrants into the American classroom, I chose a research context that was firmly embedded in the Latino community. After listening to the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz*, both face-to-face and through radio recordings, my initial belief that immigrant students have inordinate strengths that should be recognized, nourished, and promoted has been further verified. My goal is to leave the reader with a better understanding of these strengths and the creative ways in which this specific group of students have used these strengths to circumvent the many obstacles that lie before them.

**Conceptual Framework: LatCrit and Critical Race Theory**
The principle component of my conceptual framework comes from LatCrit theory (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Elenes, 2001; Elenes, Gonzalez, Delgado Bernal, & Villenas 2001; Fernández, 2002; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). LatCrit theory has its roots in critical race theory, which draws from and expands on the literature coming out of law, sociology, history, ethnic studies and women’s studies. Critical race theory was the birth child of legal scholars who were discontent with liberalism\(^7\) and the painfully slow process of civil rights litigation to move American society towards racial equality (Bell, 1992, 2000; Olivas, 2000; Gotunda, 2000; Spann, 2000). Ladson-Billings, one of the first to apply critical race theory to the field of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998), views critical race theory as a line of inquiry in which racism is seen as a permanent fixture of American society, with non-racialized whites being the primary beneficiaries. Critical race theorists believe that racism is not confined to the actions of individuals, but rather is endemic throughout American society. In studying American society and its institutions—judicial and educational system being primary—critical race theorists purport that racial injustice, oppression, and hierarchies and the ways in which they are maintained and perpetuated need to be at the forefront of examination and not overshadowed or explained by the ideology\(^8\) of meritocracy\(^9\) (Bell, 1992; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Fernández, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Pizarro, 1999; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Tate

---

\(^7\) Critical race scholars, define liberalism as “a system of civil rights litigation and activism characterized by incrementalism, faith in the legal system, and hope for progress” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p.1).

\(^8\) The term ideology, often considered to be a Marist concept was actually coined by the French Philosopher Destutt in the late eighteenth century. A Marxist—and somewhat simplistic—interpretation of the term implies a system of (false) beliefs promoted by the ruling class that serves to keep them dominant (Williams, 1978).

\(^9\) Meritocracy is the belief that all people regardless of race, gender, or class are fairly rewarded based on their individual merit and effort (Delgado Bernal, 2002).
(1997) asserts that critical race theory is particularly valuable in the deconstruction of school discourses which often serve to normalize whiteness and assume racial neutrality.

As defined by Solorzano & Yosso (2002):

Critical race theory advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin…Critical race theory in education is a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom. (p.25)

LatCrit, which developed out of critical race theory, shares with it the basic premise that race and racism are a defining characteristic of U.S. society. Social, judicial and educational policies are viewed as existing within a particular social and historic context in which race remains paramount. However, unlike critical race theory, LatCrit explicitly addresses issues of immigration, ethnicity, culture, language, and sexuality. LatCrit theorists argue that race intersects with other dimensions of one’s identity and that each aspect can elicit multiple forms of oppression (Delgado Bernal, 2002). LatCrit theory addresses the multidimensionality of Latinas/Latinos identities. Because the immigration status and primary language use of the Latino youth in this study is integral to their experiences in their communities and schools, LatCrit provides a keener lens through which to understand these experiences. LatCrit uncovers the many layers and complexity of the participants’ identity formation and knowledge construction by paying close attention to the ways in which their immigration status, language, race, gender and class intersect.
Similar to critical race theory and critical pedagogy, one of the central tenets of LatCrit is a commitment to social justice and racial liberation. LatCrit is conceived of as an anti-subordination as well as an antiessentialist project, which attempts to link theory with practice and the academy with the community (Villalpando, 2003).

Critical race theory and LatCrit provide a methodological as well as an epistemological understanding of how racism and other forms of subordination affect the lives of racially disenfranchised students (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Fernández, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Villalpando, 2003). Because critical race and LatCrit theory are grounded in the experience and knowledge of people of color, the notion of an objective truth existing in an ahistoric context is challenged by the use of stories and counterstories, which serve to give voice to the racially marginalized and oppressed. Both critical race theory and LatCrit theory challenge dominant ideologies and ahistoricism by viewing the lived experiences of students of color as a legitimate vehicle for knowledge construction. Villalapando (2003) describes the counterstory as “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege, and can shatter our complacency, can challenge the dominant discourse on race, and can be used in the struggle for racial reform. Counterstories can provide data that offer individuals a way to see the world through others’ eyes and enrich one’s own reality” (p. 625). In examining the sociocultural practices of Latina/o youth through research that focuses on their words, visions and values, not only do we gain insight into how they experience oppression, but we also are better able to see the ways in which they use their personal agency to resist and transform this oppression. The methodology of this study draws directly from this

---

10 Critical race and Latcrit theorists maintain that all social interactions occur within a particular historical context which is essential to understanding the interplay of social forces. Critical race and Latcrit theorists take issue with scholars who fail to frame social issues within a larger historical context.
transformation in that it privileges the voices and experiences of Latino youth through the in-depth analysis of a cultural production originating within the Latino community.

Transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) is a construct found within LatCrit theory which asserts that students can resist the oppressive structures of American schooling in a way that is not self defeating, while simultaneously striving for social justice. This resistance is motivated by the desire to change oppressive conditions and structures of domination. This study will explore how this resistance is articulated by Latino youth and how it is nurtured by community activists. It is in the motivation for social justice that critical pedagogy contributes to the conceptual framework of this study. Because this study considers El Puente, the community organization that sponsored the participants’ community activism, a site of instruction with an orientation towards social justice, critical pedagogy will provide a lens by which to understand the role of El Puente.

This study examines the process of assimilation and the students’ engagement in resistance through the lens of LatCrit theory. Following in the tradition of postcritical ethnography—an approach to ethnography which requires reflexivity11 on the part of the researcher and collaboration with the researched—my goal is to conduct the research process in such a way as to have the content of the radio shows and the input of the collaborators generate the themes and propositions in a dialectic manner whereby LatCrit theory serves as a theoretical framework, but does not become the “container in which the data must be poured” (Lather, 1991 p.62).

11 Reflexivity is concerned with viewing the identities of the observed and the observer as flexible, multifaceted and non-static entities capable of change within various historic contexts (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004).
"American Culture": Heuristic Terminology

Throughout this dissertation the participants’ collectivist world view is juxtaposed against the individualism of American culture. Although, there exists no one “American culture” and to refer to it as such is overly simplistic, I do believe it is fair to say that there exist certain characteristics and beliefs that can generally be ascribed to American culture. Robert Kohls, a pioneer in the field of intercultural relations outlined 13 values that Americans live by (Kohls, 1984). Among the most salient of these values is the importance placed on self determination and individualism, competition, materialism and acquisitiveness, and the belief that change is an indisputably good condition. To reduce any culture down to 13 values obviously does little to capture the complexity of a heterogeneous group of people—for example as a native to New York, I was constantly reminded of how specific this study is to the Southeast and its particular demographic makeup. Nevertheless, the term “American culture” is meant to provide the reader with a starting point to better understand how the study’s participants perceived the host culture.

In keeping with the heuristic term “American culture,” frequent reference is made throughout this study to the dominant ideology of “American culture.” The most salient characteristic of the dominant ideology in the United States is the assertion that all people have an equal opportunity to succeed and that hard work is justly rewarded by economic and social mobility. Embedded in this ideology is the belief that upward social mobility is not the result of an individual’s membership to a privileged group, but rather is the product of hard work and diligence. Likewise, social marginalization is seen as the result of an individual’s lack of hard work and determination. The “dominant discourse” around immigrants grows out of this larger “dominant ideology.” Many of the non-
immigrant residents of Victoria City viewed the substandard working and living conditions of the Latino immigrant population as just reward for their undocumented status—a “crime” they rendered as a product of individual choice rather than the result of larger structural and global inequities. As a member of the “dominant group,” I recognize that the terminology is problematic in that it essentializes a group of diverse people with widely differing belief systems, but this heuristic terminology is intended to capture the participants’ view of the host culture as compared to their own.

**Dissertation Structure**

This dissertation begins by placing the experiences of the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz* into the larger context of North Carolina’s changing demography. In Chapter One, I laid out the educational and economic conditions of North Carolina’s Latino/a students. In Chapter Two, I review the literature on the assimilation and acculturation of immigrant students, as well as literature pertaining to student resistance and transformational resistance. I also give an overview of the literature on critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching in order to provide a lens to understand the role of the community organization, El Puente, in the lives of the students of *Nuestra Voz*. Chapter Three lays out the methodology of this study. I provide a rational for how the objectives of this study were best met through qualitative research. I discuss my conceptual framework and its impact on the methodological choices made throughout the research. I give a description of the collaborators, the research site, and my role as a researcher. This ethnographic study borrows from a postcritical tradition whereby the assumptions and biases of the researcher must be considered. In keeping
with this tradition, I have included a section in which I hope to make my positionality\textsuperscript{12} transparent to the reader. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on the challenge of true reciprocity.

Chapters Four and Five explore the reoccurring themes found in the radio shows content. As part of the methodology, the study’s collaborators were asked to reflect on these themes through open-ended interviews. In both of these chapters, the reader is presented with excerpts from the radio shows, excerpts from interviews conducted after the collaborators listened to segments of the radio shows, and my own analysis. Chapter four examines how the discourse espoused throughout \textit{Nuestra Voz} served to help the Latino students of Victoria City navigate a bicultural world, and encouraged the maintenance of salient aspects of their home culture. The doubly precarious issue of gender and biculturalism is also explored in this chapter. In Chapter Five the discourse of \textit{Nuestra Voz} is analyzed. I argue that the students of \textit{Nuestra Voz} articulate a discourse of resistance. This discourse is mediated by many factors: the dominant ideology of meritocracy, a Latino double-consciousness, the high level of optimism that accompanies immigration, and an emphasis on community activism. Chapter Six, which draws more heavily from the ethnographic research than the content analysis of the radio shows, focuses on how the critical practices of El Puente helped these students resist the oppressive structures of the schools. In this chapter, I argue that the students who participated in \textit{Nuestra Voz} took part in a form of group resistance that runs counter to the traditional conception of student resistance. I demonstrate the ways in which the students of \textit{Nuestra Voz} were groomed by the staff at El Puente to be community leaders and

\textsuperscript{12} Positionality as defined by Noblit, Flores, & Murillo (2004) “involves being explicit about the groups and interests the postcritical ethnographer wishes to serve as well as his or her biography. One’s race, gender, class, ideas, and commitments are subject to exploration as part of the ethnography” (p.21).
activists, and argue that as a result of their work with El Puente, the students gained significant cultural capital. In Chapter Seven, I summarize the research findings and their implications for policy, educational practices, and further research. Lastly, I conclude with a discussion of how this research impacted my professional priorities and goals.
CHAPTER TWO: CONNECTIONS TO THE LITERATURE

This study draws from three main bodies of literature: assimilation and acculturation, student resistance, and critical pedagogy. From the conceptualization of this study to the final writing process, these bodies of literature influenced the questions asked, the methods used, and the interpretations made. Far from a coincidence, each of these bodies of literature helped frame my conceptual framework. In order to place the experience of the research participants into a larger political, socio-cultural and historical context, I have explored the process of assimilation, acculturation and the incorporation of immigrant youth into American society through the works of sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and experts in the fields of immigration and education.

In keeping with my conceptual framework which asserts that the students of *Nuestra Voz* engaged in a form of resistance that diverges dramatically from traditional resistance theory, I review the origins of resistance theory by providing an explanation of its antecedent, reproduction theory (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). I then review the literature on traditional student resistance, highlighting the role of student agency within class and racial hierarchies (Giroux, 1983, 2006; Macleod, 1987; McLaren, 1989; Willis, 1977). I widen the lens to include how issues of race and culture intersect within the body of work on student resistance (Fordham & Ogbu 1987; Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998) giving special attention to the literature on Latino student resistance (Hurd, 2004;
Valenzuela, 1999; Vigil, 2004) as it privileges the specific cultural and linguistic marginalization experienced by Latino youth. I follow with an examination of two studies (Mehan, Hubbard & Villanueva 1994; O’Conner, 1997) that challenge many of the suppositions made by traditional resistance theorists. In both studies, students did not engage in the self defeating behaviors which are the hallmark of traditional resistance theory, but rather were able to critically address their subordination, while still maintaining their ethnic and cultural identities. I conclude with an in-depth review on transformative resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), which exemplifies the ways in which students have resisted inequitable school practices while working to transform social injustice.

This study highlights the effective pedagogical practices of the community organization, El Puente, arguing that El Puente served as a site of resistance whereby the staff, through culturally responsive teaching practices, encouraged students to critically examine the inequities in their school and community. Given the educational role that El Puente plays in this study, a review of the literature on critical pedagogy (Darder, 1995, 1997; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997; Gramsci; 1971, Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2000; Sleeter, 1995; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Trueba & Bartolome, 2000), as well as culturally responsive teaching (Banks et al., 2001; Gay, 2000; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Irvine, 2003) is provided. In examining the unique ways that the staff of El Puente employed critical pedagogy and by widening the researcher’s lens beyond the confines of classroom practices, I believe this study adds to both these bodies of literature.

Assimilation, Acculturation, and the Incorporation of Immigrant Youth
Ingrained in our national consciousness is the experience of the first wave of European immigrants who came to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The idea that there exists a linear process of assimilation, whereby immigrants enter American society, successfully assimilate within a generation or two, and are rewarded with economic mobility, stems from the nation’s earlier experience with immigration (Ainslie, 2002; Portes, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou 1997). If we are to understand the process by which immigrant youth of today are incorporated into American society, however, we must abandon the classical linear conceptualization of the assimilation process and adopt a framework that includes the saliency of race, changing labor markets, and the context of reception from the host culture.

Several of the studies reviewed below highlight diverse patterns of the ways in which immigrant youth find their social positions by negotiating the host culture and their heritage. Others focus on social, economic, and cultural challenges that often marginalize immigrant youth. Some scholars critique the notion of assimilation itself, arguing that it is a hegemonic force that perpetuates unequal relations of power.

**Segmented Assimilation**

Many scholars writing about immigration argue that assimilation is not unilinear, nor directed towards one class. Rather a combination of individual and contextual factors determines whether an immigrant group assimilates solidly into the socioeconomic structures of the middle class or finds themselves trapped in the lower rungs of American society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Through extensive qualitative and quantitative research, sociologists Portes and Rumbaut
(2001) found that different immigrant groups enter different sectors of American society based in part on the cultural and social capital they bring with them (i.e. education, language skills, connections to the professional class). Equally important to upward assimilation are the biases held by the host culture towards a particular immigrant group. Portes and Rumbaut stress that immigrant workers do not experience American society as a level playing field. Many factors help to determine how an immigrant will be received into American society. Where an individual is placed in the American racial hierarchy is cited as one of the most important contexts of reception. The political relationship between the US and the sending country also affects the success of an immigrant group (i.e. immigrants fleeing communist regimes receive greater assistance from federal agencies). Finally, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) maintain that the existence and health of co-national communities is vital to the success of an immigrant group.

**Patterns of Acculturation**

Within their model of segmented assimilation, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) outline three intergenerational patterns for acculturation: *dissonant, consonant, and selective*. *Dissonant acculturation* occurs when children learn the English language and American ways of being while simultaneously losing their home language and culture. Within *dissonant acculturation*, children are left to confront the external obstacles of American society directly and with no support from family members or a co-ethnic community. This situation often results in a form of parental role reversal, where the parents are unable to negotiate American society without the help of their children. A dissonant pattern of acculturation is most likely to result in downward assimilation.
Consonant acculturation takes place when the learning of the English language and American culture occur across generations at roughly the same pace as the family’s abandonment of their home language and culture. Within the pattern of consonant acculturation children confront external obstacles with the support of their family. The allure of the inner city subculture, if a factor, is countered by the family’s economic and educational aspirations. Consonant acculturation usually leads to an upward assimilation, but at times may be blocked due to racial discrimination.

Selective acculturation, as stated by Portes and Rumbaut, occurs:

when the learning process of both generations is embedded in a co-ethnic community of sufficient size and institutional diversity to slow down the cultural shift and promote partial retention of the parents’ home language and norms. This third option is associated with a relative lack of intergenerational conflict, the presence of many co-ethnics among children’s friends, and the achievement of full bilingualism in the second generation…Selective acculturation offers the most solid basis for the preservation of parental authority along with the strongest bulwark against effects of external discrimination (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p.54).

If selective acculturation is to occur, it is most likely to happen with first generation immigrants, who still possess a level of optimism about their opportunities in American society. Cultural affiliations, as well as linguistic maintenance, are essential components of selective acculturation. Young people find their strength from their cultural community and intergenerational alliances are maintained and nurtured. Very often these young people reside in communities whose members exhibit a high level of ethnic pride and serve as role models.

Styles of Cultural Adaptation
Similar to Portes and Rumbaut’s patterns of acculturation is psychologists Suárez-Orozco (1995, 2000) and Suárez-Orozco et al.’s (2004) work on the identity formation of immigrant youth who are in the process of acculturation. Suárez-Orozco (2000) defines acculturation as:

the process whereby individuals learn and come to terms with the new cultural ‘rules of engagement’. The individual’s place of origin provides her with familiar and predictable contexts; these predictable contexts change in dramatic ways following immigration…Without a sense of competence, control, and belonging, migrants are often left with a keen sense of loss and marginality (p.197).

Depending on the context of reception, Suárez-Orozco (2000) and Suárez-Orozco & Duocet, (2004) argue that immigrant children tend to gravitate towards one of three dominant styles of adaptation: ethnic flight, adversarial, and bi-cultural. The adoption of a particular adaptation style is not fixed or mutually exclusive. A single child may adopt different styles of adaptation at different periods in her life depending on changes in the context of reception.

Suárez-Orozco (2000) and Suárez-Orozco & Duocet, (2004) describe ethnic flight as a style of adaptation in which youth deny and distance themselves from their home culture. Students employing this adaptational style work hard to fit into the dominant group and are likely to deny or downplay the discriminatory practices they experience from members of the dominant culture. Academic success is seen as a way to gain distance from their family and ethnic group. They quickly learn English, not only as a means to survive and achieve, but as a symbolic act of identification with the dominant culture. Success for these young people is equated with independence and individual self-advancement. Typically these young people do not honor the authority of older family members and tend to view their parents as “out of it.” Ethnic flight is most closely
associated with “passing” as a member of the dominant culture. Suárez-Orozco (2000) points out that because today’s immigrants tend to be people of color, this form of “passing” is no longer possible for the vast majority of immigrants.

An adversarial style of adaptation is employed by young immigrants whose identities are structured around an oppositional stance towards the dominant culture. These young people actively reject the institutions of the dominant culture—including schools and the formal economy. They respond to the negative perceptions of immigrants held by the dominant group—what Suárez-Orozco (2000, 2004) call social mirroring—by gravitating toward peers and developing an oppositional counter-culture from which gangs may emerge. Young people who employ an adversarial style of adaptation tend to seek out their peers, not their families, for guidance and support.

Suárez-Orozco describes the young immigrants who employ a bi-cultural style of adaptation as having learned and implemented transnational strategies that allow them to mediate “the often conflicting cultural currents of home culture and host culture. The ‘work of culture’ for these youth consists of crafting identities in the ‘hyphen,’ linking aspects of the discontinuous, and at times incommensurable, cultural systems they find themselves inhabiting” (Suárez-Orozco, 2000, p.220). These young people act as cultural brokers and are able to navigate transitions from the home culture to the host culture with relative ease. Success in school is seen not only as means for individual advancement, but also as a way to make their parents’ sacrifices worthwhile. “Making it” for these young people means giving back to their families and communities.

Sociocultural and Psychological Adaptation
Berry (2001, 2006) conducted research in psychology and in the sociocultural and psychological adaptation of immigrants and found various ways an individual and/or family may experience entry into American society. Berry proposes four responses to the intercultural contact that accompanies immigration. The first is assimilation whereby individuals do not maintain their cultural heritage, but rather prefer to immerse themselves fully into the receiving culture. In contrast, separation is defined as the process by which immigrants avoid participation in the receiving culture and place high value on maintaining their own culture. Marginalization occurs when there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance and little interest in becoming part of the larger receiving culture. The fourth response, integration, occurs when both the original culture is maintained and there is daily engagement with the receiving culture. Many studies have supported the claim that an integrationist approach to immigration is optimal when both the socio-cultural and psychological adaptations of the immigrant are considered (Berry 2001; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Phinney et al. 2001).

**Modes of Incorporation**

Often lost in the discussion on immigration is the receptivity and adaptability of the host culture. By definition, acculturation is the “intercultural borrowing between diverse peoples resulting in new blended patterns” (Merriam-Webster, 1995, p.24). Negative modes of incorporation by the host culture greatly impact whether an immigrant group will successfully integrate into the host society. If the host culture is not receptive to the immigrant group, research has shown that a separatist approach may best insure the psychological and socio-cultural well being of the group (Berry 2001; Portes & Rumbaut
Villalponda (2003) argues that when Latino students are subject to constant micro aggressions by educational institutions, the adoption of a separatist approach, which nurtures the cultural beliefs, values, norms and language of Latino students is an act of resilience and self preservation.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) cite three major challenges to the successful incorporation of immigrant youth into American society: the persistence of racial discrimination, the bifurcation of the U.S. labor market and the consolidation of a marginalized population in the inner city. In discussing the persistence of racial discrimination, they assert that discrimination based on skin color places a formidable barrier in the path of economic and social mobility for the children of Asian, black, mulatto, and mestizo immigrants, and essentially renders the “melting pot” analogy an impossibility for immigrants of color. Unlike the children of Northern European immigrants, immigrants of color who learn unaccented English, adopt American behaviors, and advance economically will still never fully be able to melt into the dominant culture on account of their racial phenotype.

The deindustrialization and continuing inequality in the U.S labor market is also cited as a major challenge for today’s immigrants. Unlike the demand for industrial labor in the latter part of the nineteenth century which fueled the nation’s first wave of immigration, immigrants of today are entering the economic arena at a time when many manufacturing jobs have gone overseas. Technological innovations have furthered this exodus of manufacturing jobs by making instant communication between corporate headquarters and overseas production plants possible and by eliminating many of the jobs altogether. Rather than well paying unskilled or semi-skilled manufacturing jobs, newly
arrived immigrants and their children often are faced with low paying service-industry jobs that allow for little if any economic mobility.

The third external challenge cited by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) is the social context that immigrant groups encounter in their neighborhoods and schools. Immigrants who do not have access to middle or high incomes are often segregated in schools and communities with a high concentration of poverty. The marginalization experienced by those living in American inner-cities fosters the pervasiveness of adversarial outlooks and deviant lifestyles. In describing the experience of immigrants in urban ghettos, Portes and Rumbaut make the following assertion:

In this environment, they and their families are often exposed to norms of behavior inimical to upward mobility as well as to an adversarial stance that justifies these behaviors. For second generation youths, the clash of expectations is particularly poignant when the messages that education does not pay and that discrimination prevents people of color from ever succeeding are conveyed by native peers of the same race and ethnic origin (p.61).

**The Toxicity of American Culture**

Among scholars writing about the process of assimilation and acculturation, much has been written about the negative effects of American culture on immigrant youth (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2000, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2002). Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2000, 2001) refer to this as the “toxicity of American culture.” Research has demonstrated that the longer Latinos are in the United States, the more likely they are to experience drug abuse, negative educational aspirations, declining health, and participation in high risk behaviors (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez–Orozco, 1995). Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2000) attribute this partially to the high levels of discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment that Latino
immigrant families are exposed to. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) suggest that through selective acculturation, a process in which young immigrant children draw on their home values and culture to help them navigate American society, immigrant youth can be protected from the toxicity of American culture.

Colonization or Assimilation?

Where many of the previous reviewed studies suggest that integrated assimilation, selective acculturation, or the adoption of a bicultural style produced the most favorable outcome for immigrant youth, Macedo (1999) views the process of assimilation as a hegemonic practice of cultural domination with roots firmly grounded in a colonialist history. Macedo emphatically asserts that there exists no common American culture to move towards, and that assimilationist rhetoric such as the “melting pot” is nothing more than an attempt to deny immigrants of their culture and language. He argues that a “common culture” and an “American democracy” are both nothing more than oxymorons when one considers the “quasi-apartheid conditions that have predominated in the United States and the vicious attacks on immigrants and other subordinated groups” (pp. xiii).

Subtractive Schooling

Olsen (1997) also views the process of assimilation as a process of losing one’s culture and language in exchange for being categorized into racial and linguistic hierarchies. Olsen raises important questions about whether our nation’s changing

---

13 Hegemony, a term associated with the work of Antonio Gramsci, goes beyond the Marxist understanding of ideology to encompass the entirety of social systems as an organized process designed to support social and economic class hierarchies.
demographic will be accompanied by fuller access and more inclusion of the nonwhite, foreign born population, or whether exclusionary policies that foster deeper inequalities, will serve to further marginalize immigrant children of color. In describing the experience of immigrants attending Madison High School, the focus of her ethnographic study, Olsen comments:

The program and dynamics at Madison High, which marginalize immigrants and leave them neither prepared to join the mainstream English-speaking America nor allow them to maintain and hold on to their native tongues and traditions, reinforce stereotypes about immigrants and socially legitimize limited access to job mobility (p.250).

Valenzuela (1999) in her qualitative and quantitative study of a Texas high school describes the practices of the school as subtractive. In explaining the academic under-performance of American-born, Mexican-oriented students as compared to their newly arrived Mexican immigrant peers, she argues that American schools have subtracted valuable cultural and linguistic resources from them. The theoretical question raised by Valenzuela’s work is not whether academic achievement declines generationally, but rather how schooling subtracts resources from Mexican-oriented youth. Unlike their Mexican born peers, U.S. born students lack a frame of reference that renders their Mexican-ness a national rather than an ethnic identity. U.S. born youth are kept apart from their academically oriented immigrant peers through what Valenzuela calls “cultural tracking,” thus minimizing their access to the social capital that such interactions could provide. Despite the valuable cultural resources that immigrant youth bring, Valenzuela (1999) argues that because the school context privileges an American identity over a Mexican identity, the English language is given priority over the Spanish language and there is strong pressure for rapid assimilation.
These literatures examine the various ways that immigrant youth assimilate and acculturate into the American landscape. When looking at the process of assimilation and acculturation, the literature discussed raises issues related to race, class, national background, and educational aspirations. What is lacking, however, is a close examination of how assimilation is intentionally mediated and the processes by which immigrants preserve and maintain their cultural strengths. The notion of selective acculturation proposed by Portes and Rumbaut and the notion of bicultural adaptation proposed by Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco and Doucet provide this study with a good starting point by which to understand how immigrants negotiate American culture, but neither goes far enough in presenting the reader with concrete actions and behaviors that immigrant students can use to productively combat and oppose assimilationist ideologies. It is my hope that this study will contribute to the literature by providing an in-depth examination of cultural maintenance and selective acculturation.

**Resistance**

The Latino students who participate in *Nuestra Voz* have been subjected to significant forms of oppression: They attend schools ill equipped to serve the needs of bilingual and bicultural students; many of the students have experienced educational segregation due to their limited English abilities; they come from homes with limited economic resources, which is often further exacerbated by the undocumented residential status of many of their families. Minority students, whether due to their language, race, culture or all three, tend not to fare as well as their white, middle class counterparts. Given that our public schools claim to promote social equality by providing conditions
for educational advancement to all students, something is clearly amiss. Scholars have given much thought to why class and racial hierarchies are continually reproduced in schools. In order to understand theories concerning student resistance, or the ways in which marginalized students combat and oppose their subordination, it is first helpful to understand reproduction theory, the predecessor to resistance theory.

The Reproduction of Inequality

In explaining how schools constrain the mobility of working class youth, Bowles and Gintis (1976) assert that schools reproduce the organizational structures found in the workplace. Children of the working class are tracked into classes that reward docility and assign rote, mindless work. In contrast, the children of the elite are encouraged to be creative and self motivated. Where independent and critical thinking may be viewed as a form of insubordination among their working class peers, it is applauded and deemed necessary for success among affluent students. Intrinsic to the academic failure of working class or otherwise marginalized youth are the necessary social inequities inherent in a capitalist structure. The authors argue that it is not educational reform that is needed, but rather a total restructuring of the social order:

Understanding the dynamics of class relationships is essential, we believe, to an adequate appreciation of the connection between economies and education. For the institutions of economic life do not work mechanically and mindlessly to produce social outcomes, but rather change and develop through the types of class relationships to which they give rise. The educational system is involved in the reproduction and change of these class relationships and cannot be understood by simply “adding up” the effects of schooling in each individual to arrive at a total social impact (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p.67).
Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) offer another, more subtle, interpretation for how schools serve to reproduce the social and economic inequalities present in the larger society. They argue that the cultural capital of the dominant classes is rewarded through the curriculum. Embedded in this argument is the assertion that distinctive cultural knowledge is transmitted by the families of each class. Students coming from the dominant classes automatically inherit, through class membership, the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in school—they have been read to, have visited museums, gone to concerts, acquired the desired linguistic facilities, dress appropriately, and come from “text rich” households. These cultural norms are echoed back to them throughout the curriculum. Students not from the middle and upper classes are at a distinct disadvantage because these norms, which drive the classroom mores, are never explicitly stated by the schools.

*Theories of Resistance*

Some scholars, working to better understand the role schools play in reproducing economic and social inequities, have taken issue with theories of reproduction which relegate teachers and students to the role of incidental actors. They argue for an interpretation that balances human agency against social constraints. Rather than focus on how inequities are determined by social structures, these scholars have concentrated on how students respond and oppose these social structures. Resistance theories represent a move away from theories of reproduction in that they acknowledge the role of human agency in the larger context of social inequities. In works such as *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977) and *Ain’t No Making It!* (Macleod, 1987), resistance is viewed as a way for
subordinated students to employ their agency, albeit often to self defeating ends. Willis’s “lads,” a group of working class dropouts who rejected achievement ideology and the authority of teachers and school administrators, demonstrate the ways in which disaffected youth participate in their own demise. Willis claims that unable to change the capitalist structure that kept them subordinate, these youths instead chose to reject middle class ethos about education and social mobility.

Giroux (1983) states that “resistance theorists have developed a notion of reproduction in which working-class subordination is viewed not only as a result of the structural and ideological constraints embedded in capitalist social relationships, but also as part of the process of self-formation within the working class itself” (p.283). Giroux (1983) sees schools as characterized by overt and hidden curricula, tracking, dominant and subordinate cultures, and competing ideologies, all of which contribute to the asymmetrical power relations between the dominant and subordinate classes. Although such an interpretation of student resistance restores the critical notion of agency by highlighting the role that students play in challenging the oppressive aspects of schools, students are nevertheless left complicit participants in their own class subordination and political defeat (Giroux, 2006).

McLaren (1989) argues that self defeating forms of resistance are at times necessary for securing the continual subordination of oppressed groups. Resistance is seen “as part of the very process of hegemony; not in reaction to it. Resistance is part of the process of negotiation which works through the ideology-shaping characteristics of the school, and is often the means by which it is secured” (p.197). Although McLaren does not deny that the “subaltern” at times participates in overt forms of political
struggle, he does argue that less visible forms of resistance signifying political dissent are far more common. Absent in the analysis of both Giroux and McLaren is an in depth exploration of concrete examples of resistance used to transform the hegemonic practices of schools.

**Resistance and Minority Students**

Ogbu’s work on voluntary and involuntary minorities (Fordham & Ogbu, 1987; Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998) highlights the important differences that exist among minority groups. Within these differences lies the rational for how and why specific groups resist and reject schooling practices, while others willingly adopt an academic identity. Immigrant groups, who have come to the United States voluntarily, like those from Asia or Europe, are more likely to accept school norms, work hard and succeed academically. Involuntary minorities, defined as “people who have been conquered, colonized, or enslaved” (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998, p.4), tend to equate schooling with assimilation into the white dominant group. Included in the classification of involuntary minorities are African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican Americans. Because educational attainment is viewed as a solely white enterprise, these black and Latino students reject the adoption of an academic identity, seeing it as a form of “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1987).

Sharpening the lens even further, Hurd (2004) examines student resistance among Mexican origin youth in an English language development class. Rather than viewing the students’ disruptive behavior as a means to resist the hegemonic practices of the schools, he interprets acting-out as a way for these young Mexican students to assert their group
membership in a larger social world. Hurd argues, due to the “aggressive forms of cultural prescriptivism regarding language and culture in the United States,” (p.78) there exists no uniform Mexican immigrant identity. Youth are pressured to position themselves along a continuum from recent immigrant to more assimilated Mexicans and place strong value on the behaviors that mark interethnic difference and signify group membership. Due to the splintered identity that acculturation creates, the importance of belonging to a particular social group takes precedence over the formal learning of the classroom. Hurd sees the oppositional behaviors of Mexican-origin students in an English language development class as a means of maintaining important bonds of solidarity and sociality with other Mexican-descent classmates.

Similar to Hurd (2004), Valenzuela (1999) sees Latino resistance to schooling more as an expression of ethnic solidarity than as a response to class domination. Framed around an ethic of care, Valenzuela highlights the ways that Mexican-origin students choose not to care about their schooling as a way of resisting what they deem the “school’s project of cultural disparagement and de-identification” (p.94). The oppositional behavior of Mexican-origin youth is a response to the school’s implicit assimilationist agenda, which demands that Mexican-origin youth subscribe to a set of values and behaviors not their own. Valenzuela argues that through the students’ disruptive behaviors, both U.S. born and immigrant Latinos are able to disrupt the normality of difference that keeps them marginalized, thus achieving ethnic solidarity in a setting that ordinarily fosters alienation.

Vigil’s (2004) work on Latino gangs raises an important question concerning the presumptions made by many resistance theorists in regards to Latino youth: “Are the
students really resisting, countering, and rejecting something if, in fact, they haven’t really encountered the culture they’re resisting?” (p.92). Virgil recognizes that many resistance theorists want to grant a politicized voice to the downtrodden youth they write about, but, he argues, the evidence for such a “voice” is weak. Instead, Virgil claims the oppositional behavior of street socialized youth is not so much a reaction to a dominant culture as it is the result of the lack of mainstream influences in the lives of these youth. Due to multi-forms of marginalization (i.e. poverty, learning disabilities, holding an immigrant identity), gang youth have learned different values and their behaviors in school reflect their socialization to a street culture rather than to the dominant culture.

**Transforming Resistance**

Many scholars in education have countered the traditional discourse on student resistance by examining ways in which students employ a positive sense of agency to transform their marginalization and subordination. Mehan, Hubbard and Villanueva (1994) in their study on the detracking of African American and Latino youth through membership into AVID, a program designed to support the academic achievement of low income students, found that in lieu of an oppositional ideology or pattern of resistance, these students adopted an academic ideology and developed a reflexive and critical ideology. This ideology was neither conformist nor assimilationist, but instead included many of the tenets of an achievement ideology, while still affirming their cultural identity. Although the students’ newly acquired academic identity at times caused them conflicts with their nonacademic peers, they were able to resolve these conflicts through managing dual identities: a border-crossing strategy by which minority students move
between the high-achieving academic culture and a supportive community culture. Mehan et al. (1994) challenge the implicit notion within resistance theory that marginalized students can only have agency through negative or oppositional behavior. Their study, which examined how a group of African American and Latino students creatively worked to break down constraining structural forces in order to achieve socially accepted goals, offers a more comprehensive sense of agency.

O’Conner’s work (1997) on resilient, high achieving African Americans attending inner city schools in Chicago confirmed Mehan et al.’s finding that a critical ideology can accompany both optimism about the future and the adoption of an achievement identity. Disrupting Ogbu’s cultural ecological model of student resistance, O’Conner found that students’ knowledge of struggle may, in fact, have been precisely what “girded them against their acute recognition of how race and class operated significantly to constrain the life chances of people like themselves” (p.617). The outlook of what she refers to as the “resilient six,” the students who maintained high levels of optimism about achieving their ambitions for the future, contrasted starkly with the other high achieving students in the larger project who did not render an assessment of American society as innately unjust. Both groups of high achievers had strong evidence of their personal competence, concrete experiences with individuals who had defied racial barriers, and access to strategies to successfully negotiate financial limitations. Yet, only the students who registered a critical consciousness about the class and racial constraints within American society expressed optimism about their chances at social mobility. Although the study did not indicate one way or the other whether the “resilient six” “acted white” in their classroom behaviors, it clearly demonstrated that they were not “thinking White” (p.614).
**Transformational Resistance**

Similar to transformative resistance which focuses on positive student practices to circumvent marginalization and represents a marked turn from earlier theories of resistance that focus on self-defeating behaviors which implicated students even further in their own oppression, transformational resistance is concerned with more overt forms of political participation.

Soloranzo and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) work on transformational resistance is taken up as a theoretical construct which is considered political, collective, conscious and motivated by a sense that individual and social change are possible. Soloranzo and Delgado Bernal (2001) outline four types of student oppositional behavior: *reactionary, self-defeating, conformist,* and *transformational.* They argue that only behavior which includes a critique of social oppression and is motivated by social justice meets the criteria for student resistance. The four types of oppositional behavior are conceptualized as existing on a quadrant, with no one quadrant seen as a discrete or static entity.

*Reactionary behavior* falls into the category of oppositional behaviors but is not described as a form of resistance because it lacks a critique of oppressive conditions on the part of the students and it is not motivated by social justice. An example of *reactionary behavior* is the student who acts out in class just for the pleasure of watching the teacher get upset. Similar to *reactionary behavior* in terms of its presentation is *self-defeating resistance.* According to Soloranzo and Delgado Bernal (2001), students who employ behaviors in keeping with *self-defeating resistance* possess some critique of their oppressive social conditions but lack an interest in social justice. Self-defeating forms of
student resistance generally serve to recreate the oppressive conditions from which it originated. The student who exhibits behaviors consistent with *conformist resistance* strives for social justice within the existing social systems and social conventions. For example, a student may want to positively impact the high drop-out rate at her school and therefore offers to volunteer as a tutor to low performing students. Although the student is motivated by a desire for social justice, she has not challenged the institutional practices that perpetuate high drop-out rates or questioned the effect of socio-economic factors on student performance. According to Soloranzo and Delgado Bernal, this form of resistance does bring about some social change but because it lacks “a critique of the social, cultural, or economic forms of oppression, it does not offer the greatest possibility for social justice” (p.319).

Contrary to the three types of resistance described, *transformational resistance* is the only one that is motivated both by social justice and contains a critique of social oppression. *Transformational resistance* is not self-explanatory; it requires that the researcher gain the perspective and motivation of the student by delving into the historical and socio-political context that formed the behavior before assessing the behavior as resistant. Soloranzo and Delgado Bernal use oral histories taken from Chicano students who participated in the 1968 East Los Angeles student walkouts to demonstrate how their participation was motivated by an awareness of social justice—an awareness fostered by significant mentors in their childhood. These mentors are defined as transformative role models.

Two types of *transformational resistance* are given: internal and external. Internal resistance appears among students who conform to institutional and cultural norms, but
are actually engaged in a constant internal critique of oppressive and hegemonic practices. External resistance is displayed by more overt actions which challenge oppressive institutions. Research suggests that academically successful Latino students are more likely to engage in internal forms of resistance. Soloranzo and Delgado Bernal contextualize internal resistance with the counter story of an undergraduate student who, although in opposition to the university’s decision to not allow the formation of a Chicano studies department, chose not to participate in the university students’ protest. Her story is told in the context of a conversation she had with a Chicano professor. At the end of the counter story, the authors remind us that resistance can be found in seemingly insignificant actions that nevertheless, work in small ways to move us closer to a socially just society.

In their study, Soloranzo and Delgado Bernal (2001) extend and complicate the literature on resistance by distinguishing between reactionary, self-defeating, conformist and transformational resistance and highlighting the multidimensionality of each. It is my hope that my research with Nuestra Voz adds to the literature on transformative and transformational resistance. Through the examination of a cultural production by Latino/a youth, I explore new ways in which resistance is articulated with an eye toward social justice.

**Critical Pedagogy and Culturally Responsive Teaching**

The tenets of critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching align in significant ways with the practices of El Puente. In this section, I will first provide an overview of the central principles of critical pedagogy. I will then review the literature on
culturally responsive teaching and examine the ways it which it serves as an integral component of critical pedagogy.

**Critical Pedagogy**

A central tenet of critical pedagogy is that schools are not politically neutral terrain; they are sites of conflict and political struggle where racial and class hierarchies are created and maintained (Freire, 1971; Giroux 1997; Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 1995; McLaren & Sleeter1997). Critical pedagogy questions the notion that schools provide an equal opportunity for all students. The goal of critical pedagogy is to help students realize the specificity of their historic and cultural experiences and develop a sense of agency by which to transform the social injustices that keep students subordinate (Freire, 1971; Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 1995). Gramsci (1971), an Italian philosopher who has influenced many proponents of critical pedagogy, asserts that in order for diversity to genuinely be affirmed, there would first need to be a restructuring of power relations within schools, which would promote the active participation of minority students.

Found in the literature of both critical pedagogy and critical multicultural education, a predecessor of critical pedagogy, are critiques of hegemonic ideologies and practices that maintain the existing power structure (Gay, 2000; Giroux, 1997; Sleeter & McLaren, 1997). Critical pedagogy aims to dismantle the ways in which schools normalize white middle class ethos. Sleeter and McLaren (1997) state that difference or “otherness” must be interrogated as it is too often understood in contrast to whiteness, inevitably leading to the marginalization of students of color.
In order to identify the structures within schools and society that oppress and subordinate students, educators must possess political and ideological clarity (Gay, 2000; Sleeter & McLaren, 1997; Trueba & Bartolome, 2000). Specifically, educators must be willing to question the economic disparities that exist in the society around them. They also must understand that multicultural education can be contentious and wrought with conflict. Darder (2000) argues that teachers, particularly white middle class teachers, need to be in constant dialogue with members of the community from which their students come. Political clarity is gained by lived experiences of authentic interactions based on mutual respect with people of similar cultural, racial, economic and national backgrounds to their students. Furthermore, educators must be able to acknowledge their limitations in understanding the worldview and values of their students; for a white American born teacher to assume that her students make sense of the world in the same way she does is tantamount to promoting an assimilationist agenda.

Another important principle of critical pedagogy is the dialectic construction of knowledge often associated with the work of Freire (1970). In accordance to this epistemology, teachers and students work in collaboration to make sense of the world around them (Gay, 2000; Giroux, 1997; McLaren & Sleeter, 1997; Sleeter 1995). Students’ everyday lives and experiences are seen as legitimate terrain for examination and meaning making. Knowledge is not seen as ahistoric, but rather grounded in a socio-historic context. Implicit cultural understandings of the world need to be unpacked and seen as valid contributions to knowledge creation. This epistemological approach requires that the teacher abandon the role of “teacher as technician” (Darder, 1995, p.329) and instead be an engaged member in the learning community of the classroom.
Fundamental to critical pedagogy is a keen understanding that schooling is part of an ongoing societal struggle for what is granted the status of “legitimate knowledge.”

Gay (2000) outlines three essential assumptions which closely relate to the dialectic creation of knowledge. The first is that members of all groups have made significant contributions to a pluralistic society. The second is that these contributions are easily accessible and verifiable. And the last, and perhaps most crucial, is that in the search for knowledge and social justice, the experiences, contributions, and perspectives of all groups must be included (Gay, 2000).

Sleeter (1995) suggests a process of “centering” in which the student is presented with a multitude of perspectives on the same issue or historical event rather than one grand narrative. An example of this would be to counter the Eurocentric view of the “westward expansion” with the historical interpretation of Mexicans whose land was ceded to the United States. In doing so the student constructs a knowledge base grounded in many narratives, not just the privileged narrative of white Europeans. An important component of Sleeter’s idea of centering is that curricula be written collaboratively with members of the groups who are being written about.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Culturally responsive teaching is deeply embedded within critical pedagogy. It impacts the chosen curriculum, the learning context, the classroom climate, the instructional techniques and the assessment tools. Gay (2000) envisions cultural responsive teaching as a way for teachers to tap into the world view of students in order to engage them in the curriculum. Teachers use culturally relevant scaffolding to bridge
the gap between what students know and what they need to know (Banks et al., 2001). Essential to culturally responsive teaching is that it does not pit academic success and cultural affiliation against one another (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2003). González, Moll, & Amanti (2005) propose starting with and validating the “funds of knowledge” that students come with. Students’ home communities and households are seen as containing rich cultural and cognitive resources for teachers to build upon.

Irvine (2003) argues that caring for one’s students and having an uncompromising faith in their ability is a key ingredient to culturally responsive teaching. It is not enough to want the best for one’s students; teachers must be firm and willing to discipline, as well as maintain high expectations and refuse to let students slide by. Teachers demonstrating this level of care strongly identify with their students and are determined to give them a future. Among Latino educators, Irvine’s research points to the establishment of confianza or trust, whereby Latino teachers relate to Latino students “as culturally connected relatives” (p. 44).

These works in the literature provide this study with a framework to better understand the practices and role of the community organization El Puente. The staff at El Puente actively engages the young people who participate in their organization to examine how they and their families are kept in a subordinate position. Culturally responsive teaching is at the core of the interactions witnessed between the staff of El Puente and the student participants of Nuestra Voz. The adults involved with El Puente demand the best of and for the children they work with. They encourage them to be active players in their own emancipation and work with them collaboratively towards the common goal of social justice.
The literature reviewed provides valuable insights into the different ways immigrant youth experience their schools, communities, and educational opportunities in their host country. Throughout my research, the questions I asked and the conclusions I drew were heavily informed by these authors’ work. These scholars provided me with a keener lens by which to explore the themes of cultural preservation, community ethos, the importance of family, educational attainment and political resistance in the lives of the students of Nuestra Voz.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative inquiry into how a group of Latino students used the community radio production, *Nuestra Voz*, as a vehicle for transformative resistance and cultural preservation. Because the aim of the research is to understand the cultural, political and social framework within which the participants make meaning, a methodological approach steeped in positivism was not well aligned with the goals of this research. By employing the central tenets of qualitative research, the voices and perspectives of a traditionally marginalized group can be added to the literature and help to inform practitioners concerned with the educational attainment of Latino youth (Lincoln, 1993; Marshall, 1985; Spradley, 1979).

In this chapter, the research methodology is placed into the larger context of the study’s overall conceptual framework. The methodological implications of LatCrit theory are revisited. As this study also draws from the methodology of postcritical ethnography, a brief discussion of the prevalent characteristics of postcritical ethnography are provided. A statement on my positionality and my role as researcher are provided as well. My positionality statement better explains why I have chosen LatCrit theory as the framework for understanding the social context of this study. I conclude with a description of the research site and participants, my entry into the site, procedures for data collection and analysis, and some final thoughts on research and the possibility for reciprocity.
LatCrit Methodology

Central to critical race and LatCrit theory is the assertion that the experiences of people of color not only contribute to a legitimate form of knowledge creation, but are essential to understanding how racial subordination is maintained and perpetuated (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Fernández, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solorzano, 2000, Villalpando, 2003). The data of this study consist of the content of the radio shows, open ended interviews and ethnographic filed notes, all of which privilege the voices and experiences of the individual participants and allow the reader to better understand the complexities and nuances of the lived experiences of a group of Latino adolescents. This methodological approach is well aligned with the emphasis that LatCrit theory places on creating counter narratives within social institutions e.g. schools that have adopted hegemonic practices (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Fernández, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Villalpando, 2003). Integral to LatCrit theory is a commitment to social justice and stemming from that commitment is an attempt to link the academy with the community (Villalpando, 2003). This project came about precisely as a result of my personal adherence to that commitment. My time in the academy was the first time as an adult that I was not directly involved in the academic pursuits of marginalized youth. Although I enjoyed the intellectual rigor of my coursework, I deeply missed the level of community involvement I was previously accustomed to. My work with the youth of El Puente provided an interface between the academy and the community, an interface, I like to believe, benefitted both.

Postcritical Ethnography
Postcritical ethnography, like LatCrit theory and critical ethnography, share the goal of transforming the oppressive societal conditions that keep the researched subordinate. However, unlike critical ethnography, postcritical ethnography challenges the assumption made by critical theorists that their understanding of social networks and hegemonic practices are clearer and more accurate than those held by the researched. The researcher does not hold sacred the theory driven assumptions made on behalf of the researched, but rather interpretations and conclusions are constructed in a dialogic exchange between the two. A priori theory is seen as problematic if the researcher is committed to collaboratively making sense of the realities of the field with the researched (Hytten, 2002; Lassister, 2005). Essential to a postcritical ethnography is the role of positionality, reflexivity, objectivity, and representation (Noblit et al., 2002).

Because the researcher’s interpretations are directly affected by their position or structural location within the research context, it becomes imperative that she explicitly address her positionality, which may include but is not limited to race, class, gender, and political stance. By stating one’s positionality, any presence of certainty or finality that may accompany the researcher’s claims is lost and all interpretations are rightly kept within the realm of subjectivity (Rosaldo, 1989). Furthermore, by clearly articulating one’s positionality and recognizing that it is not a static structure within the research context, the notion that true objectivity exists is rendered mute.

Hytten (2002) argues that “many critical researchers substitute one form of hegemony for another. That is, they do not truly problematize their own understanding of the social world, and rather argue for the oppressed to replace their false consciousness with the ‘critical consciousness’ that the researcher has” (p.96). In order to prevent this
from happening, the researcher must abandon the presumption that they have a deeper understanding of the micro and macro workings of the research site. In place of academic authority, a postcritical ethnography adopts a reflexive epistemological practice in order to create a more engaging and socially relevant ethnography.

Postcritical ethnography also entails a move away from traditional forms of ethnographic representation. Coming down from what Foley (2002) refers to as “Mount Academe” and using different writing styles or artistic devices in our representations brings a level of accessibility to ethnography that may not otherwise be present if the researcher remains loyal to the removed formal tone of academic writing. Foley cautions:

No matter how epistemologically reflexive and systematic our fieldwork is, we must still speak as mere mortals from various historical, culture bound standpoints; we must still make limited, historically situated claims. By claiming to be less rather than more perhaps, we can tell stories that ordinary people will actually find more believable and useful (Foley, 2002, p. 487).

Glesne (2006) found that students in a qualitative research class were better able to think about the meanings, voices, and understandings present in the data when allowed to explore with more creative forms of representation.

Postcritical ethnography provides both a theoretical and methodological starting point for this study. As a non-Latina, white, middle class, academic researcher from a large urban city in the North researching the experience of Latina/o adolescents in a rural Southern town, it is important that I both articulate my positionality and continually practice a level of reflexivity in which I examine my cultural biases and assumptions. What I choose to include in this study is as important as what I decide to discard. These choices are in a large part determined by my own positionality. Leaving out my experience is tantamount to asking the reader to read with one eye closed. In order to
understand the meanings behind my words, the reader must first be able to locate my voice.

Positionality

We don’t see things as they are; we see things as we are. – Anaïs Nin

My research on Latino youth and transformative resistance comes after a decade long career as an educator working with immigrant youth, the majority of whom were Latino. As an ESL and language arts teacher, the objective of my instruction was to help develop the English language skills of immigrant students in order to make the curriculum accessible, often at the expense of developing their mother tongue. I am well aware of the role I played in promoting an assimilationist agenda. However, I also worked equally hard to engage them in critical dialogue about their experience in American society.

Even before reading the work of Suárez-Orozco (1995, 2001) and Suárez-Orozco et al. (2004), I was aware of the toxic effect of American culture on immigrant students. My students came with a world view often not found in the typical American classroom. Their values were not steeped in a culture that emphasized individualism and material attainment. And yet, the more Americanized they became, the more likely they were to let go of their home values and adopt an American value system shaped by a capitalistic society. In addition to teaching the content subjects and helping immigrant students to learn English, I also worked to teach them what I could about surviving in this country, while honoring their home cultures, languages, and values. A frequent piece of advice in
my class was, “Get as much as you can from this country, but whatever you do, don’t become too American too fast.”

It is ironic that I feel so strongly about the perils of assimilation considering my personal background. All four of my grandparents immigrated to the United States. My father was the son of an Italian factory worker and, in many ways, I am a benefactor of the American dream: poor Italian boy “does good,” goes far, and provides well for the next generation. Unfortunately, too often omitted in the telling of that dream is the deep sense of inadequacy and void that accompanies giving up one’s ethnic identity for the promise of a middle class lifestyle. Watching my father negotiate a world and a social class that he never felt comfortable in has instilled in me a deep belief that the talents and abilities of immigrant children deserve to be nurtured without the imposition of an assimilationist ideology.

As a third generation Italian American who grew up in New York, I have been virtually unaffected by my ethnic identity. Unlike my father, I was rarely burdened by the discrimination and negative presumptions that accompanied being Italian American. Having come of age in the 1940’s in New England, my father did the work of assimilation and passed on very little of his Italian identity to his children, partly out of shame and partly out of having lost so much of it himself. In place of the Italian culture and language, I was given a pervasive distrust of individuals and groups more closely tied to the power structure. Describing someone as a “real American” in my father’s house was synonymous to saying they were a self entitled, uncultured bigot. Berry’s description of the process of assimilation that leads to marginalization (Berry, 2001) is uncanny in its description of my father and his family of origin. Believing that maintaining their cultural
identity would severely hinder their pursuit for upward social mobility, and feeling a deep mistrust of the members of the host culture, they lived in a type of self-imposed, cultural isolation. This marginalization only intensified as my father became more successful. It was as if after abandoning his own party, my father could only sit on the sidelines and watch with contempt as the other more honored guests of the American middle class enjoyed the feast of privilege. He was the quintessential scholarship boy (Hoggart, 1992), uncomfortable in his new class and having little cultural anchoring to ground him in what he had left behind.

Nevertheless, unlike the majority of the immigrant Latino children, my father was able to experience significant class mobility. He had access to an excellent public school system, he was awarded a scholarship to an elite university, he benefited from the GI bill, and—what he himself cited as the most important factor for his success—he was seen as white in the American racial binary. When working with Latino students, I am constantly aware of how their parents’ reasons for immigrating are similar to those of my grandparents, but the economic and political terrain has changed so much that they do not have the same opportunities. I have repeatedly witnessed the optimism that accompanies the first generation: believing that hard work and a commitment to their children’s education will be enough to ensure their success in the United States. Knowing that this is not true for brown and black children who do not come with the right cultural capital, I find the demand of assimilation doubly offensive. After listening to the painful and often hateful national discussion on immigration and immigrant rights, I have felt that Latino immigrants are standing on the other side of a door that will not be opened through
education, and my fear is that this metaphorical entrance is quickly becoming an impenetrable wall.

I come to this research frustrated by the repressive educational practices of the public schools. During my teaching career in North Carolina, I have sat through dozens of meetings in which a student’s home language was seen as the source of their academic problems. I have seen how quickly the schools are willing to track a brown or black child into remedial classes, despite the ardent recommendations by informed teachers that they be placed in advanced classes. I have started to wonder if the schools are capable of serving the needs of bicultural students, and more importantly, whether they are motivated to do so. But I believe in human agency and I believe in people’s ability to transform oppressive situations and so this study will focus on how agency can be enacted in an educational situation. It is not coincidental that the educational site I chose to focus on did not fall within the walls of a public school. Nevertheless, it is my hope that the agency of these students will better inform some of the practices and policies of the public schools.

While working with Nuestra Voz, I was living about twenty minutes north in New Hope County. On a windy day, I could smell the musty odor of the poultry plants that are the source of employment for many of the Latino families living in Victoria City. The weeks preceding the county elections, local candidates would leave messages on my phone promising to do something about all the illegal immigrants who were “ruining the county’s social services.” When my next door neighbor hung a huge confederate flag across his double wide trailer home, I wondered who he found more objectionable: the Mexicans who lived in the trailer park across the street, or me and my bi-racial, female
partner. I will never know what it is to be Mexican, undocumented, and primarily Spanish speaking, but my year and a half stay in New Hope County taught me something about what it is to be an unwelcome outsider.

As a teacher who regularly watches the academic marginalization of students of color, as a non-heterosexual whose lifestyle is used as political fodder for the right-wing agenda, and as a privileged white American, who despite her position in the American racial hierarchy, does not want to live in a racial caste system, I embrace an oppositional political stance that aims to dismantle the existing power relations of this country (Elenes, 2001). My work with the young people of Nuestra Voz comes out of a commitment to challenging the limitations placed on the social mobility of Latino immigrant youth. I applaud their resistance to assimilationist ideologies and I align myself with their fight for social justice.

**My Role as Researcher**

The best description of my role would be as a participant observer (Glesne, 2006; Hargreaves, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). I was originally welcomed into the lives of my collaborators and the other students in Nuestra Voz because the executive director of El Puente thought I could be an asset to Nuestra Voz and the youth who participated given my previous experience as a high school teacher. I attended the weekly two-hour work sessions that preceded the airing of the show. During this time, I actively worked with the students in researching their chosen topics. In addition to the production of the radio shows, much of the spring of 2006 was spent preparing for an immigration rally that was sponsored by El Puente. I came to work sessions and helped students write
and practice their speeches and painted signs and banners that were used on the day of the march. At this point in the research, I was much more a participant than an observer. I was put in charge of making sure that the students’ speeches were powerful and poignantly, but would not be seen as offensive to the non-immigrant residents of Victoria City. I translated the speeches that had been originally written in Spanish and coached the students as they practiced presenting them. After some discussion with the students, I suggested that the young people in the march be given hats like those worn at a graduation, to symbolize their desire to attend and graduate from college. The suggestion was seen as a good one and all the high school students who marched wore the cardboard graduation caps that we had prepared in the preceding weeks. And of course, I met the students at their high school and marched along side them to the city courthouse. In short, I helped to shape, if only in a small way, the tone of the march and rally that the students helped to organize.

Later in the study, I attended a three-day youth forum sponsored by a larger regional organization concerned with the welfare and rights of Latinos. The forum was held in a neighboring city and the participants were expected to sleep in the dorms of the college that was hosting it for two nights. I agreed to be the chaperon for the students from Nuestra Voz. As their chaperon, I attended all the programs including the evening dances, ate all my meals with them, and made sure that they were in bed and up according to the schedule of the forum. This was very reminiscent of the trips that I used to take with my high school students while working as a teacher in New York. However, I was one of three white people present in a group of over one hundred students and
adults and everything was in Spanish; both factors made me distinctly aware of my outsider status.

I struggled with the conflicting roles that accompany participant observation (Hargreaves, 1999). There were times when I regretted not advocating more for the students at their high school and hated the observation aspect of “participant observation”. One instance stands out in particular in which Carlos reported to me his reasons for leaving school without a diploma. He had missed more days than allowed, but claimed to have attended the afterschool make-up hours offered to high school students at risk of failing a class due to poor attendance. According to what he told me, the proctor had not written down his name and so he was not given credit for being there. If he were to meet his graduation requirements by his 21st birthday, his only option now was to pay the $250 tuition for summer school. His family did not have the funds and so he “chose” instead to drop out.

Having worked for five years as an ESL teacher in a high school in North Carolina, I was well aware of this haphazardly implemented attendance policy and the battle against the age cut off faced by so many English language learners. I was also not surprised by, or skeptical of Carlos’ claim that he had attended the necessary make-up sessions, but was not given credit for having been there. While working as a teacher, I regularly would hunt down the proctor of the school’s afterschool make-up hour and advocate for my students who had been accidently overlooked when attendance was taken. After hearing Carlos’ story, I spoke to the director of Nuestra Voz about the importance of having a student advocate at the school level and tried to explain the policies and procedures that were involved with Carlos’ being essentially pushed out of
school. But before the words even left my mouth, I realized that there was little she or
anyone else at El Puente could do to right this situation. My ability in my former school
to successfully advocate for students was the result of my having been strategic in my
interactions with administrators, counselors and fellow teachers. On a structural level,
the system is broken and, although as an individual teacher, I was able to make it work
for my students, as an outsider, who I now was, I could do nothing but “observe.”

Research Site

Victoria City

It would be easy to pass through Victoria City oblivious to its rapidly changing
demographic, or for that matter, oblivious to the existence of a city at all. The main
thoroughfare is a four-lane state highway cluttered with fast-food establishments, gas
stations, and a super Wal-Mart; it could be a road anywhere in the United States. It is not
until you turn off the four-lane road onto the main street running south that the flashing
neon signs of Taco Bell and Bojangles are replaced with local stores and pedestrian-
friendly sidewalks. The presence of stately oak trees and older homes interspersed among
ranches and newer mom-and-pop businesses are evidence that there is a history to this
city. Having driven up and down this road more times than I can count, it wasn’t until I
was on foot that I became aware of the Tyler poultry plant sitting unassumingly amidst a
group of 1960s ranches, casually set apart by a rusty chain link fence that circles its
perimeter.

Closer to the downtown, older homes begin to outnumber newer ones. There is a
rundown gingerbread house with peeling paint and a sagging porch. Across the street sits
a grand Victorian that appears to have been recently renovated. As one drives down the hill into the downtown, the streets run on a grid system and the buildings, which are mostly one- and two-story industrial brick construction, hark back to when Victoria City was an important stop for local farmers on North Carolina’s Atlantic & Yadkin Railway.

The city’s downtown area shows signs of undergoing a cultural revitalization, as well as a shift in demographics. El Puente sits on the corner of a block of one-story brick buildings. There is an art gallery one block to its north, and behind it is a store selling local crafts: colorful hand woven shawls and sweaters hang in the shop’s large glass window. Across the street is a pottery studio equipped with potters wheels and dusty kilns. At the entrance to El Puente, is the colorful sign of Don Carlos’ Tienda, one of the many stores catering to the city’s Latino population.

On the few occasions that I arrived at El Puente during its regular hours of operation—the students met there after closing to work on the radio show—I was surprised by the number of people who came in and out of its doors, looking for all manner of assistance. Bilingual posters hang on either side of the door, with notices ranging from information about workers’ rights to the hazards of drinking and driving. More than once a table with fresh produce and eggs was set up in the front lobby with a sign informing clients that the food was free for the taking. El Puente is a busy place; one only needs to visit to see that it is a hub of activity, providing many needed services to the Latino community of Victoria City.

*El Puente*
Nuestra Voz is one of many programs offered by El Puente, a community based organization out of Victoria City. El Puente was set up in 1995 to address the needs of the growing Latino immigrant community by working as a liaison between the Latino community and the local government and other non-profit agencies. Their mission has been to foster cultural understanding among Latinos/as and other residents of New Hope County and to empower Latinos/as to overcome the challenges they face as immigrants, while finding their voice in what at times has been a very unwelcoming community. As stated in their mission statement, El Puente has adopted Paulo Freire’s education empowerment theory to find solutions authored by the community itself. This effort is accomplished by creating opportunities for the community to dialog and problem solve together. Nuestra Voz is one of two radio shows that El Puente produces and broadcasts. Their use of local radio is a means to foster community dialogue about topics that impact the Latino community.

In addition to working to build bridges between the Latino community and the non-Latino community, El Puente monitors the actions of the local police, the housing authority and the public schools to ensure that the civil liberties of Latinos living in Victoria City are not being violated. The staff of El Puente is dedicated better informing members of the Latino community about their legal rights in regard to issues like workmen’s compensation, temporary visas and immigration status, fair housing codes, and health benefits. They also provide referrals for individuals coping with drug addiction, domestic violence, and health issues. When Immigration and Naturalization Services raids were being conducted throughout the Latino neighborhoods of Victoria City, El Puente used their local radio show to alert listeners of the exact location of the
whereabouts of INS officials and informed them of what to do if detained by INS officials. Perhaps fueling the ire of many public officials working in Victoria City, El Puente has historically been the go-to organization when issues arose concerning Latinos in the community. For example, in the late 1990s when a Mexican father lost his wife and five children to a fire which consumed his trailer, the fire department called the executive director of El Puente at two in the morning to come and help manage the situation. And shortly after, it was El Puente that initiated an educational campaign on the importance of fire safety within the Latino community. Although often a thorn in the side of many local officials, El Puente is, nevertheless, a respected community organization that has worked tirelessly to serve the Latino community.

**Nuestra Voz**

*Nuestra Voz* was a collaborative effort between Maria, El Puente’s director of youth activities, and a group of students from Victoria High School. The students were approached by Maria about whether they would be interested in starting their own Spanish teen radio show with El Puente’s support. The students were interested and started working on the show’s format, objectives, and ideas for a name. *Nuestra Voz*’s first broadcast was in May of 2003. Although there were periods when the program was broadcast sporadically, *Nuestra Voz* was on the air until February of 2008 at which point Maria, the director of the program, relocated to another state. The number of students who participated in its production has fluctuated from three to eight students during those five years. The majority of the students who helped to produce *Nuestra Voz* immigrated to the United States with their parents at a young age. The legal status of the students who
participated in *Nuestra Voz* spans from naturalized citizens to undocumented residents, with the majority being of Mexican origin. The students are all high school age and all attended the local public high school. Many were recruited as a result of their participation in academic organizations for high performing students. Maria has explicitly stated that the members of *Nuestra Voz* should be seen as leaders in their community and therefore held the students to a high level of accountability.

I believe that *Nuestra Voz* is an important educational site for the Latino/a youth whom it served. Maria modeled many of the tenets of critical pedagogy while working with the members of *Nuestra Voz*. Maria is a native of Colombia and had lived in New Hope County for nearly a decade. She is in her mid thirties and speaks Spanish fluently. She is also proficient in English. She is exactly the bicultural role model that Darder argues Latinos/as need to successfully navigate their bicultural reality (Darder, 2002).

Students met weekly at El Puente to brainstorm and research various topics which might be the subject for upcoming shows. Maria provided guidance and maintained ultimate veto power if a topic was not considered appropriate. However, students were expected to research and design the half hour program by themselves. After a work session of approximately two hours, students drove five minutes across town to Victoria City’s local AM radio station where the show was broadcast. Both Spanish and English shows are broadcast at this station. Generally two to three students hosted the show and listeners were encouraged to call in. The show provided a forum for community discussion among Victoria City’s youth about issues that directly impacted their lives.

A typical show would begin with the hosts introducing themselves and the topic of the evening’s program; topics have included teen violence, after school opportunities,
the Dream Act,\textsuperscript{14} young people and Latino Christmas traditions, depression, dropping out of high school, and AIDS. The hosts would discuss the topic among themselves and ask listeners to call in with questions and comments. One or two Spanish songs were played if there were no callers and the dialogue became forced. The last three or four minutes was usually dedicated to community announcements and information.

\textit{Entry}

I first became involved with \textit{Nuestra Voz} as part of a class ethnography project for Dr. Glenn Hinson in February of 2006. I wanted to do an ethnographic project on an immigrant community and in talking to a friend, found out about El Puente and their work in Victoria City. My friend put me in contact with the executive director and after a few rounds of phone tag, I was able to set up a meeting to discuss the possibility of my working with the organization on a volunteer basis. Because my initial entry into the research site was not a gradual process and my role was, in part, pre-determined by the director of \textit{Nuestra Voz} and the executive director of El Puente, I have included a passage from my field notes written directly after this meeting because it captures the level of formality and apprehension that accompanied my initial entry into the research site.

I made a right and then a left and was now in the old business section of Victoria City, the block where El Puente was located. I parked the car and got out. I walked to the corner and saw the sign for El Puente. The sign was stenciled in fading beige paint on the window. It was in English and Spanish. On the door there was also a sign reading CERRADO. I knocked and a white woman in her early twenties got up from the desk where she had been sitting and let me in. She had dirty blond hair, a silver stud in her nose, and was wearing a tan crocheted poncho over a brightly patterned blue dress which was worn over a pair of jeans. I introduced myself in English and happened to notice from the clock above the door that I was

\textsuperscript{14} A piece of proposed federal legislation that would grant undocumented students who have graduated from a U.S. high school to attend college or serve in the military as a U.S. resident.
15 minutes late. I apologized. I could hear Spanish conversation coming from the hallway to the right. She asked me to wait while she let Ileana, the woman I was to meet, know I was here. I heard Ileana get off the phone and the young woman directed me to her office. On the way I passed an office where a Latina woman in her early thirties was sitting. She acknowledged me, but didn’t seem very friendly. She was wearing a lot of brown, which I noticed, having specifically chosen not to wear my brown turtle neck, and instead put on a hot pink sweater in the hopes of not coming across as a dreary, white academic. An Anglo looking man wearing grey slacks and a white oxford was on his way out of Ileana’s office. He was laughing and talking to her in perfect native Spanish. I guessed from his accent that he was South American. We were briefly introduced, and although I didn’t catch his name, I was hoping on account of his friendly manner that he was the individual Ileana had spoken of earlier who ran the radio show I might be working with.

The man left and I introduced myself to Ileana. The first thing I noticed about her was her intricate silver jewelry. She was wearing a number of hand crafted rings. Her dangling earrings were elaborately constructed with delicate turquoise centers. She had straight black hair which she wore pulled back and up. Her face was longer than it was round, and she wore black rimmed glasses that lent a sense of seriousness to her appearance. She wore no makeup and her nails were cut short and free of polish. She had on black pants, a blue, brightly striped, button down shirt, similar in color to the dress of the woman from the front desk. Over her shirt, she had on a black, polar fleece vest. There was something that felt very familiar about her.

Her office was cozy, approximately 12x12 in dimension. It was set up more like an artist’s studio than an office in a non profit organization. Against all the walls there were either work spaces or bookshelves. Wherever I looked, I saw something of interest: a poster with a political slogan in Spanish, a tapestry, a painting. There was more than I could take in. I found myself having a hard time focusing, and for a fleeting moment the whole situation felt uncomfortably surreal, as if I had suddenly been cast on a stage without ever having auditioned. It passed, but I was left feeling that this was more of an interview than a meeting and that I was going to have to sell myself. In telling her about the project, I was aware that I had repeated myself a number of times. I was coming at it from so many angles and realized as I described the project, I needed to figure out which particular aspect I should emphasize. I told her what I needed for the class and that I had always worked with the Latino community in educational settings and planned on doing a dissertation on some aspect of the cultural disconnect that exists between American schools and Mexican families. I told her that since entering graduate school, I felt very disconnected from the communities that had brought me back to school in the first place and that I wanted this to be a mutually beneficial experience for the teens I would be working with. I didn’t tell
her that I was absolutely fascinated by what happens when an old southern town becomes transformed by a huge influx of Mexican immigrants.

Finally, I slumped back in the chair and with an air of resignation said, “I don’t know, if these kids were in my charge I think I would feel good about letting them work with someone like me.” I was tired. She seemed positive. She wanted to talk more about possible venues for my reciprocity. She excused herself and called in Maria, the woman in brown. Unlike Ileana, whose ethnicity could neither be identified by her appearance or accent, Maria was clearly Latina. She had light brown skin and her cheeks were freckled. The manner in which she used her hands while talking reminded me of many of the mothers of my Mexican students. She was not wearing a lot of makeup, but the mascara on her eyelashes was noticeable. She was wearing a couple of small gold chains around her neck and gold earrings. Ileana explained my situation to her in Spanish and asked her to talk a little about the radio show. Maria told me that they met on Thursdays from 4:30-7:30 to organize the program and that it aired the following Tuesday. Presently there were seven boys and one girl involved in the production. Ileana interrupted to ask about the girl, apparently she had recently joined. Their next meeting would not be until the 17th of February because the high school basketball games were being aired. I interrupted to ask a question about whether the kids were bilingual. She said the majority were. There was one boy who didn’t speak English but he understood it. Ileana asked Maria if they spoke English or Spanish when they came together. Maria responded emphatically that they spoke completely in Spanish. I took her tone and the severity of her facial expression as she addressed her answer to me to mean that she was not going to give up an English free space just because I was there. I assured her, in Spanish, that that would not be a problem for me. I understood Spanish fine, it was just that I hadn’t spoken it in awhile.

This was the moment I was dreading, when I would have to assure everyone of my Spanish proficiency, a proficiency that is layered with deep feelings of inadequacy. Ileana must have picked up on my discomfort, because she went back to speaking to me in English. I sensed that Maria was now uncomfortable. Worse than my discomfort with having my Spanish judged by a true bilingual, was the thought that my English speaking presence would change a pre-established language dynamic. Ileana assured me that Maria spoke English fine, but I recognized Maria’s discomfort with English, which I too felt when asked to speak Spanish in front of someone who is fluent in both Spanish and English. Ileana, being solidly multi-lingual, seemed oblivious to all of this. We settled on Maria speaking in Spanish, Ileana speaking in English, and me mostly listening.

Maria began to explain an idea that she had for how I could give back to the kids in the program. She was describing how the kids were always wanting projects to get involved with and suggested that maybe we could do some form of oral histories with them. We could give them small
tape recorders and they could do interviews in the schools. My mind wandered for a moment, which has more severe consequences when listening in a second language, and when my focus returned I was not sure if she was suggesting that I could help them purchase the recorders. I asked for clarification and Ileana explained that they needed help with interviewing skills and organizing their questions. I was flattered that they thought I could help them in this way, and excited about having the opportunity to work with teens again. As we talked more about how I might assist them, I rearticulated the importance of me not being seen as “la maestra”.

Maria went on to talk about how bored the children were, and Ileana interjected to say that if more than two Mexican kids are hanging out on the street they are seen as a threat and the cops break them up and make them go home. We talked about possible weekend excursions we could take them on. A number of ideas were tossed out and it became clear that these kids really just wanted something meaningful to do with their time, and that any involvement in their lives would be greatly appreciated by both Maria and Ileana. We agreed that Maria would need to talk with the kids first on the 17th and if all went well, I should plan on coming on the 21st. Very formally, Maria said it was nice to meet me and excused herself.

The students who produced *Nuestra Voz* at that time agreed to let me work with them. I began attending their pre-broadcasting work sessions the following week. Despite all my attempts at not altering the language dynamic, I found that three of the five students, who were just as comfortable in English as they were in Spanish, would often switch to English in my presence. After telling them on more that one occasion that this was not necessary, and always being careful to respond in Spanish, I eventually had to accept that I could not control what language they chose to address me in. However, I was always careful to shoulder my fair share of the communication burden (Kubota, 2001). Rather than functioning exclusively in English or Spanish, Maria, the students and I moved in and out of both languages with comfort and a keen sense of consideration to the needs of our interlockers. When Maria and I spoke intimately about the trials of our personal relationships, work frustrations, or our desires concerning motherhood, there

68
was a tacit understanding that we need not rely solely on one or the other of the languages, but that we could move between the two in order to make ourselves best understood. Our ability to communicate was as much based in our shared experiences, and trust for one another as it was in our bilingualism (Crittenden, 1994).

Throughout my involvement with *Nuestra Voz* and especially my participation with the April 10th March, I became particularly close with Maria. I tried to alleviate the demands placed on her by offering to do any English translation necessary, calling the local school to speak with counselors and principals, driving students home after the show, and speaking to student’s family members when problems arose. I consider it an honor that she allowed me to work with her and gave me access to the archives of *Nuestra Voz*.

**Research Collaborators and Participants**

The majority of the radio programs that I have analyzed were broadcast by the five students—three males and two females—during the time of my involvement in *Nuestra Voz*. Of these five students, one returned to Mexico in the spring of 2006 and it was not known whether she was coming back to the states. Another student moved out of her family’s home in the spring of 2007 and despite multiple attempts, I was unable to maintain contact with her after the summer of 2007. Therefore, the interviews that were part of the data collection process were conducted with the three remaining students. However, the content of the radio shows include the views and opinions of more than these three students. The ethnographic description of Victoria City and the students’
neighborhoods and homes is also not limited to the study’s three collaborators but includes the participants as well.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Carlos}

Carlos immigrated to Victoria City in 1998 when he was in the fourth grade. Up until that point he lived in Mexico with his father and other siblings. His mother, who had come to the states when he was a small child, had been living in Victoria City prior to Carlos’ arrival. When I first met him in February of 2006, he was a sophomore in high school and was living with his mother and older brother. He spoke English with a thick accent and often was difficult to understand on account of a speech impediment and his insufficient command of English grammar and syntax. He was equally difficult to understand in Spanish and Maria had mentioned that on one occasion a listener of the show called in to complain about his poor Spanish and argued that he should not be allowed on the air. Maria defended him, explaining that she would not penalize him for something that was not his fault.

Carlos was always very open and friendly with me. When I first met him he talked eagerly about wanting to go to Harvard one day and about how much he wanted to continue his studies. I was initially very impressed with him, but later in the evening Maria confided to me that she was worried about him because his goals were unrealistic in light of his academic record. Of all the students who participated in Nuestra Voz, Carlos was the weakest academically. He often struggled when reading a segment of writing on air and frequently searched for basic words in Spanish and English. The last

\textsuperscript{15} The participants are the initial five students that I worked with, which include this study’s three collaborators.
time I saw Carlos was in the fall of 2007. His sixteen-year-old girl friend and their four-
month-old son were living with him in his mother’s house. He was no longer in school
and was working the third shift at the local poultry plant. He was planning to go to
Maryland to check out a business venture a friend had told him about in which he could
earn over 70,000 dollars a year.

Ramon

Ramon immigrated to the United States from Mexico in 2000, when he was 12
years old. During my research he lived with his mother, his seven-year-old sister and
four-month-old brother. He was not sure where his father was living and I did not feel
comfortable pursuing the subject. For all practical purposes, Ramon is the man-of-the-
house. He is very active in his church and hoped to attend a ministry college. Ramon is
an excellent athlete and was a well respected student. At times I found it difficult to
determine whether he was overly proud or just slightly reserved. Once, after helping
translate an essay he had written for a scholarship, I reiterated an offer I had made several
times about writing him a letter of recommendation, at which point he proudly informed
me that many teachers had made the same offer and therefore he would not need to take
me up on it. At the time I felt mildly slighted. What I didn’t realize then, and that perhaps
he did, was that there were far greater obstacles standing in his way to going to college
than a teacher recommendation.

Ramon is a young man of great passion and aspiration. One of his many dreams is
to be a writer and he has written volumes of poetry. He loves Spanish love ballads and
would sing along with total abandon. He is involved in many activities (e.g. two jobs,
captain of his soccer team, youth leader at church, and community volunteer with Nuestra Voz and El Puente). On top of his busy schedule outside of his home, he has a lot of family responsibility in helping to support and raise his two younger siblings. He is a natural born leader and has readily embraced the role of community activist. He has a big personality that resonated with listeners and inspired the other students he worked with. During the majority of the time that I spent with Nuestra Voz, Ramon was always positive and hopeful about what the future had to offer. It was not until my last interview with him, that I sensed a crack in his armor of optimism. He had graduated from high school the previous spring and had not been able to attend a four year college as he had hoped.

*Gabriel*

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

Being the youngest of the five students, I was unable to ascertain whether his jovial, somewhat non-committal manner was a product of age or an unwillingness to invest himself too deeply in the issues surrounding American immigration. Gabriel was the only member of Nuestra Voz who did not deliver a speech at the April 10th
immigration rally. He also made it clear in an interview that he would always consider himself Mexican not Mexican-American and that if he was unable to go to college in the United States, he would simply return to Mexico to attend university. In the same interview, he proudly stated that his parents had not come to the United States because they had to, but rather because they wanted to. As he put it, “We had it good over there.”

**Zelda**

Although Zelda was not one of the study’s three collaborators, she was a highly active member of Nuestra Voz and played a prominent role throughout my research. I chose to include an ethnographic description of her because I believe her academic successes and personal struggles offer important insights into how gender mediates the acculturation process. Of all the students from Nuestra Voz, Zelda had been in Victoria City for the longest. Originally from Mexico, all of her formal schooling had occurred in the public schools of Victoria City. She was the student most likely to slip into Spanglish and when speaking in English, her dialogue was peppered with the ubiquitous, “like, you know what I mean?”

Zelda was 14 when I first met her, but she had the mannerisms of a much older woman. She was an honors student and a respected athlete; she was also boy crazy. She was eager to try and engage me in conversations about my personal life and was well versed when conversing about dating and relationships. She was pretty with long brown hair and hazel eyes. Although she never wore a lot of makeup, she always dressed in tight clothes that accentuated her nubility. I wasn’t particularly surprised when I learned she had a boyfriend almost 10 years her senior; I could hardly imagine a boy her age having
the confidence to ask her out. Unfortunately, her father who had already watched Zelda’s older sister get pregnant at the age of 14 and move out of his home to live with the baby’s father was determined to do whatever possible to keep this from happening to Zelda. But despite the restrictions placed on her, Zelda left her father’s home to move in with her boyfriend and his cousins shortly after her 16th birthday. At that time she also stopped working with Nuestra Voz and had no contact with the staff at El Puente. In our last conversation, I tried to impress upon her the importance of staying in school and not getting pregnant. She assured me she would and talked about how her boyfriend, although older, did not make all the decisions, off handedly remarking, “He knows I could have gotten something better.”

**Elena**

My involvement with Elena lasted for less than four months. She was 17 when I met her and was one of the newest members of Nuestra Voz. After losing both her parents at the age of 14, she and her younger brother immigrated to the United States to live with her uncle and aunt. Considering her life circumstance, she showed enormous resiliency. She was an honors student, despite the fact that she had entered Victoria High with very minimal English skills. She was involved in several extra curricular activities, and appeared to get along well with her peers. I never met her uncle and aunt but often drove her home after the show’s broadcasts. She lived in a large brick ranch in a middle class neighborhood, with well tended lawns and carefully maintained gardens. When I pulled into her driveway at 7:40 p.m., the house was usually dark except for the glow of a small lamp that sat in front of the living room window. We would say our goodbyes and I
would watch as she headed up the stone pathway to the front door. The door would open as she approached and quickly close after she entered. There was never a wave or greeting from whomever it was that waited for her arrival. On a number of occasions I tried to schedule things with Elena by calling the house, but the adults I spoke to claimed that she was not home. I left messages but they were never given to her.

Elena spoke little about her home life and the circumstance of her parents’ death but it was not hard to see that she was still suffering from the aftermath of such a life tragedy. Much of the time she appeared to be very nervous and unsure of herself. When we would meet at El Puente she had a disheveled feel about her, although she was never unkempt or badly dressed; she appeared lost. She spoke little about her uncle and aunt except to let it be known that they were very strict. This became painfully clear when after receiving a large educational scholarship by a private donor, her uncle sent Elena back to Mexico because he had found out she had a boyfriend. Elena was gone before any of us had a chance to say goodbye.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection and analysis were conceived of as an intertwining process within this study. Because my initial research was intended to fulfill a class requirement, I entered the field with prescribed objectives laid out by my professor. As my involvement in the site increased and I became more invested in the lives of the participants, my role and my objectives began to change. My data collection was guided by the experiences that I had while doing research and could not have been predetermined prior to
involvement with the participants (Piotrkowski, 1979). Because of my initial class
requirements, I wrote throughout much of the data collection process, and therefore was
highly “attuned to the prospect that the results would be words to be read (Glesne, 2006,
p.177). The themes that I ultimately used in the coding process, emerged quite early in
the data collection process. I believe that by having begun the writing process vis-à-vis,
lengthy written reflections done as part of the data collection process, I was better able to
structure and organize the data during analysis.

**Ethnographic Data**

The first phase of data collection was the ethnographic field notes that were taken
while attending the weekly pre-broadcasting work sessions and accompanying the
students to the local radio station for the program’s broadcast. I attended these shows
consistently on a weekly basis for three months. In mid March of 2006, El Puente began
preparations for the April 10th immigration rally. The needed preparations required that
the students of *Nuestra Voz* have a series of additional meetings and work sessions which
I also attended. During the summer and fall of 2006 the broadcasts became more
sporadic, occurring more on a monthly basis. I was not always able to attend because of
scheduling issues. Nevertheless, I was able to stay in contact with Maria and the four
remaining students in *Nuestra Voz* via phone conversations, emails and my presence at
fundraising events and community activities that the students took part in. In the summer
of 2007, I was asked to accompany the students on a three-day retreat for Latino youth. I
served as the chaperon to five new girls who had recently started working with *Nuestra

---

16 A significant portion of Chapter Six is dedicated to describing this event and its impact on the students.
I had only met this group of girls once or twice before the retreat but two of the study’s male collaborators, Ramon and Gabriel, also attended the retreat.

The more time I spent with the students of *Nuestra Voz*, the more I became what Glesne describes as a “participant as observer” (2006 p.50). At times I had very concrete responsibilities and therefore often was not able to sit on the sidelines and take notes. Furthermore, when I was not immediately engaged in something related to the production of *Nuestra Voz*, I was engaged in conversation with Maria and/or the students. I learned a great deal from Maria and the students of *Nuestra Voz*, not through “studying them” but by being with them (Hargreaves, 1999; Spradley, 1979). As often is the case with participant observation, I was far from detached or neutral in my interactions with the participants. It was precisely because of my emotional engagement with the participants that I was able to gain a deeper understanding of their lives (Lerum, 2001; Wade; 1984).

Throughout my research, I kept a series of field notes. These were both descriptive and analytical. The more detailed notes were usually taken after I had been in the site. I also kept a journal with me while in the site to jot down short observations, notes to myself and questions I wanted to investigate further. There were times, e.g. after the three day forum or the April 10th rally that my mind was swirling so fast I found it easier to record my thoughts and observations on a mini-audio recorder.

**Content Analysis of Nuestra Voz**

Because the radio shows had been previously recorded and I had obtained copies of the shows, the first step in the data analysis was to review the recordings of the 58 radio shows. I first listened to all the tapes, making general notes to myself about the
topics being discussed. After listening to all 58 shows, I discarded the shows that had little or no relevance to my two overarching themes: the process of acculturation and resistance. I then translated and transcribed the remaining 43 radio shows. Because English is my first and stronger language, in most cases it was easier for me to listen to the Spanish tapes and transcribe them into English. However, when the content was nuanced or the meaning was unclear to me, I did the initial transcription in Spanish and then translated it into English. After transcribing and translating the text, I listened to the 43 shows again to check the accuracy of my translation. During this process, I consulted with two native Spanish speakers and one nonnative fluent Spanish speaker, knowledgeable of the Spanish spoken in the southern United States. I could have had the tapes professionally translated and transcribed, but had I chosen to do this I would have not been as familiar with the content as I became during the transcription process. The radio shows were in part a performance in which much of the meaning was conveyed through the students’ presentation. Had I not spent the painstaking hours translating and transcribing the shows myself, I believe I would have lost an important layer of meaning that is not sufficiently expressed through words.

The Interviews

After the transcription and translating was complete, I chose salient segments from 10 different shows that I thought reflected important recurring themes of the radio show. I set up interviews with the three research collaborators, two of whom I interviewed together and one who I interviewed alone. The interview with Carlos and Gabriel was approximately two hours in length and the interview with Ramon was just
under an hour. Both interviews were audio taped. In these interviews I played back chosen segments of the radio shows for them. After listening to each segment, the collaborators were asked open-ended questions about what they had heard; the goal being that they would elaborate on the topic and share their thoughts about what the speaker was trying to convey. The majority of the segments were from shows they had played a part in producing and broadcasting. Not only did these interviews provide an opportunity for the collaborators to go into greater depth and explanation of the show’s topics, but it gave me insight into how their attitudes had changed with the passage of time and changing political climate. The purpose of these interviews was to dialogically make meaning with the members of *Nuestra Voz* about the content of the radio shows. I envisioned this phase of data collection as a collaborative process with the members of *Nuestra Voz* in which their voices and understandings would play a significant role in the final data analysis (Lassister, 2005). The interviews also allowed me to compare the beliefs and attitudes of the individual members of *Nuestra Voz* to the beliefs and attitudes that were expressed through the discourse of *Nuestra Voz*.

**Changing Questions**

When I began this research, the question that piqued my academic curiosity was what happens to a small southern city that is transformed by a large influx of Latino immigrants. As I got more involved with the students of *Nuestra Voz*, my initial question seemed irrelevant compared to the question of how these students and their families were going to navigate the inevitable process of assimilation. I began to view the data as existing on a conceptual axis: data that demonstrated a form of resistance to American
whitestream culture and data that represented the promotion of a selective pattern of acculturation. The question of how the non-Latino residents of Victory City were going to absorb the growing Latino population became secondary—and much less interesting—to how Victoria City’s Latino families and community were going to weather the Americanization of their youth: Would the Americanization of Latino/a youth erode the familial relations of Latinos? Would the pro-education discourse of the Latino community be silenced by the structural inequities found in American schools? Would Latinas be able to successfully balance the conservatism of their home lives with the liberalism of American peer culture? Would the community ethos of Latinos be dismantled by the strength of American individualism? These questions were formulated during the many conversations, observations, and interactions with the students of Nuestra Voz and it is my hope that my findings provide a kernel of understanding by which to better answer them.

Coding Nuestra Voz

Because I had already spent over three months translating and transcribing the radio shows, as well as being physically present for the airing of many of the shows, I was familiar with this portion of the data and found coding to be an intuitive process (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). I began the process with four major themes in mind that I planned to organize the data around: cultural preservation, community ethos, the importance of family, and political resistance. As previously mentioned, these four themes emerged during my time in the research site. After reading over the transcripts twice in their entirety to gain a holistic overview and determine whether these four
themes provided a suitable organizational structure for the data analysis, the fifth theme of educational attainment emerged and was added. I then went back through the transcripts and coded for these five themes. I allowed a number of weeks to pass before returning to the transcripts to conduct a third reading. At this point I checked the coding of the five overarching themes. After making minor corrections to my initial coding, I began the process of subcoding each of the five themes (Glesne, 2006). Overall, I found that the data fit well into my five codes.

**Coding the Interviews**

Because the interviews with the three collaborators were organized around chosen segments of the radio show, the content naturally fit well into the five codes. However, I did have to create a code for autobiographical information. Initially, I had planned on conducting an additional, separate interview with the collaborators in which I would ask them about the details of their individual immigration experience, but found that this was not necessary as the collaborators provided me with that information in the first interview. I also had to create a code for ideological changes, as two of the collaborators expressed opinions that were not consistent with the discourse of *Nuestra Voz*.

**The Format of My Findings**

I organized my findings into three discrete chapters, all of which could be read as separate articles, but were meant to be read as connected, though not necessarily sequential chapters. The data from the interviews and the content analysis of the radio show are woven together throughout the findings chapters. The first findings chapter,
Chapter Four focuses on how the students of *Nuestra Voz* evoked *familismo* as a way to preserve their home culture, and in doing so, advocated for the adoption of a selective pattern of acculturation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). I chose to dedicate an entire chapter to the concept and discourse around cultural reconstruction and the role of *familismo* for two reasons: it was an integral part of the larger discourse of *Nuestra Voz*; and it is where I observed the greatest disconnect between what the students were saying on the air and what they were doing in their lives. Because this chapter is concerned with the lived experiences of the students, it contains large sections of ethnographic description. It is my hope that the thick description provided will provide a context in which to better understand the lives of the students.

Chapter Five examines the various discourses of *Nuestra Voz*. As a cultural product created with a specific set of political and cultural objectives, the discourses within *Nuestra Voz* were an effective medium for resistance and transformation. In this chapter, I borrow from the discipline of cultural studies in my examination of how the discourses of *Nuestra Voz* challenged the dominant discourses around Latinos/as. The reoccurring themes of educational attainment, cultural preservation, community ethos, the importance of family, and political resistance were deeply embedded in the discourses addressed in Chapter Five. The articulation of these discourses was, perhaps, the most powerful act of resistance the students participated in.

Chapter Six focuses on the critical practices of El Puente and draws more from the ethnographic data than the content of the radio shows. In this chapter I explore the ways in which El Puente helped to foster an activist identity among the students of *Nuestra Voz*. The chapter examines two tangible acts of resistance that the students
participated in as they took part in *Nuestra Voz*, the April 10th immigration march, and a three-day Latino/a youth forum.

**Reciprocity and the Research Process**

I found my role as researcher uncomfortable and at times, disconcerting. Having worked as a mentor and teacher to young people for close to two decades before starting this project, I was unaccustomed to the lack of transparency that accompanied my presence. Glesne (2006) advises that one of the best ways to gain access within a site is by just being present, participating in activities and talking informally with people. All of this I did for a period spanning 18 months. I did gain access to the students’ lives but unlike teaching, I was not there for the daily struggles, nor was I able to have enough of an impact to make a significant difference in their lives. I was, however, able to get enough “data” to help me in my academic and professional pursuits. This lack of parity is something that I have struggled with throughout the research process. I am left bothered by the intrinsic inequity, regardless of how many attempts are made at reciprocity, of the researched/researcher relationship. Perhaps, significant reciprocity will only come about through the dissemination of my findings and the impact it may have on the practitioners who help to shape the educational experiences of Latino/a youth.
CHAPTER FOUR: RECONSTRUCTING CULTURE—PARENTAL EXPECTATION, PEER CULTURE, AND GENDER ROLES.

Introduction: Acculturation and the Role of Familismo

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argue that a major threat to the upward assimilation of immigrant youth is the social context they encounter in American schools and neighborhoods. Immigrants of color who are faced with racial prejudice, educational inequities, and blocked economic mobility are more likely to adopt an adversarial outlook, which only exacerbates their marginalization; whereas, immigrant children who possess a strong cultural self-identity and maintain a sense of belonging to their sociocultural community have a greater chance at academic success (Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Trueba, 1998). The staff at El Puente was highly aware that many of Victoria City’s Latino youth were at risk of adopting a “dissonant pattern of acculturation” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), leaving them more likely to join gangs, drop out of school, or become involved in a drug subculture.

In an attempt to promote a pattern of acculturation in which students maintained strong intergenerational allegiances and were oriented towards school culture rather than street culture, the staff and students who produced Nuestra Voz continually emphasized the importance of family. Throughout the radio programs, the Latino family was portrayed as a student’s greatest resource. A sense of obligation to one’s family was viewed as vital to the upward assimilation of Latinos. The emphasis on family was part of a larger attempt to promote the preservation of the students’ home culture. Familismo, or the importance placed on family cohesiveness, interdependence, and loyalty has been associated with Latino adolescents’ physical, emotional and academic well being and is
believed to mediate the adverse effects of the larger host culture (Behnke, MacDermid, Coltrane, Parke, Duffy, & Widman, 2008).

Research suggests that the tendency of American adolescents to reject the authority of their parents and turn to peers for affirmation is not a universal phenomenon. According to Suárez-Orozco (1995) work on Latino families, Mexican-born and first generation Mexican-origin adolescents are more likely to view the family, not the peer group, as their key social institution. However, Fuligni (1998) found that by the third generation, adolescents’ beliefs concerning parent authority and adolescent autonomy were the same as those of their European American counterparts. The students of *Nuestra Voz*, many of whom had witnessed first hand the devastating effects of adolescent rebellion against parental authority, participated in a discourse which was in direct alignment with Portes and Rumbaut’s (2001) assertion that youth residing in households in which parental authority is maintained are better able to armor themselves against external discrimination and therefore, less likely to adopt dissonant patterns of acculturation.

However, the challenges of having parents who were raised in another country and whose style of parenting is rooted in another culture were not lost in the discourse of *Nuestra Voz*. The difficulty of maintaining open communication with more traditional Mexican parents was a reoccurring issue raised by both male and female participants of *Nuestra Voz*. Yet it was the females who appeared to struggle more with the restrictions placed on them by parents, particularly their fathers. Granted far less freedom, the girls who participated in *Nuestra Voz* made frequent mention of the difficulty of being always honest and respectful towards one’s parent.
In this chapter, I first describe the home communities of the students who participated in this study. Using ethnographic field notes and excerpts from the radio shows in which the students discuss characteristics of their neighborhoods, I attempt to provide the reader with a sense of place. I highlight the resources and risk factors within their community and examine how the importance placed on family throughout the radio shows served to reinforce a valuable resource. Finally, I explore how the cultural expectation of respecting and honoring one’s parents, at times presented painful conflicts and challenges for the girls who participated in *Nuestra Voz*.

**The Sociocultural Context**

**Homes, Neighborhoods, and Families**

After broadcasting the radio shows at the local station about three miles from El Puente, the students would often pile into my car and I would give them a ride home. With the students as my guide, I became familiar with the streets and various neighborhoods of Victoria City. Visiting four out of the five students at home also provided me with insight into their family life. The students lived in a diversity of neighborhoods, varying from neatly kept apartment complexes, middleclass subdivisions of brick ranches and manicured lawns, to trailer parks and run-down mill houses. I also had the opportunity to visit some of the poorer, more depressed neighborhoods of the city, where at the time of this study none of these students lived.

**Ramon.** Less than a quarter of a mile from the doors of El Puente is an old, one-story mill house where Ramon lives with his mother and two younger siblings. Ramon’s house sits close to the road, with the small front yard doubling as off-street parking for the two
or three cars that always seemed to be parked there. On the morning I came to visit, a
white and maroon paneled van was pulled up next to the side of a house with a bumper
sticker reading *Manejar Borracho? No Seas Tonto Muchacho!* [Drive drunk? Don’t be
foolish kid!] The house is in better condition than many of the other houses that line the
street, some of which, although occupied, are painfully dilapidated. Ramon’s home, built
sometime in the early 1900s, sits close to the ground, lacking a proper foundation as well
as the usual modern amenities of insulated floors, walls, and windows.

The interior of the home provides a sharp contrast to the lack of structural care
that has been given to the house’s exterior. A clean plush carpet covers the living room
floor and ornate curtains cover the room’s windows. A statue of La Virgin de Guadalupe
hangs high on the wall and photos of family members are carefully placed on the tops of
two wooden tables. All visible surfaces appeared to have been recently, dusted,
vacuumed and polished.

It was 8:30 on a Saturday morning in late September and Ramon had just returned
from a meeting with a church youth group. His mother had gone out and he was taking
care of his four-month-old brother and seven-year old sister. I chatted with his sister in
English about school and her new teacher. She was outgoing and eager to share her
academic accomplishments with me. She proudly showed me the computer she used to
do her schoolwork, which sat on an orderly desk equipped with pencils, books, and
writing paper. It was evident that her mother was invested in her daughter’s academic
attainment, having set aside a designated space in this small house solely for her child’s
school work.
The purpose of my visit was to conduct an interview in which I played back segments of the radio shows and asked Ramon to discuss his interpretations of the hosts’ meanings. In order to do this, I had to access the digital files saved on my laptop. Ramon’s sister, either bored by the lack of attention being paid to her, or wanting to participate in this adult activity, decided to run one of her computer’s software programs with a loud audio component in the same room. Ramon never admonished her but gently asked her to leave the room only once it became too difficult to hear the radio show recordings. He granted the same patient attentiveness to his four-month-old brother who sat in his walker contentedly amusing himself with an attached mobile.

Once his mother came home, she politely introduced herself and quietly removed the infant from the room. Having been responsible for so many of the household duties myself as an adolescent when living with a single parent, I immediately recognized a familiar dynamic: Ramon and his mother functioned less like the common perception of what a parent-child dynamic is and more like two adults working together to run a household. She was clearly aware of why I was there and respectfully gave us the space we needed to conduct the interview. Ramon, in turn, understood that his mother had needed to run an errand and willingly assumed responsibility for his siblings in order to allow her to do so.

Zelda. Ramon was not alone in having to assume familial responsibilities. On another visit to Zelda’s home, one of the female participants of Nuestra Voz who I had grown particularly close to during my research, I was also struck by the adult like manner in which she tended to the needs of her younger siblings. We were supposed to meet at El Puente but she was unable to do so because her father was sick and needed to watch two
younger siblings. She lived in a well-kept trailer park with her parents and three other siblings. Each home had its own gravel driveway and many of the residents had planted small flower gardens around their mailboxes. A group of Latino children rode their bikes up and down the narrow paved road encircling the homes. Close by, an African American man in his early 30s was accompanying what appeared to be his son into a neighboring trailer. One of the young boys who had been riding his bike came over to see who I was and why I had pulled my car into his driveway. “Hola,” I said to which he responded, “Hello.” I asked in English if this was his home and when he replied yes, I told him I was there to see his sister. He pointed to the house and said she was inside. I walked up the four steps to the wooden landing that led into the trailer. A couple of clear garbage bags filled with smashed soda cans was carefully placed just to the right of the front door.

The inside of the trailer was as neat and homey as the outside. There was a pink table cloth covered with plastic on the dining room table with a vase of fake pink flowers in the center. There were pink ruffled curtains around the windows, and pink cushions on the chairs. The trailer had the feel of a condensed, middle-class decorum from the 1970s. The cabinets in the kitchen were painted white with mirrored facades. Several covered pots sat on the burners of the electric stove. From the dim glow of the heating coil and the faint smell of cooking food, I deduced that a meal was being kept warm for someone not yet at home. The area designated as the living room had framed pictures of various family members spread throughout. An elaborate entertainment system served as the focal point of the plush sofa and chairs. Clear of clutter and even a hint of disorganization, it was hard to believe that a family of six lived in this small space.
When Zelda met me at the door she immediately asked if she could get me something to drink. Just water, I responded. Handing me a glass of ice water, she asked me how my day had been, in a manner more mature than her chronological age—at the time she was 14. As we sat down and began to talk, her father came out from a back room. He was sick and looked to be feverish, but had gotten up in order to bring dinner to his older son, who was working the second shift at the poultry plant. He piled beans and some sort of stewed meat into a metal container, placed a couple of tortillas on top and peeled two hard boiled eggs that were on the stove, placing them in the container, too. Zelda had described her father as old world and chauvinistic, but as I watched him adeptly prepare his son’s meal, I had to wonder if she was being unfair.

Later during the interview Zelda’s younger brother came in from riding his bike with friends. Zelda, in a gentle mothering voice instructed him to get something cold to drink and then asked if he would like her to make him something to eat. He declined, gulping down a glass of water and quickly returned back to his bike and friends. At one point during the visit, our conversation was interrupted by the cry of an infant. Zelda had not mentioned that her three-month-old sister was asleep in the back room. I followed her to the queen size bed that the child had been napping on. The baby, who had a serious demeanor for such a small child, seemed perfectly content to be in her sister’s arms. With the baby in her arms, Zelda led me back to the dining room table and we picked up the conversation right where we had left it. As a former high school teacher, I left Zelda’s house wondering if her teachers saw the level of maturity that I had witnessed during this visit.
Gabriel lives in small shady complex of white stucco apartments. Each time I gave him a ride home, he took noticeable pleasure in reminding me that he lived “just passed the “Piggly Wiggly.” The store’s name would roll of his tongue, sounding more like a line out of a children’s song than a useful landmark for giving directions. With the exception of my last visit to Gabriel’s home, I had always dropped him off at night. It seemed to be a quiet neighborhood. I rarely saw anyone hanging out in the graveled parking areas or sitting on the cement stoops that led into the residences.

On the one occasion that I did go inside, Gabriel was sitting on the steps to his apartment waiting for me. His aunt and father were home and both greeted me amiably. His aunt was watching a Spanish news show. I sat down with her briefly and joined her in watching a report about a horrendous family murder. We both shook our heads as the gory details were described, giving visually evidence to one another of our mutual outrage. Not having seen the beginning, I wasn’t clear as to whether it had happened in the United States or somewhere in Latin America. When I asked her, she replied, “Aquí, en Los Estados! [Here, in the states!]” with such emphasis, as if to say, “but of course! Where else could it have happened!?"

Gabriel was talking to his father, who was seated at a small kitchen table, about his plans for the afternoon. Originally we were supposed to meet at El Puente but his ride had fallen through. I had wanted to interview Gabriel with another student, Carlos, from Nuestra Voz but when I arrived at El Puente Gabriel was not there. I called him and offered to pick him up at his house. The plan was that we would drive to Carlos’ house and after the interview I would bring Gabriel home. His father was amenable to this, but wanted to be clear on the details. Gabriel was very respectful when addressing his father
and there was a formality to the interaction not typical in my experience of American adolescents and their parents. As we got into my car which was parked just outside their apartment, I asked Gabriel if his father was all right with his leaving. He said that there was no problem and that his father always wanted to know where he was going and with whom.

**Carlos.** It was Gabriel who gave me directions to Carlos’ house. Carlos was one student whom I had never driven home. Carlos lived in a 1960s ranch just off the main road into town. There was a car parked in the driveway and Carlos was outside when we drove up. He invited us in and we followed him up the stone steps and into the house. There were two or three young children watching television in the front room. Carlos had never mentioned having younger siblings, so I assumed they were the children of friends. Other than the television and two chairs, the room was sparsely furnished, which made the space feel bigger than it actually was. As we walked towards the back of the house, the mother of Carlos’ four-month-old baby was coming out of the kitchen. I introduced myself and asked her about her baby boy who she was holding. More than 20 years her senior with a small child of my own at home, we briefly talked about the demands of having an infant to care for. Despite our many differences, surprisingly, the interaction flowed naturally and I regretted not having more time to talk with her. I was curious about her living situation and how she was managing to stay in school while taking care of an infant. I was also curious about how this young white girl’s family felt about their 16-year-old daughter getting pregnant and moving in with her Mexican boyfriend’s family. From what Carlos had told me, she was living with him in his mother’s home while still attending the local high school. He also referred to her throughout our
conversations as his wife, although neither wore a ring and there had never been mention of a wedding.

Gabriel and I followed Carlos into a room off the kitchen with a large table that filled most of the space. Other than the four chairs that surrounded the table, a brightly colored floral table cloth, and a standing fan, there was no other furniture or decoration. During the hour or so that we were there, I could hear adults in the next room speaking in both English and Spanish, at times talking to one another and at times to the children, asking them to turn the television down or reprimanding them for bickering among themselves. Although I didn’t meet Carlos’ older brother, I assumed that one of the voices belonged to him. From what I could hear, it seemed visitors were frequent at Carlos’ home. Unlike Gabriel, Carlos appeared to be granted a lot more latitude in terms of who came and went.

*The “other side of the tracks.”* After the interview, I asked Gabriel if he could help me locate a student I had been trying to get in touch with for over a month. She was no longer living with her parents, and both her email and cell phone no longer worked. I was not clear as to whether she was living with a cousin or had moved in with her boyfriend. Gabriel said that he knew her boyfriend and offered to bring me to his house. We were in the car for less than five minutes when we arrived at a run down trailer park. Gabriel instructed me to park next to a group of four young men who were sitting on a picnic bench. It was a pleasant fall day on a Friday afternoon. The four men seemed to be in a celebratory mood. Five or six empty beer cans sat on the table next to them, and they each had a cold one in hand. One of the men was a fair skinned North American with a thick southern accent. He was reserved and said little to me. Two darker skinned Latino
men sat on the bench and watched curiously as Gabriel explained why we were there. Gabriel seemed to be well acquainted with a good looking, bilingual Latino man who was also a friend of the girl’s boyfriend I was looking for. After hearing of my difficulty in getting in contact with her, he graciously offered to call the house to see if she was there. She wasn’t, so he left a message giving her boyfriend my phone number. Unfortunately, she never did call me. As we got back in the car to leave, I thought to myself that had it not been for the trailers and the one white man, this setting could have as easily been somewhere in Latin America: The intensity of the late afternoon light and heat reminded me of the afternoons I had spent in parks in Michoacán. The Latino men gathered openly outside drinking beer and their eagerness to be of assistance all merged into an amorphous memory, leaving me with a distinct sense of déjà vu.

It wasn’t until a year later that I considered the poverty of that trailer park. I came across an article about the deplorable living conditions that so many of North Carolina’s Latino immigrants face and that trailer park was specifically mentioned. There was a photo of a young, barefoot boy in soiled clothing playing with an old toy car. Unlike the trailer park that Zelda and her family lived in, there were no well maintained flower gardens or individual driveways with signs indicating a house number. Instead, the trailers were closely packed together and laundry was hung haphazardly out to dry. Had it not been for the jovial mood of those four men, and the pleasantness of that sunny fall day, perhaps I would have noticed the dilapidated state of the trailers, the lack of tended gardens and the absence of modern, well-running cars. Perhaps, I would have stopped and tried to imagine raising my child there and realized that there was no grass to play on and nothing to screen him from the sight of his neighbors’ vices.
Victoria City through Their Eyes

Throughout the programs of Nuestra Voz, the students made frequent reference to their neighborhoods and community. The majority of the students who participated in Nuestra Voz appeared to find comfort and a sense of belonging in their communities, contrary to the perception held by many in the larger Anglo society that crime and violence was on the rise as a result of the growing Latino population. The students were aware of the negative perception of their communities and expressed impatience, verging on irritation, with young people who promoted a gangster or Cholo persona. Gina, who had hosted a number of earlier radio shows and had lived in Los Angeles before moving to Victoria City, mocked the young people in her community who identified with gang life, calling them Cholo wannabes and sarcastically referring to Victoria City as the barrio of Country Living. In the following excerpt from a radio program aired in late 2003, Ramon and Gina discuss their community. They highlight the sense of community that exists in their neighborhoods and take issue with Latinos who emulate a Latino gangster identity prevalent in more metropolitan cities.

Gina: Ramon, how is life in the community where you live? What’s it like?

Ramon: Well right now it is calm. I haven’t seen anyone doing a lot of vandalism or anything like that. But I think that if we continue this way our future will get better. I see a lot of guys in the school who think, how do I say this; they are no longer being rowdy because they know what they want to do in the future. It’s like that. They know what they want and why they want it. In short, they have decided what they want to do in the future. Now tell me what you think.

Gina: I think a lot of things. No, but returning to what you just said, when you say “it is like that,” like what?
Ramon: How do I say this, right now, well not all, every one has different opinions and thinks differently, but some say they are Cholos. But I imagine…

Gina: They are Cholo wannabes. They want to be Cholos but they are not. They don’t know what it is to be a Cholo. But we live in the barrio of *Country Living*. Well, I think it is calm. It is…you don’t see much… you would think because there are lot of Hispanics it would be disorderly, but it is not. It is very calm. It’s nice. The people help you when you need them to.

Ramon: When you need help they give you a hand. Like you say, when you go to do something and you don’t have a tool in order to do it, you can go to a friend or a neighbor and they will lend it to you. They won’t refuse you.

In interviews with Gabriel and Carlos it became apparent that the three collaborators experienced Victoria City very differently, depending largely on the time of their arrival. Both Gabriel and Carlos made mention of the presence of crime and violence, but Gabriel who had arrived to Victoria City five years after Carlos viewed his community as a source of strength. Whereas Carlos, who had immigrated to Victoria City in the mid 1990s when the Latino population was still relatively small, spoke at length about feeling alienated and disconnected.

**Gabriel and the promise of community.** The topic of this portion of the interview was causes for teen depression. Gabriel spoke about his feelings of isolation and loneliness upon arriving to Victoria City from Veracruz, Mexico. He cited the acceptance offered by his neighbors as an important factor in his not becoming depressed. It is important to note that despite the large numbers of Latinos in Victoria City’s schools at that time, Gabriel’s sense of Latino community was fostered in his neighborhood, not the schools where he spent the majority of his time.
Gabriel: It was weird because, I mean, I used to go out like every single afternoon to play soccer with my friends or go out some places like people do here. Like after school, they go some places, like the movies or go to the park or wherever and I used to do that in Mexico, but when I came here I didn’t have any friends so I had to stay home and it was boring and you started to think about what your life was like back there.

Eleanor: Were you depressed?

Gabriel: I was like, oh man, what have I got myself into? But it wasn’t so hard because these kids beside me, now they live beside me, but they used to live like two apartments away from me, and they would come to my house and ask me to play soccer with them and then I would start to go out and play soccer.

Eleanor: Hispanic kids?

Gabriel: Yeah and then everything started to change, like in a month. It was different, but in school it was still the same. It took me like a year and a half to get used to it.

Later in the interview, I replayed a segment of a radio show in which Gabriel talked about how fighting and drug use in the school and the larger community contributed to the prevalence of teen depression. Gabriel, who at the time of the interview was doing well in school and was involved in constructive extracurricular activities, spoke of his personal experience with fighting. Although his account was mild in comparison to the comportment of actual gang-affiliated youth, his experience underscores the detrimental potential of youth culture, particularly among marginalized adolescents.

Eleanor: You talk about fighting and the pressure to use drugs. Did you experience that?

Gabriel: Yeah the fighting I did, my second year in here we used to form like a little clique. We used to go to the park and whenever there was like some guys there, we would get mad and we started screaming at them or saying bad words, whatever, and then they would return or bring some friends and everything would get started.
Eleanor: Like a little…

Gabriel: There was like a little gang. (laughs) But then…well that is all.

Eleanor: And what about the drugs? Do kids use a lot of drugs?

Gabriel: There used to be some. I mean, even in the junior high, like two years ago there used to be people selling drugs. The kids, there were no adults coming to the school to sell drugs, but the kids brought them to school.

Carlos, lost in translation. Carlos had come to Victoria City at a much younger age than Ramon and Gabriel when the Latino population was still relatively small. He spoke of suffering from a sense of cultural ambivalence and uncertainty, not knowing whether he was from Mexico or the United States. Throughout our interactions, he always seemed to prefer to speak in English and yet his English was somewhat disjointed, heavily accented and at times difficult to understand because of a speech impediment. Being an ESL teacher and having had a severe speech impediment myself, I was very sympathetic to Carlos’ speech difficulties, but often wondered whether it impaired his social integration. Not surprisingly, Carlos struggled academically and left high school before receiving a diploma. Nevertheless, he was able to clearly articulate his sense of cultural uncertainty in a poignant discussion about what it was like to have left his home country as a child:

Carlos: All my friends that I have got, they did something in Mexico, a lot of stuff but when I came over here I was only in fourth grade. I was only a child so I couldn’t even really get to enjoy my country. So, that upset me, too, because I didn’t get to enjoy my country. I’d get jealous of my friends because they got to enjoy their country. I tell my sister one day, ‘Does Mexico have Wal-Mart?’ She said, ‘Of course they have Wal-Mart. What do you think, because the United States has Wal-Mart, Mexico doesn’t?’ Yeah, because I didn’t even really get to go outside of my town. It was a
really small town. So the only thing I would do was go home from school and sometimes go and play with my friends but I came over here in fourth grade and so complete my life changed. I know more better the United States. It was kind of funny because there was a white guy and some black people and they asked, ‘Where are you from?’ and I said, ‘I don’t know, I don’t know where I am. I was born in Mexico but I don’t even know what is my history from Mexico. I came in fourth grade over here.’ ‘Oh,’ they said, ‘You speak English very good.’ ‘Yeah, I was born in Mexico.’ And he said that is great and I said, ‘No, that is not great for me.’

Carlos, who immigrated to Victoria City while still in elementary school, did not share the experience of having a neighborhood group of Spanish speaking kids to play with. He spoke of being linguistically isolated from his peers and of watching hours of English television, which he was unable to understand. He did not find American society welcoming and cited two important cultural differences that he believed accounted for the lack of community he experienced. The first was the level of violence that existed in Victoria City and the response by law enforcement. When discussing American violence, he made reference to a city imposed curfew, rendering it partially responsible for keeping young people isolated from one another. Another cultural difference that he cited as having negatively impacted his acculturation process was the car culture, so prevalent in most of the urban and suburban communities within the United States.

**Downward Assimilation and Its Mediating Factors**

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argue that the consolidation of marginalized youth in poor urban areas will have a negative impact on their upward assimilation within American society. Far more likely, in this scenario, is that a concentrated population of socially and economically marginalized immigrant youth will experience downward assimilation whereby they learn new, distinctly American cultural patterns of
assimilation. In describing these cultural patterns, Portes and Rumbaut give an apt
description of student resistance:

A crucial consequence of social and economic marginalization is the
emergence of a measure of solidarity in opposition to external
discrimination, based on the central notion that the plight of the minority
is due to the hostility of mainstream institutions. Among the young, this
form of minority solidarity translates into a denigration of schools and
their staff as instruments of racial oppression and of education itself as
incapable of bettering their situation...In this case assimilation is not to
the middle class mainstream but downward to the attitudes and norms of
the inner city” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001,p.60 -61).

**Familismo: Reinforcing Parental Expectations**

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) contend that a strong deterrent to the downward
assimilation of immigrant youth is the reinforcement of parental expectations by others in
the community. The staff at El Puente worked hard to do just that. By constantly
emphasizing the importance of honoring one’s family and maintaining parental cultural
values they challenged the societal forces that would lead to a dissonant pattern of
acculturation. They consciously worked to foster an ethos of discipline and normalized
the notion that, as immigrants, the students of *Nuestra Voz* owed it to their families to
achieve academically. All the students that I worked with were proud of their academic
achievements and never displayed a belief that academic achievement was tantamount to
“acting white.” Interestingly, when the students of *Nuestra Voz* referred disparagingly to
“wannabes,” it was not “wannabe whites” but “wannabe gangsters”.

The majority of the half hour radio shows, at one point or another touched on the
importance of respecting one’s parents. Discussions ranging from the consequences of
not eating well, to making the most of one’s free time, all made reference to the
importance of obtaining the approval and permission of parents. One of the earlier shows,
broadcast in the summer of 2003, focused on ways to gain parents’ trust. The two female hosts repeatedly emphasized the benefits of introducing your friends to your parents, as well as always letting your parents know where and with whom you are with. They encouraged listeners to try to understand the viewpoint of immigrant parents who want only the best for their children. They repeatedly mentioned the various dangers that young people will confront in this society—drugs, teenage pregnancy, drinking and driving etc. Quoting an old Mexican saying, “if you don’t listen to advice, you’ll never make it to old age,” one of the hosts made the point that parents are like teachers, who provide their children with a vast resource of knowledge and experience. The perception of immigrant parents as being “out of it” or “having little to offer,” a common perspective among immigrant youth experiencing a dissonant pattern of acculturation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) or adopting an adversarial style of adaptation (Suárez-Orozco, 2000, 2004), was not at all present. Instead, the hosts advocated including parents into one’s social world in order to keep lines of communication open and foster trust between parents and children. In the following segment of this show entitled Como tener confianza con tus padres [How to gain your parents trust], Andrea, one of the show’s earlier hosts, discusses an experience in which she was able to honor her mother’s wishes and still enjoy her friends.

Andrea: Remember that the topic of today is what you can do so that your parents give you more freedom and remember that this is something that truly interests everyone because sometimes your parents don’t know who you are with or where you are. Imagine that in order for my mother to let me go to a party, I had to have a get together with my friends so that she could see who my friends were and what kind of attitudes they had and if they…Well, parents are always worried about whether their children’s friends are good or bad for them. Imagine, I was there talking with my mother and I said, ‘Mommy, you know what, they invited me to a
party and I want you to let me go.’ We had only been here for a little while and so my mother said, ‘If you want to go then you have to introduce me to your friends so that I can get to know them.’ But like you said, sometimes it is uncomfortable and you don’t want to go ‘Come to my house so that my mother can meet my friends,’ but it all worked out. They talked with my mother very respectfully. My mother got to know my friends. They told jokes with her and, well, they didn’t dance with her because she is a little old for dancing, but it was a great experience because it changed the way we were with each other from before. We entered a new stage in our lives. They see that you are growing up, because you know that parents always see you as children, but what is important is that your parents see that you are growing up and that you need freedom and to be able to go out with other people. I think if you want to do something and need your parents’ permission, what you need to do is introduce them to your friends. You could have a party. It is not expensive. What you do is ask your friends to bring some chips and drinks or something like that, and you will have a good time, and your parents will too.

Tatiana: I think that your experience was so positive and you and your mother both benefitted. And think about this, it is not just the young people, we have to consider the way the parents see things. They think that the friends we have can change us and to a certain extent they are right because a lot of things can influence our decisions, our way of thinking, our way of dressing and the things we wear. But also they should have a little faith in us and give us the opportunity to talk to them…and realize that we are their children. Like I am a daughter, but I also am eighteen years old, but age doesn’t matter because we are always going to be their children to them. And they want the best, but talking can help us come to an agreement and keep us from getting angry with our parents.

Maintaining strong intergenerational communication was emphasized throughout the program. The student hosts actively tried to chip away at the American perspective that parents are, at best, bothersome intruders in the life of a teenager. In lieu of mainstream American culture’s portrayal of the distant, apathetic teenager who views family obligations as tiresome, the students of Nuestra Voz gave an exalted rendering of family, particularly parents. They countered the common representation of the selfish
teenager by encouraging their listeners to place the needs of the family first. In a show entitled *Como aprovechar el tiempo libre* [What to do in your free time], a student host interviewed Ana, a 29-year-old staff member of El Puente. Throughout the interview Ana made references to the similarities between her childhood, which was spent in Chile, to those of the young Latinos/as living in Victoria City. Like Andrea, she too encouraged students to include their families in activities. She also talked about the importance of contributing to the family and respecting the needs of one’s parents. She espoused a strong sense of *familismo* through the endearing tone she used when discussing her younger siblings, and encouraged listeners to view family obligations as a joy, rather than a burden.

Ana: But of course, everyone has a responsibility to help out in the house. Many people have obligations to do the things that their mothers ask them to do. I also had things that I had to do. I had to take care of the younger ones and give them their lunch. I had to care for my sisters and brothers. So, you know I had three siblings and I was the oldest one, so I always had to be in charge of them. My siblings, do you want me to tell you their names? They are in Chile; my first sister is Lorena and then comes Constance and my brother, who is the youngest, who I imagine is taller than me but is 13, is called Fernando. I got along with them very well and during vacations I enjoyed getting to know them better and having time to share with my siblings.

**Achievement as Parental Payback**

In a show entitled *Los derechos de los jovenes* [The duties of young people] hosted by Ramon and Carlos in the spring of 2004, the discussion began with the importance of helping the community, particularly the young people in the community. However early in the show when Ramon expounded on the biggest responsibility of young people —doing well in school—the conversation shifted to a discussion about young people’s duty to their families, especially to their parents.
Ramon: We have the duty of going to school; this is one of our biggest duties because our parents are foreigners in this country. They struggled to get the money together to come here. We have a duty not to waste it. We have the responsibility to move forward for ourselves and for them, too, to move forward, to keep moving forward, with our head in front of us. Always in front of us.

The sentiment of paying parents back for their sacrifices through academic achievement was reiterated throughout the show. At one point Carlos went into great detail about how hard his mother had to work in order to support her four children, some of whom resided in Mexico and some whom she had brought to the United States. Ramon raised the issue of the immigration status of parents who are undocumented and how difficult such an existence can be, stating that young people must repay their parents for these endured hardships through diligence and respect. During the show a listener called in and asked Ramon and Carlos whether they would do what their parents asked of them even if they were very rebellious teenagers. In answering, Ramon adopted the perspective of a parent. By the end of his response to the caller it was difficult to decipher whether he was speaking for the caller’s parents or as a parent himself.

Ramon: Let me say this, I am not very rebellious but if I were, I would do it. I would obey because we are the only ones that they help. They brought us into this world and have given us life. They give you love, so much love. They support you, they listen to you, and they advise you. They tell you what you ought to do, or at least give you ideas about how to look at what is good and what is bad, how to think about what is right, to choose well, what is your path, this is what happened to me but I want you to continue moving forward on the right path and I want you to continue on this path because it is your responsibility to help unburden your family, or move forward with your own family or your wife if you get married one day. This is your duty; this is a very big obligation.

Later in the show Ramon asked Carlos if he were made to choose, whether he would comply with the wishes of his family or go out with his friends. In answering Carlos
again highlighted the ways in which parents support and sacrifice for their children, while simultaneously making the point that friends may try to involve you in highly detrimental activities like drug use.

Ramon: If your best friend came and asked you to come out and play and at the same time your mother or father or older brother called you to clean your room which was a disaster, who would you listen to?

Carlos: Well Ramon, the first thing is, I don’t know how to answer the first part of the question because my mother or older brother would never tell me to clean my room. She doesn’t get involved with these things. I am going to give another example, a very simple example. If I were the kind of person that you are talking about and my mother told me to clean my room, I would do it because I believe that this friend or my best friend does not give me the food that my mother gives me. I believe that. ...or doesn’t give me the advice that parents always give on how to protect yourself, don’t take drugs. Maybe your best friend might try to get me to use drugs.

Ramon: Or he might be a drug addict and you don’t even know. He might be doing things behind your back that you don’t know about.

Peer Culture: Friends vs. Family

The amount of attention given to the topic of friendship was minimal when we consider that Nuestra Voz was a radio show created by and for Latino/a adolescents.

When the topic of friendship was taken up, it was often accompanied with warnings on how not to let friends have a negative influence on you. In a show about teenage rebellion, friends were repeatedly rendered as a prime culprit in leading good students astray.

Ramon: Well, I will continue with my philosophy. It also depends on the friends that you have. This can make a young person rebellious, their influence on you. If your friends go out at 12 at night and your parents say ‘no,’ and you say, ‘How is it that they can go out and I am the same age as they are?’ And you insist that they let you go out until finally they give you permission. This, in a way, is bad because you know what these guys do and that your friends are a bad influence. And you follow them out till two
o’clock in the night? This kind of rebellion is dangerous because it could lead you to drugs, although you might not believe it now.

In the one show dedicated solely to the topic of friendship, the students focused much of the conversation on discussing the qualities that differentiate an acquaintance from a true friend, with one of the female hosts emphatically making the point that often it is very difficult for teenagers, who are so caught up with being popular, to know the difference. None of the students mentioned the importance of having common interests or enjoying the company of the friend in question. Instead, it was unanimous that a good friend was someone who was willing not only to support you in difficult times, but also to give you helpful advice and even intervene if you were making bad choices.

Predictably, after much discussion on the importance of honesty and trust in a friendship, the students proposed that in many ways parents are the best friends a young person can have.

Carlos: Another thing about friendship are the parents, you know what I mean?

Ramon: Yes, parents are not only our parents but they are our friends because they listen to us and also they value us. They come to us like our friends.

Zelda: They can look past the bad and they are always there for us and it doesn’t matter how we act towards them. They are always there for us. They are our true friends and our soul mates. They have known us since we were little and so they know everything about us. If you want, they can be your best friends. It depends on the individual.

When the students returned to the topic of friendship, the remaining conversation was on how to know whether to trust a friend. Again, parents were seen as a vital resource in helping young people decide whether an acquaintance should be allowed to
become a trusted friend. In the students’ final summation of what entailed a real friendship, *familismo* was once again evoked.

Carlos: A good friend doesn’t do bad things, they don’t give up, rob, drink…

Zelda: Drop out of school.

Carlos: They don’t drop out of school

Zelda: They support you.

Carlos: A friend that says continue studying like you say to me, you might not have papers but keep studying…it is encouragement. It is encouragement that you have and share with others. It is like us, we are friends. There are five of us right now in *Nuestra Voz*. We are united and we give more support to other people.

Ramon: Like a family.

**The Challenges**

Despite the frequent assertion that children should always obey and confide in their parents, there was some recognition on both the part of the staff of El Puente and the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz* that cultural clashes between children and parents were inevitable. As one of the students poetically observed when discussing the difficulties associated with honest communication with parents who have grown up in another country, “there is a lot of distance in those years.” In a show done on depression, Zelda talked about her parents as a primary source of the pressure that could lead an adolescent to become depressed. She repeatedly made the point that girls encountered more conflicts with their parents because of how protective parents were around their daughters and the issue of dating. In dealing with the parents of both the female students who were involved with *Nuestra Voz* at the time of this study, it was my personal
observation that they were awarded little freedom by their parents and often were unfairly assumed to have lied or been dishonest in some way.

Un Choque: A Clash of Cultures

In recognition of the difficulties that parents and children may encounter with one another, Nuestra Voz invited members of a local, community organization called Straight Talk, as guests to be interviewed in one of their later shows broadcast in the spring of 2006. The purpose of Straight Talk is to foster better communication between Latin American-born parents and their children, many of whom have come of age in the United States, in an attempt to prevent the rise of teenage pregnancy and STDs in Victoria City’s Latino community. The coordinator, who was Mexican and had worked with adolescents and their parents while in Mexico, underscored the severity of the communication disconnect between parents and children by stating that within Victoria City, there has been a sharp rise in teenage pregnancy and that, although not very often, she has seen girls as young as ten-years-old become pregnant. The coordinator tacitly alluded to the increase in STDs in Victoria City’s Latino community as symptomatic of Latinos’ downward assimilation by making the discouraging comparison between the prevalence of STDs in the Latino community to that in the African American community.

Coordinator: The statistics on the number of STDs in Victoria City have shown an incredible increase. I can’t give you specific numbers for each STD at this time, but what I can say is that they are at very high levels. We are competing with the levels found in the African American population. We are practically head-to-head with them in terms of syphilis and HIV.
Elena, who interviewed the coordinator from Straight Talk, brought up the clash of cultures that many young Latinos/as experience. Elena was reluctant to blame parents for the cultural clash; in her rendering of the situation, it had more to do with the conservativeness of one culture and the liberalism of another. The coordinator of Straight Talk, while validating Elena’s feelings, placed a lot of the responsibility on the parents for not trying to educate themselves and understand the culture of their children.

Elena: We were talking a little while ago at El Puente that there is a clash between our culture, the culture that we brought from our countries, between here and the US, because here the young people are…I don’t know…more liberal…I don’t know how to say it, but our parents think differently so there is a clash. We as young people know that if we follow the culture here or that of our parents, because in the school they tell us one thing and at home they tell us another, so these cultures clash. I think that the parents .

Coordinator: Well one of our goals is precisely to be able to communicate with the parents to have a more open mind in order to be able to understand our children. They are living a life that is not ours and they have a right to live their own life. We have to give them the opportunity to make their own decisions but we have to orient them. We have to educate them, we have to understand them…and understand that they are not going to live the same way that we have because we, in our countries, the culture is different, the beliefs are different, the taboos are different. We came here and brought our children and they didn’t say that they wanted to come. They came because we brought them. We came and they were faced with a different language, a different culture, different beliefs, other behavior, other ways of being. So in the house we teach them one thing and they go out the doors of the house and there exists another life. So they are growing up between two different cultures, and so that’s where I always talk about the third culture, which is where we, the Hispanic adults, don’t understand this culture. We don’t fit into this culture, so this is where the conflict is between the parents and the young people because they say, “Well my friend did this and their mother and father didn’t say anything, so why are you saying something to me? What’s the problem?” We, as parents have to learn the culture of this country.
It is not only the homework of our children but ours too to learn the language the best we can, culture and to live here, the way to live here. It is good to be proud of our countries but we also need to learn about our new environment and the culture of where we are living.

**Gender and the Challenge of Cultural Preservation**

As a researcher, I became fairly close to all the participants of *Nuestra Voz*, but particularly the girls. I was well aware of the conflicts that they had with their families and how, despite their good grades, extracurricular activities and regular church attendance, everything they did outside the house was viewed with suspicion. At one point in my research when I was pulled into a particularly bitter argument between Zelda and her father, I watched as all communication broke down and in its place painful accusations were hurled from daughter to father, and back again. I turned off the tape recorder, abandoned the role of researcher, and tried my best to mediate a nearly calcified mistrust that was so clearly fueled by cultural misunderstanding. When tempers cooled, I was asked by the father to come back and speak with his wife; he seemed to think I could be of some help with this ongoing family crisis. I was not, and his daughter ended up moving out of her parents’ home to live with her boyfriend. At the time she had just turned 16 and her boyfriend was in his 20s.

In one of my last conversations with Zelda, I asked how she made sense of all the things she had said on the show, about the importance of honoring ones’ parents and maintaining a relationship built on trust. She replied that the relationship she had talked about on the show was the relationship she would have liked to have, but unfortunately not the one she had. Her response signifies her recognition that she was more a messenger than an example to the youth of Victoria City. Given the particulars of both of
the female participants’ families, it is understandable that there exists a disconnect between what they said, and how they conducted their personal lives. What is noteworthy is that despite their fathers’ authoritarian parenting styles, the female participants still deemed it necessary to advocate that girls always be truthful and confide in their parents.

I asked my three male collaborators if they believed that boys were awarded more freedoms than their female counterparts and they unanimously said yes. Although they didn’t necessarily deem it as equitable or even warranted, they did believe that it was “the Hispanic way” to limit the actions of girls and that it had its roots in their native country, Mexico, where parents, especially fathers, watched over their daughters closely for fear they may run off with a boyfriend. Carlos, who was particularly unabashed in claiming that girls needed to be watched closely in order to prevent a possible pregnancy, never acknowledged the role he played in impregnating his 16-year-old girlfriend when he was in his early 20s. He justified his actions by saying that she was an example of why girls cannot be trusted, claiming that she had lied to him about her age for the last four years and suggested that had he known her true age, he would have acted differently.

Ramon who had an excellent relationship with his mother, also acknowledged that he would not be afforded the same freedoms if he were female. As the oldest boy in the family he was allowed to come and go as he pleased. His mother only asked that he let her know if he were coming home to sleep so that she would know whether to lock both locks. He was also free to bring friends home with him, but again the expectation was that he would communicate his plans with his mother. Ambivalent as to whether it was fair to treat girls differently, he did nevertheless believe that it was necessary.

Ramon: As a man I have more freedom than women. I don’t know if that is correct but women have more to lose than men. A man can do
his thing and then he is able to leave. He doesn’t have to stick around. But a woman, if she has a relationship and then is unfortunate enough to end up pregnant and has a child, she has a huge responsibility. She has to leave school and get a job and take care of the child. It is a huge responsibility. With a woman you have to be more careful. I don’t know, like I said, you have to have the same level of trust and keep lines of communication open. You can’t let there be secrets because when you start hiding things that is when problems start.

None of my collaborators exhibited insight into what it would be like to be female and forbidden to have a boyfriend. Nor were they willing to examine whether the expectations of female chastity were realistic given the mores of the host culture. Yet, they all agreed that the consequences that girls would experience if they were to become pregnant would be severe and therefore justified the authoritarian approach often exhibited by Mexican fathers. Interestingly, the male collaborators did not make any reference to the importance of a girl maintaining her virginity, or following the dictates of the Catholic Church, suggesting that the “Hispanic way” may have as much to do with perceived dangers in the host culture as cultural or religious beliefs rooted in Mexico.

González-López (2004) in her work on Fathering Latina Sexualities argues that the portrayal of Mexican fathers as rigid, authoritative macho men who reign over their families is both overly simplistic and inaccurate. González-López’s study highlights the way in which Mexican fathers, who immigrate to the United States, enter with very different gendered ideologies in regard to women, sexuality and virginity. However, despite the differences in the regional ideologies that they come with, once here, fear is the central emotion involved in the social construction of a father’s view of his daughter’s sexuality. She states:

The United States—what once was a promised land for these men—becomes a sexual threat as they reflect on the sex education of their
daughters. A culture of sexual fear permeates the everyday lives of immigrants who settle in inner-city and marginalized barrios and begins to shape their views of a daughter’s virginity and premarital sex. Virginity becomes secondary for these working-class men, who instead promote and ethic of protection and care that may safeguard a daughter from pregnancy out of wedlock, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual violence, casual sex and promiscuity, and sexual dangers associated with drugs, alcohol use, and gang violence, among other risks (Gonzáles-López, 2004, p. 1127).

In a show entitled *la abscia previene consecuencia* [abstinence prevents consequences] the students, both of whom were female, tried to instill in their listeners a sense of what the economic and educational repercussions of getting pregnant would be on their lives. They asked listeners to consider the impact that having a baby would have on their chances of finishing school, attending college, and/or finding a lucrative career. There was no mention of religion or the value of virginity, but either was any reference made to contraception. They did, however, make it clear that abortion should never be considered as a viable option saying, “As for the issue of abortion, we don’t want you to consider it for even a moment because; it is a life that you are ending.” In keeping with their anti-abortion agenda, the hosts provided listeners with the number to the local March of Dimes chapter, but not to Planned Parenthood.

The parental constraints placed on the female members of *Nuestra Voz* are in part a result of parents’ fears of pregnancy and the reluctance, by both schools and families, to disseminate information about, and grant access to contraception. Within the walls of El Puente, students can obtain information about their reproductive rights, as well as grab a handful of condoms that are there for the taking, but in the three years that *Nuestra Voz* was on the air, there was not one show done on the importance of contraception as it related to teen pregnancy. Because the fear of pregnancy is conflated with parental
authoritarianism, it is impossible to isolate the root of the conflict that existed for the girls and their parents. Unfortunately, both the girls who were in Nuestra Voz during this study abruptly left their homes as a result of having romantic relations with a member of the opposite sex. Zelda moved in with her boyfriend, after deciding that she could no longer endure her father’s rules. The other was sent back to Mexico immediately following her family’s realization that she had a boyfriend, leaving behind an eighty-thousand dollar scholarship to a small liberal arts college from a private donor unconcerned with her residential status.

**Conclusion**

The students in Nuestra Voz worked to ensure a pattern of acculturation that would slow down the assimilation process and prevent a pattern of dissonant acculturation from occurring. They advocated family loyalty and encouraged listeners to work hard, not just for themselves but as a way to pay parents back for their sacrifices. They challenged peer culture: repeatedly claiming that friends were important but family was essential. They asked their adolescent listeners not to assume the behaviors of their American peer and cautioned young people about the dangers of drugs, drinking, and tobacco. The students were reticent throughout the majority of the programs when it came to discussing parental conflict, and despite ongoing conflicts with family members, instead chose to advocate for treating parents with respect and obedience. It took the coordinator of the outside community organization Straight Talk to speak candidly about the difficulty faced by Latino/a adolescents who must balance the more conservative culture within their homes with the permissiveness of American society. The coordinator
was free to assign blame to Latino parents who did not try and adapt to the social mores of the host culture—an issue that the students of *Nuestra Voz* never raised.

Many scholars argue that accelerated assimilation into American society has negative ramifications on the educational performance of Latinos (Ainslie, 2002; Berry et al., 2006; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Trueba, 1998). While this may be true, Miranda, Estrada, and Firpo Jimenez (2008) found in their work on Latino families that low acculturation families have a high degree of rigidity and rely on a hierarchical power structure, and prescribed roles and rules established by the parents which results in lower levels of family adaptability. While this rigidity was far less problematic for the adolescent males who participated in *Nuestra Voz*, the females struggled to find a balance with the more liberal aspects of the host culture and the restrictive and rigid characteristics of their family life. Ironically, it could be argued that it was not the deleterious aspects of the host culture which compromised their academic life, but the restrictive realities of their home life.
CHAPTER FIVE: NUESTRA VOZ—A DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE

At my first meeting with Nuestra Voz, I quickly recognized a shared discourse among the students that emphasized perseverance and a desire to project the Latino community forward. The students’ speech was peppered with the phrase “para seguir adelante” [in order to move forward] and there was constant reference made to the importance of believing in oneself and helping the community. I was surprised by the level of political and social sophistication that these students possessed: They were well versed in the needed legislation that would allow undocumented immigrants to attend college and repeatedly talked about the necessity of getting an education if they were to avoid working in the chicken plants. This politicized discourse became all the more perceptible when a group of Latino youth from a nearby, more affluent city came to El Puente to talk to the students of Nuestra Voz about starting a local radio show of their own. These more assimilated youth appeared to be uncomfortable speaking Spanish and cast their eyes down when asked a direct question by an adult, mumbling nearly inaudible answers. The contrast between the students of Nuestra Voz who spoke eloquently about the importance of community activism to these seemingly disaffected youth was, to say the least, stark.

Fiske (1996) defines discourse as “a socially located way of making sense of an important area of social experience” (p. 128). The students of Nuestra Voz were well aware of the implications of their immigrant, often un-documented status. They were also aware that they were in the middle of a national debate about the place that immigrants, particularly brown immigrants, would hold in the American landscape. The creation of Nuestra Voz was a strategic act of resistance on the part of its founders, in which a
counter discourse was made available to the Latino youth of Victoria City. In this chapter I argue that the students of *Nuestra Voz* participated in many complimentary discourses—a discourse of transformation, a discourse of community ethos and a discourse of perseverance—which all fell within a larger discourse of resistance. The discourse of transformation, which was shaped by the students’ “immigrant optimism” (Suárez-Orozco, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) rendered the most formidable societal obstacles (e.g. racism) as surmountable. The promotion of a community ethos, a counter discourse to the dominant discourse around Latino immigrants, took up the negative perceptions held by the host society and countered them with a discourse that strongly promoted working collectively to move the Latino community forward. Finally, deeply embedded in their discourse of resistance was a running discourse of perseverance, whereby the advancement of the Latino community was held paramount to all individual struggles.

Strongly fixed in the discourse of *Nuestra Voz* is the belief that the Latino community must circumvent and overcome the many barriers and pitfalls that exist within American society. This discourse competes with the dominant discourse that the United States is a country where hard work, determination, and resiliency will get you far. The students of *Nuestra Voz*, like many immigrants, did adopt the dominant discourse and promote the optimistic belief that the United States is a land of unlimited opportunity where individuals are materially rewarded for their efforts. However, in place of the usual emphasis on individualism prevalent among middle-class Americans, the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz* were strong advocates of community involvement and activism, and repeatedly championed the belief that their individual advancement was inextricably tied to community advancement. Although vestiges of meritocracy were
present throughout the radio shows, they were significantly mediated by a stronger commitment to the Latino community. Figure 1 outlines the mediating factors, and the complimentary and competing discourses that contributed to *Nuestra Voz*’s discourse of resistance.

**Figure 1. Conceptual model of the discourse of *Nuestra Voz* and its mediating factors**

A Transformative Discourse
**Immigrant Optimism**

The frequent assertion by the students who produced *Nuestra Voz* that “there are many obstacles before us but they can be overcome” is a manifestation of their *immigrant optimism* (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco, 2000; Suárez-Orozco & Doucet 2004). This optimism helps to buffer first generation immigrants from detrimental aspects of the American society. It is more pronounced among immigrants whose families were drawn to the United States because of economic opportunity than those fleeing their native countries for political or religious reason (Suarez-Orozco, 2000). According to Portes and Rumbaut (2001), “Despite problems, setbacks, and much suffering, most immigrants view their American lives in a positive light, an outlook they can translate into high expectations and a sustained effort to achieve them…This optimism about fairness of opportunities and lack of serious social barriers extends to their appraisal of their immediate environment” (p.95). Like many immigrants in the early stages of acculturation, these students are willing to make grave sacrifices in exchange for the promise of social and economic advancement. They see themselves as part of a familial trajectory in which they are at the jumping off point toward upward social and economic mobility. Repeated references were made throughout the shows of having to go farther than their parents have in the United States as a means to honor their parents’ diligence and sacrifice.

**Race, Racism and Immigrant Optimism**
Olsen (1997) asserts that in the process of becoming American, immigrants of color “undergo a complex baptism of racialization into subordinated positions in the U.S. racial scheme” (p.39). The influx of Latinos into the rigid racial binary of the Southeast raises the question of just where Latinos will fit. Will second and third generation Latinos “become white” like earlier Italian and Irish immigrants who flooded the urban centers of the Northeast during the turn of the twentieth century, or will the phenotype of black simply be expanded to accommodate this newly arriving population? The students who participated in Nuestra Voz participated in a discourse that envisaged their destination point in the South’s racial hierarchy as contested territory.

The salience of race was addressed repeatedly with the student hosts trying to make sense of a form of discrimination that was relatively new to them. Although they were unabashed in pointing out the prevalence of race in American society, they did not indulge in counter forms of racism, accusing whites or blacks of possessing universal negative traits. To the contrary, rather than engage with the host society’s racial ideology, they espoused a pride in Latino culture and emphasized the importance of conducting oneself in an educated manner as a means to ameliorate the discrimination they experienced. The following is an excerpt from the first show broadcast in May of 2003 in which the two hosts outline the purpose and goals of Nuestra Voz.

We are a group of young dynamic people with a strong desire to help our community. After an offer by El Puente to make a radio program we decided to do it and this is the program. We began by having meetings and planning for the show. We have planned for many things like choosing to have a director in order to be better organized, to conduct a survey to know what the opinions are of the other young people in the community, and to tape our own format with music and commentary and lots and lots of fun. Everything we planned for was a lot more work than we had expected, but, well… the benefits are here. Something very important that
we did was to establish our objective and we arrived at the conclusion that the most important thing for us is that we help and inform our community, especially the young people. One of the most important steps was to choose a name for the program that identified each one of our objectives. And after expending a lot of brain power, we decided that *Nuestra Voz*\(^\text{17}\) was the best option. *Nuestra Voz* is a program that was created so that you would have the opportunity to express your ideas, problems, doubts, experiences and feelings. In addition to this, it is to provide information to all the young people about the *dangers* that we run into in this society.

When the study’s collaborators were asked what they thought the *dangers* were that these earlier radio hosts were referring to, with little hesitation they all replied “racism.” When asked to expound on this, their answers reflected a complicated understanding of the dynamics of race and how their racialization in America has affected their experience as immigrants. The following is a conversation with Gabriel and Carlos in which they expound on their answers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

\(^{17}\) In an effort to protect the confidentiality of the participants, all identifiers had to be changed. However much thought and consideration went into finding an appropriate pseudonym since the students meant to convey the goals of the radio show through its original name. Although *Nuestra Voz*/*Our voice* is a slightly more subdued version of the original name, I believe that it does convey the intended objective of the show.
Carlos: My experience was kind of weird. There were like only six or ten people who were Hispanic when I arrived and everyone else was white or African American. And my problem was we couldn’t speak English. There was one Hispanic teacher. It was kind of weird because we would be in a regular class, an art class, and then they separated us. We would always be in the library with the same teacher. I didn’t like it. Even though I didn’t understand English, I didn’t always want to be in just one class with one teacher and always in the library.

Eleanor: Was that the same for you, Gabriel?

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

Eleanor: Did the teachers try to include you?

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

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

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

In these three answers racism is stated as being the primary danger, but it is enmeshed in language differences, the rapid demographic shift, educational segregation, alienation, indifference, stereotypes of Latinos and a lack of access to resources. The students recognized that their “otherness” was the source of their difficulties. However, their responses—Ramon’s use of the past tense and Gabriel’s assertion that “everyone
has just stopped and gotten used to the idea of having Mexicans in this country”—implies a belief that as the host culture has adapted to their presence, their situation has changed.

Just four months after the airing of Nuestra Voz’s first program, the students took up the theme of racism head on. Throughout the conversation, the hosts repeatedly emphasized the importance of being respectful and answering racist remarks educadamente.\(^{18}\) The hosts exhibited an insightful understanding of the reasons behind the discrimination they were experiencing, yet maintained a healthy intolerance of these discriminatory practices. The students strongly advocated taking a proactive role in which they acted as ambassadors for their culture and language. Not only did they call upon their peers to respond to racial slurs respectfully, but they maintained that it was the obligation of bilingual Latinos to defend monolingual Spanish speakers against racial prejudice and abuse whenever possible.

Throughout the show the students conceptualize of racism as something not integral to an individual, but a product of a specific set of circumstance. They are not completely resigned to the idea that the discrimination they are subject to is a fixed and permanent reality for Latinos, and at times seem to even go as far as to suggest that through the positive actions of Latinos, American racism can be transcended. The following excerpt from the show demonstrates a clear acknowledgement of the racism directed towards the Latino community, but it also exemplifies the student’s belief that through the promotion of their culture and language, they can slowly chisel away at the discriminatory practices which afflict their community. The following is conversation between Gina and Yolanda, both Mexican origin students who were instrumental in

\(^{18}\) Educadamente which translates in English as educately, has a much broader meaning in Spanish, conveying both schooling and having been raised to respect one’s culture and family. (Valdés, 1996)
starting up *Nuestra Voz*. Gina came to Victoria City from California and Yolanda had emigrated directly from Mexico.

Gina: Do you believe that some people are racist?

Yolanda: Well I am not a racist because I get along with blacks, with the whites, but some people are racist because I was in the doctor’s office the other day and there was a black woman with her child and a Hispanic woman with her child and the black woman did not want her child to play with the Hispanic child.

Gina: How sad because they are children and they are already getting used to being that way at such a young age. I talk to everyone in school and what is beautiful is that the Americans who don’t know Spanish ask me to teach it to them…and it makes them happy to learn whatever little word that I teach them.

Yolanda: Yes, but there are also occasions when you feel ugly, when they start to insult you for speaking Spanish or for your culture. They start to criticize you because you are Hispanic. They insult you.

Gina: This feels really ugly and I believe that we as Hispanics, that we ought to teach them since we are educated and we know how to act in front of people. If someone starts to insult you or to say Mexican, Hispanic, or whatever, you can respond but, at the same time, you have to respect them.

Later in the show when asked what advice Gina would give to the Hispanic community in regards to racism, she again emphasized the importance of disproving stereotypes by addressing racism in an educated and respectful manner. Interestingly, she interrupts herself when discussing the responsibility of Latinos to present themselves as educated with a comment on the economic realities that brought Latinos to North Carolina. Her tone is incredulous when contemplating the assumption by non-Latinos that Latinos came for reasons other than economic survival.

Gina: Look if someone is racist to you, I know that you may feel bad because of the tone that they may use, but remember that you need to always remain calm and respect them and I know that
sometimes you might reach your limit and there you are, but remember that many people say that the Hispanics are badly educated or something like that, that they aren’t educated. In order for us to show them that we are educated, because who, who can begin to think that they would come here if they didn’t need to come here.

Yolanda: Well, I also think that Hispanics came here not because they wanted to be here, but rather to look for work, to take care of their families, to improve their lot in life.

Gina: Yes because, many people in Mexico are poor, not only in Mexico but in many other places.

Although the students of *Nuestra Voz* encouraged their peers to conduct themselves in a respectful manner when combating incidents of racism, they were not naïve in believing they could change discriminatory practices solely through good behavior. During the radio shows, listeners were invited to call in with questions. When a caller described a particular scenario, asking whether the radio hosts believed it was an example of discrimination, the students used it as an opportunity to promote taking legal action on behalf of the larger community.

Caller: You are stopped by the police, you were going the speed limit but the police officer says that you were going five miles more than the speed limit. I think this is discrimination because you weren’t doing what they said you were doing and maybe they did this because they see that you are Hispanic.

Yolanda: Yes, there are cases of this happening here in Victoria City. They see that you are Hispanic and they put ten more points on your license. Or, if for example, there is an accident between an American or black and a Hispanic, they blame the Hispanic. They say the Hispanic has no license and the Hispanic caused the accident.

Gina: What we have to say about this is that you have to go to court and get a lawyer because this is not right and if we let it happen it is
going to continue.

**Race as a Contested Terrain**

The students were able to place the racist attitudes of the Americans around them into a broader social context than what is experienced by the individual. They were aware that a major demographic shift had occurred in their community and they recognized that acculturation placed grave demands on non-Latino Americans, as well as the newly arriving Latinos. However, their understanding was accompanied by a palpable sense of indignation concerning the xenophobic attitudes so prevalent in their new community.

The following excerpt from the show demonstrates the balancing act the students performed when trying to understand the host society’s perspective while maintaining their commitment to social justice.

Yolanda: What do you think the reasons are why someone is racist?

Gina: Well think about it. It could be that here they are not used to other cultures. Well, let’s take Victoria City for example. Eight years ago there were not a lot of Hispanics here and all of a sudden a lot of Hispanics started coming. I believe it was difficult for the people living here to adapt to the culture, the language, when they weren’t very well informed. They didn’t know a lot about us. It is something that they had to adapt to and they don’t like it.

Yolanda: Yes, but just because someone has come from Mexico or other countries to the United States doesn’t mean that Americans, or the blacks or the whites, who aren’t accustomed to seeing Hispanics, it shouldn’t mean that they call us Mexican, that they can insult us and call us things that we aren’t. Everybody has different cultures, different languages, and a different color, different traditions but on the inside we are all the same, we are all humans.

The three collaborators for this study were played the above excerpt and asked to comment on it. Through their responses, it becomes clear that the passage of time has had
a huge impact on how Latinos are received in Victoria City. Carlos, who came to Victoria City when he was in the fourth grade in the late 1990s, had a very different experience than Gabriel who came in 2002 at the age of fourteen. Comparing their two responses brings validity to the student’s perception that the racialization of Latinos has been contested territory.

Eleanor: What do you think of what they are saying?

Carlos: I think she wanted to say, eight years ago, I think when she came, it was the time I came. It was like she said; there were not a lot of Hispanics. It was in 2000 or whenever, there was a conflict in Victoria City. The clan, the KKK, because the KKK came and said we want to take all the Hispanics. So at that time there were no Hispanics, no Hispanics crossed the street because they said that they would kill them if they saw one. So the whole street, you know where there is the city hall, they blocked all the street, there was just white people around. I think it was the first time I saw race over here in this country towards the Hispanics and the people they started to leave. White people moved out of Victoria City, you couldn’t tell after that. One week later there were less white people over here because they left Victoria City because they didn’t want to live with Hispanics at all because they said Hispanics, we came over here to take their jobs and to control their culture, change their culture. Then, like I was saying to my friend at that time, I still remember, we didn’t come for that. We came to work, Mexico, Honduras, different countries, we came because we didn’t have the opportunities that the United States has given to us, better school, better education, better work, better life and a better condition to live and that was the first time I see race in Victoria City. And the second time was in the school, you know people call you wetback, or white people call nigger to black people.

Eleanor: What about you Gabriel, because you came a bit later?

Gabriel: I came later so I didn’t get to see all that, all those things that happened. I was like, I joined the community in different times. They were getting used to the Hispanics. There was not that much tension between the races.

Eleanor: How does it feel now?
Gabriel: Well right now it is different because you talk to almost everybody. They don’t care if you are Mexican, black, or white. They talk to you. It’s different.

Eleanor: So it took time?

Gabriel: Yeah, there had to be some time for them to get used to us.

As a native to this country, I was struck by the continual tolerance that the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz* exhibited in regards to this country’s racial hierarchy. Absent from the conversation surrounding race was a cynicism about the ability of people and communities to change. Also absent was the tendency to see racial groups in absolutes. Although at times observations were made about important cultural differences between Latinos and Americans, the students were not likely to attribute negative characteristics to a particular racial group, despite the fact that this is what they themselves have frequently experienced. The call to retaliate against acts of racism in an educated manner and not perpetuate the stereotypes bestowed upon them, demonstrates their belief that through hard work, education, and decency, Latinos may just make their way up the racial and socioeconomic hierarchy. Nowhere was this more clearly articulated than when in response to a story about racial slurs, Gina, one of the radio hosts, made the following statement: “But you agree that we can reclaim all of this through education and respect, so that they can see that Hispanics are good.” And then she cut to a song.

**Community Ethos: A Counter Discourse**

The young people who spearheaded *Nuestra Voz* used the forum of a student directed Spanish local radio show as an effective vehicle to explicitly address the social
issues that concern their community, particularly the youth in their community. They participated in a discourse which revered community participation and placed a high value on the betterment of the Latino community. Nevertheless, the frequency of shows entitled “gangs,” “marihuana,” “drugs in general,” and “alcohol abuse” suggest their recognition of the dominant society’s negative perceptions and beliefs about Latino youth. The students possess what W. E. B. Du Bois (1986) termed a “double consciousness”—“a sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others” (pp. 364-365). However, before they measured their “soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (pp.364-365), they used the radio show as a forum to present a counter discourse by which to disassemble the accusations and presumptions directed towards them by the host culture.

**Transnational Strategies**

Despite the sense of hope and possibility that they see existing within their new environment, the students from *Nuestra Voz* were nevertheless cognizant of the obstacles that lay before them. The stereotypes and negative perceptions of the Latino community in the larger American society is a formidable obstacle that these young people must surmount. The students’ attempt to dismantle these stereotypes by repeatedly broadcasting shows on gangs, drugs, and juvenile violence, suggests both their recognition of how they are being viewed by the host culture, as well as their determination to throw their voices into the larger discourse.

Suárez-Orozco (2000) proposes that immigrant youth of color, often painfully aware that they are not wanted or welcomed by the host culture, tend to gravitate towards
three very different styles of adaption: ethnic flight, adversarial, and transnational. Ethnic flight is described as the process by which youth deny both their ethnic identity and the negative reception they experience from the host culture in an attempt to gain acceptance from the dominant group. These young people are often labeled as ‘sell outs’ or ‘wannabes’ by their immigrant peers. Youth who adopt an ‘adversarial style’ are likely to reject the major institutions of the dominant society (i.e. schools). These youth tend to develop an oppositional stance and will at times, through deviant behaviors, mirror back to the host society the negative perceptions bestowed upon them. Youth who employ what Suárez-Orozco term a ‘transnational style’ will “respond to negative social mirroring by identifying it, naming it, and resisting it. These are youth for which the culturally constructed social strictures and patterns of social control of immigrant parents and elders maintain a degree of legitimacy” (p.220). Related to Suárez-Orozco’s transnational style is Portes and Rumbaut’s theory of selective acculturation (2001) in which immigrant youth are firmly embedded in a strong co-ethnic community, where bilingualism is highly valued and the home culture is maintained.

The students of Nuestra Voz, who are highly aware of the negative stereotypes that accompany their Latino identity, strongly advocated a ‘transnational style.’ In all of the radio shows reviewed, pride and ownership were given to the Spanish language and Mexican traditions, so much so that when students would slip into Spanglish or use an American colloquialism, the other hosts would admonish them. In keeping with Suárez-Orozco’s transnational style, the students condemned adversarial behaviors such as drug use, school truancy, and gang participation, so commonly attributed to immigrant youth of color. By addressing acts of defiance head on, they armed their peers with the
information necessary to combat the pervasiveness of such societal ills in their community.

Gangs, drug use, and other social problems, when discussed were not viewed as an exclusively Latino problem, but rather placed in the context of the larger American society. The students acknowledged the existence of these social issues in their community, and saw their prevalence as detrimental not only to the individual participant, but more importantly to the Latino community as a whole. The following show on Pandillas [Gangs] broadcast in May of 2004, demonstrates the community ethos promoted by the students.

Gina: Why do young people join gangs?

Ramon: There are lots of reasons. One of the things that I believe the most important is that they don’t feel that their parents care about them. They don’t trust their own parents and so they meet with their friends and make their gangs and they assume that this is their family, my real family, or also, in order to keep stealing and to feel secure.

Gina: But what about the person that has everything but still joins a gang?

Ramon: Well, it’s mainly for the power, like you say in big cities, like in California, there are…I imagine that there are different types of gangs that have control over a territory and the same here or in other places.

Carlos: Like you could have a gang, like here in Country Living.

Gina: The barrio of Country Living (laughs).

Ramon: But it is a great example …for the power of a neighborhood, a little piece of ground.

Gina: But because of this… I have to tell you that it makes me laugh to see those kids…well not kids, but 14–year-olds trying to be Cholos.¹⁹

¹⁹ Cholos refers to young Latinos who are gang identified through appearance, behavior, or actual gang affiliation.
Ramon: Cholos, I don’t even think they know the word Cholos. Another thing, according to them, it is about being famous… to feel important.

Gina: But in order to be someone important…in order to be someone, you need to study and that is why you have to put a lot of effort into school, instead of thinking about other things because schools are going to help you and if you are going to be…. if you are going to help the community change…

Ramon: Yes, then you are someone important because if you help the community then you are someone important because not only have you helped yourself, but you have helped a lot of people, not just one or two, but lots.

**Sigue Adelante: A Discourse of Perseverance**

Throughout the radio programs reviewed, constant emphasis was placed on the importance of getting an education, not only as a means toward individual improvement but as a way for the Latino community to keep moving forward. Nevertheless, the students were well aware the schools they attended were not equitable in terms of the resources they provided to the Latino students: The lack of interpreters and bilingual teachers was seen as a major problem. The difficulty of navigating North Carolina’s graduation requirements for students who have little or no guidance from counselors, teachers, or family members was also a serious concern of theirs. However, each assertion of how the Latino population was being shortchanged in North Carolina’s public schools was accompanied by a clear message on the importance of pushing through obstacles and moving forward. Even the looming reality that higher education was not an option for those of undocumented residential status did not deter the students from advocating a proactive approach to education, in which the support and involvement of their families were seen as essential.
The Barrier of English

In a show entitled *Los Jovens en las Escuelas de Norte Carolina* [Young people in North Carolina’s schools] the students discuss at length the implications the language barrier has on student performance. They cite both the lack of Spanish-speaking counselors available to help students choose the necessary classes for graduation, and the paucity of Spanish interpreters to help bridge the communication divide that exists between the home community and the school community as highly detrimental to student performance. Despite the perceived lack of responsiveness on the part of the schools to better serve their Spanish speaking population, the students do not use this issue in a bashing session, but rather espouse a move-forward ideology in which individuals are encouraged to extend effort in overcoming the language barrier for the advancement of the Latino community. In the following discussion between Zelda and Ramon, learning English as a necessary means to moving ahead is strongly advocated. Zelda who was involved with *Nuestra Voz* throughout the majority of my research, had come to Victoria City from Mexico as a young child and was fluent in both English and Spanish.

Zelda: Like we were saying before, the language, the language has to have a lot of influence on this, no? But it ends the communication between the school and the students and more than anything their families, no? The lack of Spanish knowledge among the teachers and counselors no…no because the counselors only know English and how are they going to try and help a student if they didn’t know what he said because they don’t know Spanish.

Ramon: The language is a very big barrier that we face when coming to this country, but make the effort, work very hard, and we can move forward and as you say, the counselors, the majority of the counselors, speak only English and in order to take our classes, we
need to know English in order to be able to talk to them. So the counselors give us at least minimal help in choosing our classes.

Zelda: Exactly, because a student who doesn’t understand English will have a hard time doing well in classes and sometimes, the teachers think that the students know everything and sometimes people don’t want to speak because they are embarrassed more than anything. So I am saying to the Spanish speaking students if you are having difficulty, take the courses so that you can move forward and overcome these problems.

The students understand that language is at the center of their ability to access the American educational system. They also understand that English acquisition is necessary if they are to access the dominant power structure. Although, they recognize that the lack of bilingual teachers and counselors has a negative impact on the academic engagement of Latino youth, they take a very pragmatic approach and urge students to learn English. At one point in the show, one of the hosts points out how instrumental counselors are in deciding the academic track that a student will be placed in, inadvertently raising the question of what track students are placed on when they don’t speak the same language as their counselor.

Ramon: Talking about the counselors, do you think that the counselors have a big influence on you in terms of what classes you choose to take?

Zelda: Yes, as I mentioned a little while ago, they have a lot to do with it. Why? Because we believe that they are getting paid for this job…it is a job so in school. There is only one, one or two it seems. One or two for how many students in Victoria High, the majority of who are Hispanic, no? So you believe that they have time to sit with you and recommend the classes you should take? No, but they have this job because they know what classes you should take.

Zelda suggests that by not hiring more bilingual counselors, the schools have been unresponsive in addressing the needs of their bilingual population. She
acknowledges the essential role that counselors play in ensuring that students take the right classes, and advises listeners on the importance of learning English if they want access to course requirements. Despite her recognition of the ways in which limited English proficient students are being short changed, she does not harbor on the inequity of the situation but instead encourages students to make the effort and learn English.

**Bilingual Teachers and Transformative Pedagogy**

Although the program *Los Jovens en las Escuelas de Norte Carolina* [Young people in North Carolina’s schools] began with the students’ discussion of the importance of surmounting the language barrier, a significant portion of the show was dedicated to the positive impact that bilingual teachers could have on their education. Not only were bilingual teachers seen as an effective way to help with the linguistic challenges faced by the Spanish speaking students, but the students believed bilingual teachers would inspire the Hispanic students to continue their studies and create a more inclusive environment within the broader school community.

Ramon: Also, I was just thinking about something that has happened. Do you think that if we had more bilingual teachers they would help to inspire more confidence in the Hispanic students? Do you think that bilingual teachers would be a big help for the Hispanic students in the schools?

Zelda: Umm yes…I… definitely… yes…because we are bilingual and therefore we wouldn’t necessarily need to look for interpreters in the school because the interpreters were busy with other people. Therefore some content teachers could explain the questions that the students had; you could more or less get the idea. You wouldn’t need to do this or to look in that page. This would be a big help and it is what we are asking for….we as students want teachers that are like us….that desire that we graduate because we
need more bilinguals. This is something that I say wow….a lot of students would be very thankful for more bilingual teachers.

Ramon: Like you say, it is very important that we have more bilingual teachers, because as we said a few moments ago at the beginning of the program, the students that just got here suffer a little more than those who are already here because they need help with interpretation and sometimes out of embarrassment or because we don’t know them, we do not offer a hand.

Zelda: Exactly, also these teachers, I am talking about the majority of the teachers who are here are Americans so they make their own clubs. Make clubs for the deck or something like that and they are Americans, so I am saying a bilingual teacher could offer more to the Hispanics… So I am saying that having more bilingual teachers wouldn’t just help the school, but all of the school. It would help the Hispanic culture, the students, the immigrants.

Ramon: Of course the students would have more confidence in themselves and they would be able to move forward. To move forward without any problems.

Zelda: To achieve their goals.

Ramon: Yes, that is it. To achieve their goals and you know chicos, you need to move forward, you can’t stay behind.

In his description of transformative pedagogy, Cummins (2000) argues:

when educators encourage culturally diverse students to develop the language and culture they bring from home and build on their prior experiences, they, together with their students, challenge the perception in the broader society that these attributes are inferior or worthless (p.246).

Although, the students did not express sentiments that would suggest they have internalized feelings of decreased self worth, they do convey a sense of having been marginalized in the schools because of their language and culture. Bilingual teachers, they argue, would serve as brokers rather than gatekeepers, and would help to legitimize the cultures and language of the Latino students.
Parental Involvement

In keeping with an ideology that places high import on family relations, the students viewed parental involvement as crucial to a student’s academic success. Recognizing the importance of parental involvement, they encouraged bilingual students to act as the linguistic and cultural liaison between the schools and the families. In discussing the difficulty that Spanish speaking parents have in being involved in their children’s education, the students again advocated that individual students do whatever was in their power to help bridge the language and cultural divide so prevalent in Victoria City’s public high school.

Ramon: Another thing guys, is try to bring your parents to all the conferences that they have in the schools. Go, make the time because it is very important that they know everything that happens in the school, everything that comes in and everything that goes out, what is good and what you are learning. Each day that you get a report card bring it to them and talk to your teachers and if they don’t know English and you speak English, well try and interpret for them without lying. Don’t lie, you are your own interpreters for your parents. And if not, there are interpreters in the school that can help you. But involve your parents in your studies. Whatever meeting you have try to bring them, because I understand that many parents work in the afternoon and usually the school conferences are in the afternoons and they don’t have time. But try at least to bring them to one conference to see all the mistakes that you have made in school, what you have learned, and the all the grades that you are getting.

Zelda: Like you said Ramon, even though your parents may not understand about the school like you said, bring them to the conferences that they have which happen each month for the Hispanic parents…so that they can learn more about the school, about how the classes run this and that. They will get more experience with the schools and start to understand you, us better….so this is something good because they will learn more

---

20 There is only one Spanish speaking interpreter for the whole school in which a little over a third of the students live in Spanish speaking homes.
and we will also learn new things…so these meetings, these conferences that the teachers have. There is an interpreter named Vicki who is really good. So it is something good for them and it is something that is worth the effort and also the teachers are there for this…so I also should bring my father next year…. laughs

Ramon: Aye aye. No it is like we are saying, involve your parents in these meetings and your studies and if you have some problem with your studies, ask them first if they can help so that they can see how difficult or unclear the homework sometimes is that the teachers give us. So that they can see how hard you study, all that you are learning and how you are developing but with our parents together in order to be a family.

In considering the low academic engagement of Latino students, practitioners, policymakers, and scholars have all used the lack of parental involvement as a convenient scapegoat (Valencia & Black, 2002). The first Hispanic secretary of education, Lauro Cavazos under George H. W. Bush, went as far as to say that Hispanic parents, because of the lack of value they place on educational attainment, bear much of the blame for the high dropout rate of Latino Students. In response to accusations like those of Cavazos’, some scholars have argued that the unwillingness on the part of American schools to meet the diverse needs of Latino children has discouraged parental involvement (Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Wortham, Murrillo & Hamann, 2002). Deeply entangled in the matrix of Latino parental involvement is the language and cultural disconnect which exists between schools like Victoria City High and Latino households.

The students of Nuestra Voz, recognized the importance of parental involvement, as well as the importance of bridging the language and cultural differences. Not only did they advocate bringing parents to the schools so that they could play a more active part in their child’s education, but they also saw it as a way of uniting their families and facilitating greater intergenerational understanding. Much has been written about the
school/home connection, but the students raised an important and often neglected point: relations between students and parents can only be enhanced if parents have a greater understanding of the academic pressures placed on their children.

In keeping with the move-forward discourse of the radio show, the students did not bemoan the lack of interpreters, but instead advocated that students themselves serve as interpreters for their families. They recognized that if the school/home connection was going to be made, they themselves would have to act as the primary liaison. This is a tall order to ask of students who themselves struggle to navigate a bilingual/bicultural world, but one that they saw as necessary in order to ensure the success of their peers.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate the ways in which the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz* articulated “bicultural strategy for cultural adaption” addressed by Suárez-Orozco (2000) and Suárez-Orozco and Doucet (2004) and created a counter discourse that encompassed a community-focused, action-oriented Latino identity. In almost all of the shows reviewed, the phrase *sigue adelante* [move forward] was said at least once. The economic, academic and societal barriers that were addressed throughout the shows were placed into the larger context of moving the Latino community forward. The students strongly advocated a pro-active stance, encouraging their peers to do whatever necessary to better access the opportunities they believed American society promised.

The show promoted a strong community ethos in which youth were encouraged to subscribe to the values of their home culture. In place of the emphasis on individual
achievement so prevalent in middle-class American communities, the students saw their individual success as tightly linked to the advancement of the Latino community. In lieu of validating street culture, they called on their peers to respect their families, involve their parents in their education, and give back to their community. They employed a high level of optimism and believed the dominant society’s negative perceptions of Latinos could be mediated. They articulated a belief in their ability to transform the negative stereotypes directed toward their community by conducting themselves in an educated manner. They recognized how their language and culture had become racialized, but expressed a belief that this too could be overcome. The counter hegemonic discourse of *Nuestra Voz* was strongly rooted in the home values and lived experiences of the students who produced it.
CHAPTER VI: TRANSFORMATIVE EVENTS

Introduction

Throughout my interactions with the students of *Nuestra Voz*, I was impressed by the students’ level of political sophistication. In critiques about their school’s teaching of U.S. history to discussions about important state legislation, it was clear that these students had been privy to instruction in which power and its maintenance was the central topic. *El Puente* provided that instruction and was a critical site of learning for the students whom it served. Through their participation with *Nuestra Voz*, the students had access to bicultural mentors who demanded the best of and for them. In working with the community activist of *El Puente*, the students gained an understanding of the historic and cultural specificity of their experiences. The students recognized that Victoria High School was not a neutral setting for Latino/a students, and that racial, linguistic, and class hierarchies were continually created and maintained within its walls. However, neither the students nor the staff of *El Puente* adopted a victim ideology. To the contrary, through their exposure to the community organizers of *El Puente*, the students were able to develop a sense of agency and activism by which to transform the social injustices directed toward the Latino/a community. The students who participated in *Nuestra Voz* were given access to a powerful social resource that promoted both academic engagement and community involvement (Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004, Stanton-Salazar, 2004). In this chapter, I begin with a brief discussion of critical pedagogy. I then discuss the centrality of the Dream Act throughout the radio shows, highlighting how this piece
of proposed legislation served to galvanize an activist spirit among the students. I focus on two transformative events, the April 10th immigration rally and the students’ participation in a three-day, Latino youth forum. The students’ participation in these events exemplified El Puente’s use of critical pedagogical practices.

Critical Pedagogy and El Puente

Critical pedagogy recognizes and challenges the reality that schools do not offer an equal opportunity to all, but rather act as a sorting mechanism to reproduce the racial and class hierarchies which plague our society (Bowels & Gintis, 1970). The goal of critical pedagogy is to make students aware of how the hegemonic practices of social institutions work to keep them oppressed (Friere, 1971; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 1995; McLaren & Sleeter, 1997). Import is given to naming the hegemonic ideologies and practices that maintain the existing power structure (Gay 2000; Giroux, 1997; Sleeter & McLaren, 1997). In order to do this, critical pedagogy demands that educators have political and ideological clarity (Bartolomé & Trueba, 2000). However, because critical pedagogy is about transforming social injustice, educators who subscribe to critical pedagogy must work to squelch the apathy and sense of hopelessness that is often present in oppressed groups. Educators, while interrogating the social disparities that exist around them, must also create a sense of agency among students so that they will work for a more just society.

The practices of El Puente were closely aligned with the central tenets of critical pedagogy. This is not surprising considering that El Puente adopted Paulo Freire’s theory of educational empowerment, whereby the members of the community are seen as essential agents in the dismantling of social and political inequities. El Puente was an
active and vocal stakeholder in the public schools of Victoria City. They tried to work collaboratively with the schools on projects they believed would help empower Latino students. For example, with the help of a professional photojournalist that El Puente helped to recruit, students began a project documenting their experience in Victoria City as part of a class assignment. As the students’ engagement in the project grew, it became apparent that the students perceived many of the policies in their schools and community to be racist and chose to document them as such. Victoria High, uncomfortable with what the students were photographing, quickly pulled the project. El Puente, however, continued to work with the students, validating their experience of racism and helping them to develop other venues of self expression. When El Puente decided to help organize a teen radio show, they recruited students through their connections with Victoria High. El Puente provided a space for students to honestly voice the injustices they experienced and observed. The staff at El Puente welcomed conversations that examined the salience of race, language and immigration in American society. *Nuestra Voz* and the political activism that it spurred is testament to El Puente’s willingness to toil in the contentious terrain of social justice.

**A Call for Political Participation**

Essential to inculcating a sense of agency among young people is the demand that those able, participate in the political process. Because my involvement with *Nuestra Voz* began in the winter of 2006, I do not know how involved El Puente was in the 2004
presidential election. However, the students of *Nuestra Voz* broadcast a show in September of 2004 on the upcoming elections. Gina, who at the time of the show had lived in Victoria City for seven years and was originally from California, co-hosted the show with Yolanda, a relatively recent immigrant to Victoria City. They had invited a non-Latina, monolingual English speaker to be on the show, who throughout the discussion about the candidates’ attributes intermittently cried out *Viva Bush*: a painful reminder of the reality of Victoria City’s political landscape. The following excerpt makes it clear that the students recognize that in order for things to improve for the Latino community, Latino political participation is essential.

Gina: Why should young people care a lot about this subject?

Yolanda: I think they should care because it is something that is going to affect them if a bad decision is made. Also, I think we Latinos will be affected a lot in terms of continuing our studies...they can put up a lot of obstacles and depending on who is in office, they are able to close or open doors for us.

Later in the show, Gina uses the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as an example of how pivotal the Latino vote can be when it comes to deciding important issues in American politics that affect Latinos. She goes as far as to say that the Latinos living in California are, in part, to blame for the loss of drivers’ licenses among the undocumented because they had the opportunity to keep Schwarzenegger from becoming governor.

Gina: Everyone has their own thoughts, but what we want is that Hispanics vote. It is the Latin voice and there are a lot of Latinos. Look at how in California how Arnold Schwarzenegger won. A lot of people weren’t in agreement with this but he took away the licenses. This was, in part, the

---

21 Although I was not involved with El Puente at the time of the 2004 election, it was clear that the staff of El Puente leaned strongly toward the political left and did not support the vast majority of the Bush administration’s policies.
fault of the Latinos because if that had happened here, I wouldn’t let someone with such a bad influence…..

In a different segment of the show, when discussing the importance of the Latino vote, Gina stresses that voting is not only an individual obligation, but a community one as well. She is clearly aware that as the Latino community continues to grow, so does its potential to exert enormous political power.

Gina: Don’t forget that the Latino community is growing and we always are going to be here and we need to keep this in mind. If you are a citizen and 18 and don’t vote, no one is going to do it for you and this is going to affect us in the future because we are growing and one day we will be running this country. (Laughs)

The Dream Act as a Political Anchor

Although the majority of the students involved with El Puente were either undocumented or too young to vote, Maria and the other staff members constantly focused the students’ attention on the educational inequities facing many Latinos/as and used them as a call for political participation. The most often discussed contention with the educational system was the lack of opportunity for undocumented students to attend community colleges and state universities as residents of North Carolina. Both in individual interviews with the students and throughout the radio programs, this was repeatedly cited as the biggest barrier confronting Latino students in North Carolina.

In the fall of 2003, just months after the first airing of Nuestra Voz, the cofounder and president from a prominent state wide organization for professional Latinos in North Carolina was invited to talk about the Dream Act, a proposed piece of federal legislation which would grant undocumented immigrants temporary legal status in order to access
higher education in the United States. After giving an in depth explanation of the Dream Act, he was asked by one of the hosts why he was so interested in seeing the Dream Act pass. He replied:

This law would give opportunity to many Hispanic students. Right now, I hear a lot of students saying, “Why should I stay in school if I can’t go on to a University or a community college?” At times I see this as a bad excuse, because a lot of good things are going to happen and one of these is the passing of the Dream Act. We hope that the terms and requirements are going to give a lot of opportunity to students. Once someone finishes and applies for this act, they are going to give this person temporary legal residence with conditions. This is very important because one of the conditions is that this temporary residency is for six years. Nevertheless, after the six years you have to demonstrate that you are going to continue studying in a university or community college or that you are going to serve in the U.S. armed forces or that you are going to lend your services to an organization that is forming called the Department of Homeland Security. So there are conditions, you continue studying, you join the military, or you volunteer in certain organizations.

This show received a lot of attention among its listeners. Students called in with specific questions about the Dream Act and how it could impact their educational opportunities. This particular program and the information that it provided about the Dream Act was referred to regularly in the four years of shows that followed. The Dream Act became the guiding political hope that these students focused their activism around.

In a show entitled Retos en nuestra comunidad [Challenges in our community] the hosts discussed their hopes for their community and themselves and in order for either to be realized, the passing of the Dream Act was seen as essential. The following is an excerpt from this show.

Gina: For me my dream is to go to Law school. (Laughs) Seriously, I want to be a lawyer and then become a judge and help people because there are things that I don’t agree with. I would like to be able to change the immigration laws. Many times people have to pay because they are unable to defend themselves or they don’t
know their rights and they go to jail for a long time. No one is able to give them back their five years if they are innocent. Who can give them back those five years? No one.

Ramon: There are a lot of cases like this. There was a case in California where someone went to jail for 30 years.

Gina: And then what …”oh we are sorry.” This is not something that you can undo. It is half of someone’s life. For my community I would like to see more Latinas go to school and be someone more in life, instead of working in…. I know work is better than robbing people but why did our parents bring us here? To work hard and be something better than them.

Ramon: Exactly, they wanted to give us the opportunity that they did not have in the past. They don’t want us to do the same thing that they have done. They gave us the opportunity to study and prepare to be someone in the future.

Gina: They brought us here ….because of this we have to make the Dream Act pass. This is a very important subject.

In a show in which the students discuss their duties and responsibilities as young people to their community, the Dream Act is seen as a guaranteed force for change. The students feel strongly that their major obligation to their community and to themselves is to continue their education and seguir adelante. Their potential for educational betterment is juxtaposed against the sacrifices that their parents had to make in coming to the United States. The students, who fervently believed that barriers would be broken and educational opportunities seized upon, saw the passing of the Dream Act as both certain and essential to their future.

Ramon: We have the duty of going to school; this is one of our biggest duties because our parents are foreigners in this country who had to struggle to get the money together to come here. We have a duty not to waste it. We have the responsibility to move forward for ourselves and for them too... to move forward to keep moving forward with our head in front of us.
Carlos: There are a lot of opportunities in this country.

Ramon: Break the barriers; it is our responsibility.

Carlos: Don’t worry about your legal status or immigration status. Things are going to change.

Ramon: Things are going to change in a year…three years with the Dream Act, with this; things are going to change and work.

Unfortunately, the students saw very little change in regards to their educational opportunities and the sense of certainty which they initially expressed about the passing of the Dream Act,22 turned into frustration as they watched their options narrow just as they were getting closer to graduating from High school. Adversity was nothing new to Maria and the other staff members of El Puente. In keeping with El Puente’s mission statement, the staff was already working as the community watchdog, documenting and advocating against injustices, from police wrongdoings and inadequate interpreting in the courts to civil rights violation. The Dream Act, which was part of a much larger, national debate around immigration rights, was seen by the staff at El Puente as an important anchor in which to focus the students’ energies.

The Politicizing Effect of the Dream Act

As the radio show’s message became more concretely solidified around the pursuit of an education, Nuestra Voz’s appeal to the Latino/a community to participate in American politics became louder. The self-assured tone of earlier shows when discussing the passing of the Dream Act was quickly transforming into a cry for political action.

22 The Dream Act was defeated in the Senate in 2006 and 2007.
Coupled with this cry was a growing sentiment that barring Victoria City’s undocumented Latinos/as from community\textsuperscript{23} and state colleges was an expression of the prevalent racist attitudes directed towards Latinos/as. In the following excerpt, two student hosts discuss the structural inequality that exists for undocumented Latinos, which they perceive as directly related to more overt forms of racism directed towards the Latino community.

Zelda: What are some of the barriers that you, as someone who goes to school, have seen or see in other immigrant students? What are some of the barriers that confront Hispanic students?

Ramon: Well right now the most important or the strongest is our immigration status because right now Hispanic students who don’t have or haven’t gotten legal papers are being charged as international students. They would probably charge me as a Mexican student who has come here to study and this costs a lot of money.

Zelda: Out-of-state.

Ramon: Yes it is out-of-state and also, it is like I told you, this is a little bit racist towards some of the students who they don’t want. Have you seen the ads against the Hispanics who have crossed the border?

Ramon suggests that there is a “little bit” of racism in these policies and mildly raises the issue of the campaign ads that flooded the airwaves in the summer and fall of 2006, before many of the county and state elections took place. Having lived in New Hope County at that time, I was witness to the blatantly anti-immigrant campaigns of many of the candidates, who blamed a myriad of social ills on the immigrant community. Ramon and his co-host, Zelda,  

\textsuperscript{23} During the period that this research took place, North Carolina’s community colleges did not have a uniform policy regarding the admittance of undocumented residents. While New Hope Community College chose not to allow undocumented students to register as in-state residents, community colleges in more progressive areas did not require social security numbers or any other proof of legal residency.
although willing to raise the issue, are hesitant to delve too deep into the anti-immigrant sentiment of the host culture, perhaps out of reluctance to caste themselves in a victim role.

The March

The culminating act of political participation on the part of the students involved with Nuestra Voz was their organization of and participation in the April 10th march for immigration reform. April 10th, 2006 was designated a national day of action for immigration justice. Across the nation students and workers alike were marching to protest the unjust treatment undocumented immigrants receive in the United States. Some planned to protest by boycotting work and school. In Victoria City, the five students who were responsible for the broadcasting of Nuestra Voz were also instrumental in carrying out their city’s burgeoning demonstration for immigration reform. They had decided not to cut class, but rather to attend classes in a concerted effort to underscore their commitment to education. With the guidance of El Puente’s community activists, these students worked tirelessly after school and on the weekends helping to organize their community’s first public show of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Initially, the expected number of participants was estimated in the hundreds, but with all the national attention around immigration legislation, as well as a rising movement galvanizing around immigration reform, what had been originally seen as a small town march grew into a statewide demonstration which filled the streets of Victoria City.

After several failed attempts on the part of El Puente’s leaders to collaborate with the local public high school, the students of Nuestra Voz secured their high school
principal’s permission to allow students to gather outside the school after classes and march to the designated meeting place, where they would join other demonstrators. In addition to making signs and working to publicize the march, the students also wrote and delivered speeches about the Dream Act.

April 10th

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

The principal of Victoria High School, a middle aged white man with a take-charge, paternal demeanor, spoke to the crowd of teenagers about the importance of staying to one side of the road and informed the marchers that he would be driving along side of them to make sure they were safe. He didn’t make it clear whether his concern was about oncoming traffic or the rumors that the Klan was planning a counter rally. The crowd of students began to proceed toward town with a few teachers taking up the rear and three or four students in the lead calling out chants, which were echoed back by the marchers who followed. The students marched less than a mile to one of the chicken
processing plants, whose promise of jobs had been the reason so many Latino immigrants had come to this particular city in the first place. A middle aged Latino couple walking hand-in-hand joined the student marchers, while workers, mothers with children in tow, and community activists coming from all directions converged at this meeting place. A large crowd of adults had already gathered. Signs that the students of Nuestra Voz had spent weeks making were being distributed to the marchers with slogans like Ningun Humano es illegal [No human being is illegal], Todos Somos Inmigrantes [We are all immigrants], Our Future is Your Future. Volunteers were passing out blue cardboard hats meant to look like graduation caps to the student marchers. After about 20 minutes of making sure that everyone had a sign if they wanted one and a bottle of water if they needed one, the students from Nuestra Voz, carrying the blue and yellow banner of El Puente, led the marchers through the streets of Victoria City toward city hall.

As a volunteer, I was asked to keep the marchers contained to one side of the road, an almost impossible task as the enthusiasm grew. Once we started walking I placed myself directly behind and to the left of the students from Nuestra Voz. Around me was a jovial group of teenagers and to my left was a father pushing his young daughter in a wheel chair. An immediate feeling of comradery formed among us, as I helped them with the English political chants and them returning the favor when the words were in Spanish. We all carried small American Flags which we waved emphatically as we cried out, “¡Sí, Se Puede!” A sense of festive determination among the marchers was palpable, as if the individual daily injustices were metamorphosing into a collective feeling of unity.
Rather than march down the main street to the town hall, we were led through Victoria City’s side streets, past rows of run-down bungalows occupied primarily by Latino families. A dark haired woman with a broom in her hand stood on her porch and watched as the marchers passed her front yard. An older woman in the house next door smiled warmly and waved. Young children, who were outside playing on this beautiful sunny spring day, watched in excitement as the sea of white shirts and American flags snaked past their house. At one point, I turned around to see how far the trail of marchers went and was amazed to see that from where I stood; there was no end in sight.

Once we arrived at the town hall, we were greeted by more demonstrators from outside communities. In the weeks that preceded the march, interest in immigration had grown so intensely that the officials of Victoria City had decided that only the residents of Victoria City could march, but that anyone could participate in the immigration rally. Some estimates place the total number of demonstrators in attendance as high as 10,000. As we joined the crowd, I could hear the voice of the executive director of El Puente bellowing from the podium, “Shame on you Victoria City!” as she cited a list of infractions committed against the Latinos of Victoria City by the police department, housing authority and local public schools.

After about an hour of speeches and music, the five students who had guided the marchers through their neighborhood streets took to the podium one by one. Undaunted by the crowd before them, they each spoke vehemently about how crucial it was to all of their futures that the Dream Act pass. The crowd chanted “¡Sí se puede!” and “Dream Act! Dream Act!” in unison, emphatically waving the small paper American flags that had been distributed by the demonstration’s organizers. I watched, noting how
effectively this symbol of American patriotism had been appropriated for the un-fulfilled promise of opportunity. Throughout the speeches, which were delivered in English and Spanish, the desire to study was intertwined with the need to keep on fighting. It was a call to arms; it was a cry for the opportunity of an education.

**The Students’ Speeches**

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

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

**Ramon’s speech.**

¿No quedaremos callados verdad?  
¡Pero siempre tenemos que luchar!  
Y esto es seguir adelante.  
Por esta razón estamos aquí unidos para lograr nuestro cumplido...

---

24 I have included both the Spanish and English version of Ramon’s speech. The other three speeches were originally given in English. Unfortunately, I was unable to provide the Spanish versions of Carlos and Zelda’s speeches because the recordings were not clear enough to transcribe.
y esto es el Dream Act.
El dream act es un sueño de nosotros como estudiantes de todos juntos con ustedes podemos hacer realidad. ¡Dream Act!
¡Que viven los estudiantes! ¡Que viven los estudiantes!
También necesitamos el apoyo del gobierno para confirmar esto act y conforme y vuelve una realidad. ¡Nuestro Sueño!

*The crowd chants* “¡SÍ SE PUEDE! ¡SÍ SE PUEDE! ¡SÍ SE PUEDE ¡SÍ SE PUEDE!”

Somos jóvenes con mucho futuro por delante.
Nuestros sueño es el Dream Act y el futuro somos nosotros.
Somos jóvenes con talentos multiples que podemos demostrar a este país y a las familias que existen sin casas como ahora.
Emociando estar aqui, segui apoyo del gobierno pero le demostraremos a todos de que estamos hechos para triunfar en esta vida. Dream act! ¡Nuestro futuro! ¡Tu futuro!

*Ramon’s speech (English translation).*

We aren’t going to stay quiet, right?
Because we always have to fight!
And this is so that we can move forward
Because of this we have come here together to get what we want and what we want is the Dream Act
The Dream act is a dream of ours as students that everyone working together could make a reality. Dream Act!
Let the students lead! Let the students lead!
We also need the help of the government to pass this act and turn it into a reality. Our dream!

*The crowd chants* “Yes we can! Yes we can! Yes we can!”

We are young people with a lot in front of us
Our dream is the Dream Act and we are the future.
We are talented young people and we can show this country and our families who live in poverty….
It is very emotional being here and asking the support of the government but we will show everyone that we will work and succeed in this life!
Dream Act! Our future! Your future!

*Elena’s speech.*

For the English speaking people, welcome friends!
We are here to fight for our rights!
And one of the most important rights for us as young people is the right to have a fair and obtainable education! This is why we want the Dream Act to be passed!

Under the present law the children of immigrants receive the same immigrant status as their parents regardless of how long they have been in this country; many of us have spent the majority of our lives here and feel that the United States is our home! With the approval of this law we will have the opportunity to go to college, join the armed forces, and contribute to this great country. With this law students, such as ourselves, will be eligible to receive financial aid for our education. Dream Act!

Carlos’ speech.

We will have the opportunity to work, drive, and participate in everyday activities just like any other American resident.

Crowd chants: “DREAM ACT! DREAM ACT! DREAM ACT!”

The dream act will give students the opportunity that they will need. The Dream Act needs to be approved! For this reason we are here to achieve our goals: The passing of the Dream Act. We cannot grow. The Dream act is our dream but it needs to become a reality! But without the help of the senators and the government we cannot make this a reality. The dream act is our dream and it needs to become a reality. We are young people with great futures ahead of us. We are part of the future. We have gotten to this point without the support of the government but we will show them that we can go and demonstrate that we will succeed in life.

Crowd chants: “DREAM ACT! DREAM ACT! DREAM ACT!”

The Dream act is our Dream, our future, but it needs to be your future too!

Zelda’s speech.

We want to study and we will keep on fighting. The Dream is opportunity and we will not let it go. Hear our voices because we are the youth and we are the future. Somos Jóvenes y somos el futuro!!![ We are the youth and we are the future!!!]

The Aftermath

157
Despite rumors and fears, the demonstration ended without any confrontations. There were, however, reports of a white man who had been drinking and apparently tried to start a fight when a police officer took him aside, advised him to look around at all the Latinos in attendance, and then asked if he really thought it wise to announce his anti-Latino sentiments in this particular setting. Whether this story is true or not, it symbolizes the strength that was realized on that day. The crowd’s fervor was exhilarating. The students of *Nuestra Voz* in the following week’s show repeatedly commented on how proud they were of their community and how united they felt in their fight for social justice. They registered surprise at the number of Latinos/as who were there and mentioned the risk that so many in their community had taken by taking a political stand, despite their undocumented residential status. Unfortunately, as a result of the march, El Puente temporarily lost its United Way funding, but this was seen as a small price to pay for the sense of unity that was created on that day.

**Transformational Resistance**

Much of what has been written about student resistance has focused on self-defeating behaviors which serve only to further marginalize an already marginalized and oppressed student population. Soloranzo and Bernal’s (2001) work on transformative resistance represents a marked turn from these earlier theories of resistance. As proposed by Soloranzo and Bernal, the students who participated in *Nuestra Voz* exhibited a form of resistance which was political, collective, conscious, constructive and motivated by a sense that individual and social change are possible. Through their involvement with the community organization El Puente, these students were able to honestly acknowledge the
obstacles that lie before them and confront them in a way that serves to better their community’s standing in the larger society. The students in Nuestra Voz understood that their chance to continue their education was part of a much larger national debate. Rather than give in to a sense of victimization and defeat, they believed it was their duty to keep fighting. This belief is clearly articulated in the following discussion that was part of the radio show broadcast soon after the April 10th march.

Zelda: Do you think the march was worth the effort?
Elena: Of course …all of it was worth it.
Ramon: This march was worth the effort. With this we are able to make a change. We can help in other ways. Now the Dream act has not passed but if it does pass or doesn’t pass we have helped with something. The students are continuing to fight for their future, for their ability to go forward. They are not going to stay like other people or like their parents. I will use the example of my father and my mother. She wants me to study, that is why she is here, because she wants me to have a good future. We have to keep studying. We have to keep fighting.
Zelda: That’s right that is how it is in that little speech. This day, April 10th, I was nervous for all of us that participated because in this march there were many undocumented students and I think that it is unfair that a student can struggle and struggle to at least finish high school and end up working like their parents. I am in complete agreement of the passing of The Dream Act. I would like to see it pass for us.
Elena: Apart from this march, I don’t know if the government is going to take an interest in this but nothing is in vain. Nothing we do is in vain. I hope that the government passes this law so that we can continue studying, not for free, but so that we can get scholarships. We want more opportunity than we have now.

The April 10th march was a pivotal event in how the students viewed themselves. Although, the majority of the students who participated in Nuestra Voz saw themselves as
good students and active members of their community, they did not necessarily see themselves as political activists. In reminiscing about speaking in front of so many people, they all agreed that when they took the podium, although nervous, they spoke “from the heart” on behalf of all the Latino/a students in Victoria City. Little concrete political change may have come as a result of the immigration rally, but the students who helped to organize the march and took to the podium realized the readiness of their community to join them in the fight for social justice.

The Forum: Activists in Training

As community organizers and activists, El Puente’s staff was well connected with other community organizations throughout the region. They placed a high value on networking and collaboration and saw their work in Victoria City as part of a larger goal of improving the lives of Latinos/as statewide. As part of the students’ involvement with El Puente, they were invited to attend an annual forum sponsored by a non-profit, statewide advocacy and public policy organization dedicated to strengthening the Latino community in North Carolina. In June of 2007, I was asked to chaperon the students from Nuestra Voz at this three-day forum. Leaders and advocates from across the state were in attendance and the agenda consisted of seminars, workshops, discussions and activities designed to develop leadership skills among young people.

My experience at the Forum reaffirmed my belief that El Puente nurtured an activist identity among the students of Nuestra Voz by exposing them to positive members of the Latino community and modeling leadership skills. In my description of the Forum, I have attempted to highlight the ways in which my observations at this event
support my earlier findings about the counter hegemonic practices of both *Nuestra Voz* and El Puente.

**The Forum**

I had only worked with *Nuestra Voz* sporadically during the spring of 2007, during which time five new female students had joined. Zelda and Elena were no longer involved with El Puente or *Nuestra Voz*. Two of my three collaborators, Ramon and Gabriel, attended the forum. Carlos was unable to attend due to the recent birth of his son. In total, there were seven students from *Nuestra Voz* and three adults, not including myself, from El Puente. Many of the other youth groups that attended were affiliated with church and community organizations from a nearby urban area. There were four students who, like me, had made the four-hour drive from the western part of the state to be part of such a large Latino event.

The forum was geared to both adults and youth. The youth activities were held at a Historically Black College that had agreed to host the event. This is also where the students and the chaperones slept. The amenities of the college were extremely basic, verging on dilapidated. The keynote speakers, seminars, workshops and meals were held at a more upscale, convention center which was about ten minutes away.

**Researcher as Outsider**

I arrived at the college on Friday afternoon. Ramon and Gabriel, who had gotten there that morning, greeted me warmly upon my arrival. I, likewise, was relieved to see familiar faces. Ramon explained to me what was on the agenda for the rest of the
afternoon. As I listened and watched the activity around me as students prepared for a talent show to be held that night, I became uncomfortably aware of my “outsider status.”

The five new girls from *Nuestra Voz* seemed cliquish and less open to outsiders. Gabriel, who was wearing dark, gold-rimmed sun glasses and had a considerable amount of facial hair seemed much older than when I had seen him last. When he spoke, I noticed his voice had deepened and when he moved, I sensed a newly acquired air of confidence that seemed almost cocky. For a moment, as I watched him dance provocatively with a group of girls, I felt as if I didn’t know him at all. Being surrounded by so many people with whom I no longer felt particularly connected to gave me insight into why the demographic shift in Victoria City had been so frightening to so many.

At no point during my research did I feel more like a researcher: I had not come as a presenter; I was not in charge of a youth group, nor was I well connected to what appeared to be a tight network of Latina community activists. As for the girls whom I was responsible for, they barely knew me and, unlike Ramon and Gabriel, had little context in which to place me. I was also surprised at how old I felt when interacting with the five new girls. They did not seem as mature or open minded as the other two girls who I had grown quite close to. It became very clear to me that, like it or not, I was there as a researcher.

The majority of the presentations and workshops were in Spanish. However, translators and headphones were available for both the monolingual Spanish and English speakers. At times the bilingual presenters would slip in and out of Spanish and English and have to be reminded to stick to one language. Although I had little difficulty understanding what was being said in Spanish, I found myself tripping over my own,
badly pronounced words. It had been a long time since I had been in an almost exclusively Spanish-speaking setting and I had forgotten how tiring it could be. Nevertheless, despite being one of only a handful of non-Latinos, the organizers and other attendees of the forum were welcoming and treated me as a respected ally.

*A Spectrum of Assimilation*

The students and leaders at the forum were from a variety of backgrounds. The executive director of the host organization was originally from The Dominican Republic and had grown up in Massachusetts. One of the youth organizers was Puerto Rican and another was from Peru. Unlike the students from *Nuestra Voz* who were all of Mexican-origin, the other youth groups were comprised of a more diverse group of Latinos. There were second generation Cubans, who despite having Spanish speaking parents, needed headphones during the workshops in order to listen to the English translation of what was being said in Spanish. There was a young man from Guatemala who spoke vividly of being persecuted in his home country for speaking his native Mayan language. There was a 14-year old Mexican girl accompanied by her brother and mother, who insisted that she never wanted to marry or have children, but instead planned to continue her studies into graduate school in order to maintain her independence and have a fulfilling career.

Throughout the weekend it became clear that if there was a spectrum of assimilation, the students from *Nuestra Voz* would fall on the lower end in comparison to the majority of the other students there. Although they never asked, and probably had little need for Spanish translation, they did not slip casually between Spanish and English like many of the other young people, but remained in Spanish throughout the weekend. The girls registered a visible show of pity when they realized that the sons of a Cuban
immigrant could neither speak, nor understand Spanish. During the talent show, both the girls and boys seemed to draw a blank when one skit referenced a well-known American comedian. And at the Saturday night dance, unlike many of the students who danced to every American pop song, the five girls from \textit{Nuestra Voz} sat on the side lines when the DJ played anything other than Salsa, Cumbia, Bachata or Merengue. The boys, although not as avid dancers as the girls, appeared partial to Reggaeton.\footnote{Reggaeton is a form of urban music which combines Spanish rap with Reggae, Bachata, Merengue and Salsa. It originated in Panama and now is popular throughout Latin American, North America and Europe.}

Seeing these students in this setting made me realize the inevitability of assimilation. But it also highlighted the importance of cultural and linguistic maintenance. Unlike so many of North Carolina’s public schools, which view language diversity as a problem to be overcome, the organizers of the forum honored the languages of all their participants. As a speaker of Spanish-as-a-second language, I was provided access to English translations\footnote{Soon after completing my registration form for the Forum, I was contacted by the organizers and asked if I was going to need English translations at the workshops.} because the organizers fundamentally believed all voices should be heard regardless of what language they are in. In creating a sense of linguistic inclusivity, divisions where minimized. The more assimilated, non-Spanish speaking Latinos could find a place of commonality with the less assimilated youth like those from \textit{Nuestra Voz}. And the cultural capital that accompanies more recently arrived immigrants (Valenzuela, 1999) was not sequestered behind unnecessary linguistic divisions.

\textbf{The Keynote Speaker: The Naming of Hegemony}
Essential to critical pedagogy is the process of naming the hegemonic powers that maintain and perpetuate the existing power structure (Freire, 1970; Gay 2000; Giroux, 1997; Sleeter & McLaren, 1997). This can be done in many ways by educators, but I have never seen it done so effectively as by the keynote speaker who addressed the audience at the Forum on Saturday morning. She looked to be in her early thirties. She had a long, prominent black braid down the center of her back. With the short pumps that peeked out under her black trousers, she appeared to be no taller than five feet.

When she walked up to the podium, she didn’t have the usual bubbly excitement that accompanies so many who regularly address the public. Instead she looked almost angry and walked to the microphone as if determined not to give too much of herself. She began by introducing herself and informing the audience that she was a doctor and then she asked, “So why was I asked to come here and give this speech?” she paused and then answered her question, “because I was a high school dropout who grew up in an impoverished border town in Mexico and I am not supposed to be a doctor: A cleaning lady, yes. A doctor, definitely not.” She then proceeded to talk about her school experience. She recounted how her advisor had thrown away her application to college and when asked about it, he informed her that it was a waste of time for both of them given that she would never get in. She then talked about dropping out of school and returning to take night classes. The night classes led to community college classes, which then led to attending the University of Texas for a degree in pharmacology and finally she ended up being accepted to Duke Medical School where she specialized in dermatology. But this wasn’t the usual pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps speech. In
fact, she seemed almost bored when recounting her incredible academic accomplishments.

She asked the audience again, “But why am I here? I am hardly the first person to make it through medical school.” Again, answering her own question she said, “I’m here talking to you, because people like me—poor people, Mexican people, the children of immigrants—we aren’t supposed to be where I am in life. We aren’t supposed to be doctors.” And then she went through a series of traits that doctors are supposed to have and checked them against her own cultural credentials: “Hardworking, well who is harder working in this country than Mexicans. We are not afraid of hard work. So it isn’t hard work that explains why there are so few of us going to medical school and becoming doctors.” She talked about how she had always believed that only smart people could be doctors, but after completing college and medical school, she realized one didn’t have to be that smart. She talked about resilience, which she said she learned from watching her mother, who after being beaten by her father, would “stand up, wipe the blood of her face, put up her hair and say, ‘let’s have some dinner.”’ She even gave homage to her father, who despite his drinking and violent nature, she believed to be a positive role model.

Then she discussed the burden of biculturalism, rhetorically asking the audience how can an individual combine two cultures into one and emphatically answering, “You don’t leave a part of yourself behind.” She believed that the stereotypes held about Latino/a youth were largely responsible for their lack of academic achievement, stating that if you constantly tell teenagers they are *flojo* [dumb and lazy] you create what you have said. She warned the Latino/a youth in the audience about the burden of being part
of a group, advising them to be individuals and cautioning them on all the negative stereotypes that await them in American society. But her message was hardly assimilationist. In recognizing the ways in which the host culture rendered Latino/a youth as monolithic and underachieving, she counseled the audience on the importance of maintaining their culture and using it as a source of strength, not weakness.

The effect of watching this woman, whose image is more often accompanied with *huipils* and tacos than medical school, was powerful. Throughout her talk, I found myself jogging my memory for an experience, any experience, with a doctor that looked like her. I couldn’t even think of a television show or movie where an indigenous looking Latina was cast as a doctor. Her warning to the audience that being seen as part of a large undervalued, homogenous group of low achievers was going to be their greatest challenge had been poignantly made.

*Vecino, Dame la Mano: Resisting Individualism*

A prevalent belief within the cultural mores of white, middle class Americans is that one should always strive to be the best at whatever they do. Central to this belief is the value placed on individual achievement. Having grown up white and middle class, and being the recipient of this message from a young age, it quickly became apparent that this was not the message the organizers of the forum wanted to send to the youth in attendance. The prevailing message, instead, was that success was determined by how much one could give back to their community. This message was embedded in many of the youth activities, talks and workshops. One of the keynote speakers even wore a t-shirt which had the words: *We help ourselves by helping each other* written on the back.
The majority of the workshops were geared towards community building and the development of leadership skills. While there were no workshops which addressed, head-on, the more harmful aspects of American society such as gang affiliation and drug use, one workshop was specifically designed to teach the youth in attendance the importance of actively resisting the emphasis that whitestream America places on individualism. The facilitator began by giving a rundown of his credentials: He had worked in politics, had been a leader in his church, had earned several academic degrees, and was a community organizer and a parent. He then sang a song to the students entitled *Vecino, dame la mano* [Neighbor, give me your hand] written by Danny Rivera, a famous Puerto Rican singer-songwriter and political activist. The song was about the importance of helping those in need and working together as a community. He talked about this message in relation to his various careers and how this one objective was what had brought meaning to his life.

The content of this workshop illuminated the sharp contrast between the emphasis placed on community and community betterment and the priority given to individual success by white, middle class America. At one point in the workshop, the facilitator asked the young people in the audience to talk about the things they had done for their community and how they felt while doing them. As I listened to the students’ individual stories of helping out an elderly neighbor or doing good works for the poor, I realized that these students were being taught from a young age not to blame the vulnerable members of their community, but rather to take responsibility for them. Although this message is sent to white, middle class children too, it is usually within a religious context (i.e. as the Christian thing to do). By invoking the message of a well-known, Latino musician and using his life experiences as an example, the facilitator rendered
community activism as a cultural trait of Latinos/as that must not be lost in the process of assimilation.

**Gaining Access to Social Capital**

Stanton-Salazar (2004) in his work on social capital among working-class minority students posits community organizations as sites where working class students of color can develop and exchange the social resources necessary for academic success. The forum, which provided the students with peer networks rich in social capital, worked to counter the oppressive practices of the public schools by providing students with alternative information, resources and strategies (Gibson et al., 2004).

The students from *Nuestra Voz*, with the help of the director, Maria, facilitated a workshop on youth and public radio shows. The students were responsible for sharing their personal experiences with the audience and answering questions about *Nuestra Voz*. Maria talked mostly about the history of Victoria City and the challenges faced by the Latino/a community living there. Not only did this workshop provide the students with an authentic opportunity for public speaking, it also granted them the experience of collaborating with an adult and well-established community activist as a peer.

In discussing their experience with *Nuestra Voz* with the audience, the students cited access to a strong peer network as one of the primary benefits of their participation. Paula, one of the girls who had recently joined, said that she found a lot of support from the other participants, who were all more involved with the community than many of the students she knew at school. Gabriel talked about the many opportunities he had been granted on account of participating with *Nuestra Voz*, using his presence at the forum as a
prime example. A woman in the audience asked him if he thought his participation had affected his school performance, to which he answered that it had because he feels more comfortable speaking to all people and is better able to express himself.

Stanton-Salazar (2004) claims that although many working-class families and communities struggle to present students with the cultural capital deemed necessary for academic success “alternative sites within the schools and community do provide compensatory opportunities for many low-status youth to receive the proper support, socialization, and integration. And within these contexts, peer relations with similar others play an important mediating role” (p.28). The staff at El Puente was discriminating when choosing the students who would participate in *Nuestra Voz*. They recognized the importance of creating strong peer networks among students who were academically oriented. The social capital gained through the students’ participation with *Nuestra Voz* was far from an accidental benefit.

**Conclusion**

The students of *Nuestra Voz* had an understanding of the obstacles that stood before them. The ideologically and political clarity of El Puente made them strong mentors in helping the students of *Nuestra Voz* name these obstacles and place them within the larger framework of social justice. Through the guidance of El Puente, the students developed a sense of empowerment which would be a vital asset in their continued fight for social justice. As activists, El Puente’s staff recognized the importance of networking and building social capital for the students. By exposing
students to strong leaders deeply grounded in the Latino community and culture, they helped mediate the assimilationist agenda of the schools.

After working with *Nuestra Voz* and the staff of El Puente, I believe schools genuinely interested in improving the academic performance of their Latino/a youth would be wise to borrow from the practices of El Puente. Honestly addressing larger social inequities with students would aid in deterring their marginalization within the classroom. Providing bicultural role models, who do not require that the students they serve abandon large swaths of their cultural fabric could also lessen the marginalization felt by so many Latino/a youth. And creating spaces where Latino/a youth can support one another and provide positive peer networks would provide a positive social resource that is missing for so many working-class Latino/a youth in our schools.

Critical pedagogy, which is concerned with righting social inequities, was at the core of the El Puente’s instruction. The students who past through their doors were given access to community activists who were not afraid to charge the politicians, law officials, and educators in their community with being discriminatory. The staff at El Puente modeled effective ways of working for social change and inculcated the students of *Nuestra Voz* on how to be future leaders. The students were made aware of the political and social battles before them, but more importantly, they were given valuable tools in the fight for social justice.
CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

How Latino/a youth experience, adapt to, and resist the practices and policies of the host culture was the conceptual starting point of this study. Borrowing from Portes & Rumbaut’s (2001) work on selective acculturation, I have argued that Latino/a youth draw from their communities and peer groups to mediate the oppressive social structures of American society: schools being, perhaps, the most significant. Embedded in the literature on acculturation is the view that American culture contains a level of toxicity for immigrant youth and that the maintenance of an ethnic identity can mediate this toxicity (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995, 2000, 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Doucet, 2004).

This dissertation examines the ways in which the students who participated in Nuestra Voz have used their community involvement to both resist and transform the marginalization that accompanies being an immigrant Latino/a in a society of white rule. In this chapter I will give a summary of my research findings and discuss their implications for policy and teaching. I will also suggest areas where more research is needed. Lastly, I will discuss the experience of teaching Latinos/as in North Carolina Public Schools while completing this study and the implications that my findings have had on my personal goals as an educator.

Summary of My Findings
Through their creation of *Nuestra Voz* the students were able to create and broadcast a counter discourse to the prevalent anti-immigrant rhetoric too often heard in the mainstream. This discourse, which emphasized the importance of community empowerment and the maintenance of the students’ home culture and values, was closely aligned with Suárez-Orozco’s (2000, 2004) bi-cultural strategy for adaptation in which students act as cultural brokers between the home culture and the host culture. By repeatedly calling upon young people to work for the betterment of the Latino/a community, the students of *Nuestra Voz* provided an alternative to the priority placed on individual success so prevalent in white, middle-class America. The students addressed head-on the self-defeating behaviors associated with the resistance of marginalized youth and countered them with a discourse of transformational resistance in which family, community and perseverance were privileged.

Central to the discourse of *Nuestra Voz* was the belief that Latino/a students, with the help of the Latino/a community, could transform the social inequities present in their community. The students’ message was infused with hope and optimism about the possibilities that exist in American society. They recognized that the host society’s negative stereotypes about Latinos/as were a grave obstacle which they would have to surmount in order to move their community forward and articulated a belief that through *educación*, these negative stereotypes could be transformed.

Although the discourse of *Nuestra Voz* may not have always been an accurate reflection of the students’ experiences and behaviors, it signifies their understanding of the importance of maintaining their home values and culture. In addition to privileging the home culture, the students’ counter discourse represents an organized form of
resistance to the assimilationist practices of the schools which the students attend. Even when the female participants were facing unjust restrictions from their fathers, they continued to encourage listeners to honor them and always be honest with them. Perhaps, this was hypocritical on their part, or, perhaps, it demonstrates their desire to render family cohesion as essential to the successful assimilation into American society.

In returning to one of my initial questions as to whether Latinas would be able to balance the conservatism of their home lives with the liberalism of American peer culture, my findings would suggest otherwise. However, maybe a balance between the two is not what is needed. In my last conversation with Zelda, I pressed her about what form of birth control she was using. She was well versed in the language of contraception and when I hung up the phone, I was relatively convinced that she would probably continue her studies and not end up pregnant. It is unrealistic to think that Latinas will strictly adhere to the conservative wishes of their parents, but perhaps in the reconstructing of Mexican and other Latin cultures, issues around female sexuality will be mediated by effective sex education programs and access to contraception.

Another question posed earlier in this study was whether Latino/a immigrant youth would be able to maintain their pro-educational ideology given the structural inequities of the schools they attend. Of the study’s five participants, Carlos was the only student who left high school without graduating. In examining what made Carlos different from the other students, the one thing that stands out was his speech impediment and his difficulty with reading. Like Ramon, he came from a single parent household and like Zelda he had been in Victoria City since elementary school. But unlike the other participants, Carlos required special educational services that he did not receive.
Considering his academic challenges, it is to El Puente’s credit that he did not drop out of school earlier and/or partake in self-defeating forms of resistance like gang membership or drug use.

Carlos benefitted greatly from his involvement with *Nuestra Voz*, in that he was exposed to valuable social resources not made accessible to him at school. Too often, Latino youth are separated from one another based on placement in ELS classes, and standard, honors, and advanced placement tracking (Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). *Nuestra Voz*, although geared toward high performing students, did not make fluency in English a pre-requisite for joining, and therefore was able to draw on the cultural capital of newly arrived immigrants, as well as immigrant youth who had attended American schools for the majority of their education. In addition to benefitting from the social resources of their peers, the students of *Nuestra Voz* had access to the staff at El Puente who acted as powerful bi-cultural role models. The students collaborated with these community activists to conduct fundraisers, organize an immigration rally in which thousands of people attended, and participate in a three-day Latino forum.

Support for the Dream Act was a galvanizing force in their political activism. Initially the Dream Act served as a beacon of hope that would allow undocumented students the opportunity to continue their studies. However, as the political climate reflected a stronger anti-immigrant sentiment, the students, with the help of the staff of El Puente, organized the April tenth immigration rally, an overt display of dissatisfaction with the present policies around immigration. When discussing their experience of the April tenth immigration rally, the students were surprised by how many Latinos/as in their community had marched and demonstrated. Recognizing the risk that many of the
undocumented demonstrators had taken, and acknowledging the reluctance of Victoria City’s Latino/a community to publically demand more just treatment, the students were invigorated by the sense of unity they had witnessed among Latinos/as on that day.

*Nuestra Voz* provided a space for Latino/a students to express themselves in their own language about issues they were facing on a daily basis. The content of their discussions was grounded in their own cultural landmarks. They not only advocated for community involvement, but played active roles as leaders among their peers. They were given access to individuals who were not hesitant about naming the hegemonic practices of the host culture, and as a result they learned effective tactics in the fight for social justice.

In revisiting my initial overarching question of how the Latino community and, more specifically Latino families, are going to weather the Americanization of their youth, programs like *Nuestra Voz* provide a creative example of how members of the Latino community can actively work to slow down the process of assimilation among their youth. As a rebuttal to the importance placed on individualism in American society, El Puente nurtured a sense of *familismo* and community ethos among the youth of *Nuestra Voz* while working diligently to promote and protect the “immigrant optimism” that accompanies immigration. Due to the magnitude of the economic and social inequities that Latinos face in North Carolina, programs like *Nuestra Voz* may appear insignificant when considering how heavily the cards are stacked against Latino youth, especially undocumented youth. However, small, grass roots programs like *Nuestra Voz* help navigate students towards a pattern of selective acculturation, and protects them from the risks associated with rapid or dissonant assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).
Implications for Teaching

Critical Pedagogy at Work

Having worked with immigrant communities for over a decade as a public school teacher, I was impressed by how effective El Puente was in nurturing a pro-academic identity in the students of Nuestra Voz. The majority of the young people involved with Nuestra Voz were in good academic standing. However, as bilingual students who experienced significant marginalization on account of their language and ethnicity (Lopez, 2007), they were at significant risk for adopting self-defeating behaviors. El Puente’s willingness to name the racism and xenophobia so prevalent in the students’ host community and, particularly, in their schools, provided the students with a better understanding of the roots of their subordination. Unlike many classrooms, where the myth of social equality and meritocracy are promoted, the staff at El Puente engaged the students in honest conversations about the structural, economic, and social obstacles before them. By doing so, the students were able to recognize education as an important asset, and not something to be resisted. They believed that they could be essential agents in the dismantling of social and political inequities. They were critical of school policies and at times school instruction, but they did not reject the value of an education. El Puente affirmed the central tenets of critical pedagogy, and in doing so, taught the students to fight against social injustice, not learning.

Teachers who work with marginalized students need to interrogate the societal mechanisms that keep certain students suppressed while elevating others to positions of power and prestige. When classroom teachers champion the idea that with the right amount of hard work, anyone can make it, they are inadvertently blaming marginalized
students and their families for their poverty and oppressive life circumstances. Educators must have political and ideological clarity. They must understand the social and economic issues that influence the poor academic performance of our black and brown students. Furthermore, they must be willing to breech the subject of racism, classism, sexism, and xenophobia with their students. How often is the ability to analyze and ask critical questions espoused as an essential goal among educators? Why not begin by having students analyze the mediating societal factors at play in their own lives? Once students begin the naming process within the context of the classroom, teachers become allies rather than servants of an institution that perpetuates inequity.

**Bicultural Role Models**

As an educator who had worked primarily with Latino/a immigrants, I recognized that not being Latina myself was at times a detriment to my students, but felt I was a strong ally and a well positioned advocate—partly on account of being white and not Latina—for the Latino/a community I serve. In working with Maria, the staff coordinator of Nuestra Voz, I had the opportunity to see first hand where my cultural deficiencies lay. To begin, Spanish speakers need to have access to adults who speak their language and have a grounded understanding of their cultural background. Although I speak Spanish, it is not my mother tongue, nor do I have first hand experience of what it is to be an immigrant. Maria shared an unspoken understanding with the students of Nuestra Voz about what it means to be Latina in America. Not only was she able to relate to the experiences of the students, she provided a counter to the stereotypes surrounding Latinas. Missing in the lives of many marginalized students are professional adults who
look and sound like them. Also missing are bicultural role models who are willing to challenge this country’s discourse on equality and meritocracy.

Throughout my time with Maria and the students of Nuestra Voz, I had the opportunity to meet and observe Nancy, a white woman who had helped start a Spanish public radio show for Latino/a youth in a nearby city. In many ways her program was similar to that of Nuestra Voz with one stark difference; she was an outsider to the Latino community.27 In interacting with other Latino organizations, she made social blunders that reflected a sense of entitlement and a lack of value for the work of others. In working with the students, she accepted behaviors that would not have been tolerated by someone genuinely invested in them. For example, on one occasion she brought her students to El Puente to meet the students of Nuestra Voz and get ideas about how to start up a radio show. One of the boys she brought spent the majority of the meeting flirting and trying to get the attention of one of the girls he had come with. The meeting was set up with all of the students sitting in a circle and the expectation was that everyone would contribute and listen. This particular young man through his posturing and continued private conversations came across as rude and indifferent. At no point did Nancy reprimand him for whispering and continually having sidebars with the young girl next to him. Although well meaning, this woman did not possess the necessary belief in the students she worked with to hold them accountable for their behavior (Irvine, 2003). As a comfortable, middle-class, white woman, I am hesitant to presume that she saw their fight for social justice as belonging to her as well.

27 Although she did speak Spanish and had spent some time in Central America, she was of northern European descent and appeared to share little cultural affiliation with the students whom she worked with.
The majority of teachers that Latinos/as will come into contact with will be white, middle class women. In order to meet the challenge that accompanies cross cultural relations in the classroom, in-service and pre-service teachers will need more training in culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2003), but only providing better trained, white teachers does not suffice. Schools of education need to be more aggressive in recruiting Latino/a teachers. And once hired, schools must view these teachers as a valuable resource and put into place effective retention practices to ensure that Latino/a teachers have the support needed to remain in the field.

Lastly, teachers of marginalized students and the community organizations that serve them need to work together as allies, not in opposition to one another. On several occasions I phoned Victoria High on behalf of El Puente to ask a question about a student or make an inquiry about a school policy. When I introduced myself as someone from El Puente, the person on the other end of the line had a dramatic shift in tone. My questions ceased to be answered and bureaucratic obstacles where shot my way. While retelling my experience to Maria, she stated that the schools seemed to want nothing to do with El Puente and in the past had not been helpful. If schools genuinely see their students’ success as their highest priority then they need to work collaboratively with the community organizations that have a history of effectively serving them.

**Silencing the Demand for Rapid Assimilation**

Valenzuela’s (1999) asserts that American schools subtract valuable cultural and linguistic resources from Mexican origin students. By privileging English dominance and applying strong pressure for rapid assimilation, Mexican students are stripped of cultural
and linguistic assets. This study offers a poignant argument for silencing the demand of rapid assimilation and English dominance. When Gabriel first came through the doors of El Puente he could not speak English. However, it was not in denying Gabriel access to Spanish speakers or viewing his Spanish language and Mexican culture as liabilities that Gabriel was encouraged to learn English and succeed academically; Gabriel attributed his success in school to the sense of community he experienced at El Puente, stating: “Initially I had problems in school for the language. *Nuestra Voz* has helped me to feel more comfortable.” The academic orientation of both the staff and the young people in *Nuestra Voz* served as a powerful bulwark against the subtractive practices of Victoria High.

**Implications for Policy: The Creation of an Underclass**

The students in this study demonstrated incredible resiliency. They did not participate in gang activity, drug use, or traditional acts of resistance. They attended school, became involved in their community, and worked to better themselves and their community through political activism. They were an infusion of hope and promise in a community that has suffered repeated offenses. They tenaciously held onto the belief that through hard work and academic achievement they could advance economically—a belief that has been promoted worldwide about the United States.

Unfortunately, their stories do not have the ending one would want for such and exemplary group of students. Carlos decided not to return to high school after being told that in order to graduate before turning 21, he would have to attend and pay for summer school, an expense his family could not afford. He is presently working the second shift
at the poultry plant which also employs his mother and brother. Ramon has had to come terms with the painful realization that despite being accepted to various colleges, being seen as a star student and athlete by teachers and peers, and demonstrating a deep commitment to his community, he will be unable to attend college on account of his residential status. Gabriel, frustrated by the lack of opportunity to attend college or university for undocumented students, has stated that he will simply return to his country to continue his education, a common but often unrealized desire held by many immigrant students.

As educators, researchers and policymakers we need to take heed of these students who have dedicated so much time and energy to promoting the importance of education in their community only to find that because of larger structural inequities or institutional racism, they will not be granted the opportunity to continue their studies after high school. We will never know the number of potential doctors, lawyers, or teachers that have been lost because educationally they hit an impenetrable wall after their high school graduation. In denying undocumented students access to community colleges and the state university system, we are not only depriving them of continuing their education, we are denying younger Latino/a students of role models and examples of what they too could become. Many scholars (Olsen, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco, 1995, 2001) have written about the optimism and emphasis on academics that accompany first generation immigrants. By squelching these students’ ambitions through policies that only serve to punish, we are squandering an important national resource; thereby making ourselves culpable for the decline of academic achievement among Latino/a students. Children who have completed a significant portion of their education in U.S. schools
should have the same opportunity to attend community colleges and state universities as
their American-born peers. Our present policy of punishing immigrant children for their
parents’ infractions by denying them the chance of a college education will prevent a
generation of talent from being realized and lay the foundation for the building of a
permanent underclass.

Implications for Research

Organizations like El Puente are well positioned to have a positive influence in
the lives of students. They are not held to as many state regulations; they generally serve
a smaller and less diverse population; they can focus primarily on the sociocultural issues
that impact academic performance. And yet, community organizations and the roles they
play in the lives of students are too often left out of the educational discourse. Heath and
McLaughlin (1993) recognized more than a decade ago that community organizations
could be the essential anchor in the lives of poor minority children who face repeated
adversity. Considering this, we need more research on community organizations that
significantly influence students’ positive identities, community activism, and educational
attainment. We need to accumulate evidence of successful programs in order to better
understand the factors that contribute to the success of these organizations who serve
marginalized youth. Finally, we need to explore the ways in which research on
community organizations could lead to better practices, both in schools and in outside
organizations.

Implications for my Professional Goals
While writing this dissertation I have been working fulltime as an English-as-a-Second Language teacher in two elementary schools. The vast majority of my students are Latinos/as. Holding the dual role as researcher and practitioner has provided me with important insights, as well as burdened me with nagging questions. Since accepting my teaching position two years ago, I have been able to make significant changes in the schools I serve. I have worked as an advocate for my students and their families. I have made administrators aware of federal policy concerning the rights of limited English proficiency students. I have challenged teachers who thought it logical to retain a student because “they just don’t have the language piece yet.” And I have delivered sound pedagogy to my students. I know that there is much more to be done, but I feel teachers who act as allies and work to combat the discriminatory practices of the public schools can have a significant impact on the lives of the students they work with. And so I am left wondering, where would I be the most effective?

As a researcher, I enter the classrooms I work in with a slightly altered lens from when I had left to begin my doctoral work. I was always painfully aware of our schools inequitable practices and policies, but I now have more questions about how to alleviate these inequities. I feel called upon to contribute to the body of research which chips away at old paradigms, especially the antiquated paradigms around monolingualism and cultural deficiencies. Working with Nuestra Voz and El Puente was invigorating in that it provided me with the opportunity to delve into positive ways that the Latino/a community, particularly the youth, can resist subordination. I believe my research serves as rebuttal to the misguided claims too often made by teachers and administrators that “Hispanics just don’t value education,” “they have no schema from which to draw
As the second generation of Latino/a immigrants enters North Carolina’s kindergarten classrooms, I see grave challenges for the teachers who work with them. These children will be caught in a strong assimilationist ideology. The acquisition of English is given the highest priority and no effort is made at developing Spanish literacy. I watch how rapidly students lose their Spanish. As they become more assimilated into our schools, they become less connected to their home culture. To a large extent, this is inevitable, but what does not need to be inevitable is the poor academic attainment that accompanies being Latino/a. Research has clearly demonstrated that the home culture of immigrant groups can be a significant force in preventing the downward assimilation of immigrants of color (Berry, 2001, 2006; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco 1995, 2000). I believe that if schools did more to embrace the culture and language of Latino/a students and abandoned their demands for rapid assimilation, Latino/a students would thrive, rather than perish in our classrooms.

As a teacher educator, I might have some impact on how future teachers address the specific needs of their language minority students. But as my niece—a high school dropout herself—commented when I told her I wanted to teach teachers, “That is a lot of hope in one person’s hands.” Of course we need teachers, who are better prepared to serve a diverse population, but we also need more diversity in the professional fields, especially the field of education, and that is not going to happen if our marginalized students continue to receive a second-rate education. If public schools are going to nurture the talents of first generation immigrants then we need teachers right now who
are willing to be their critical allies. At this juncture in my career, after witnessing the perseverance of my collaborators, I want to work directly with students, like those described in this dissertation, who have been a source of great inspiration.
REFERENCES


study of immigrant and involuntary minorities (pp.3-33). New York: Garland Publishing.


Portes, A. (2002). English only triumphs, but the costs are high. Context, 1 (1).


