Beyond the School Walls: A Critical Action Research Study Examining the Perils and Promise of Critical Teacher Engagement

by
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> *The process of deliberation—to name, frame, and act, has stopped me from assuming that things must be as they are: to start questioning what is and conceptualize what might be. Our community work promotes critical action research in that it stresses that those who live in a situation must be the ones who analyze it and identify possibilities for action and change*. (Paloma, 2008)

Current demographic trends reveal that we are in the midst of an extraordinary shift in California's K-12 student population, with the ethnic and linguistic diversity of our schools increasing dramatically. Nearly one-third of the nation's English learners (ELs) are found within California (California Department of Education [CDE], 2006), with a total of 1,571,463 students identified as ELs during the 2007–2008 school year. These numbers represent an increase of nearly 20 percent between 1997-98 and 2007-08 (CDE, 2006).

Over the past twenty years, 70% of English proficient Latino students have been underachieving in basic skills of reading, writing, and math by the third grade (CDE, 2006; Espinosa & Ochoa, 1992). The federal government's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that as early as age nine, Latinos lag behind their White peers in reading in English (Planty, et al., 2008). This underachievement continues throughout their academic careers. In the 2002–2003 academic year, only 22% of twelfth-grade Latino graduates completed all courses needed in order to access the University of California or California

International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, Vol 3 (2) (2010) pp 59-81

State University systems (CDE, 2004). Furthermore, in the 2005-2006 academic year, the four-year dropout rates for Latinos attending California public schools (18.9%) were more than twice those for Euro-American students (8.2%) (CDE, 2006). Here too, these percentages are even more extreme in many of California's urban areas, where for example, in 2007-2008 in one Southern California urban region, the high school dropout rate for Latinos reached 38 percent (CDE, 2008).

These data illustrate a change in California's K-12 population and their achievement. They also indicate that our school system is failing our Latino students at alarming rates, with important implications for the Latino community, as well as California as a whole. If Latinos are becoming the largest ethnic group in California, then it is critical that we examine the educational conditions surrounding them and the ways in which the educational conditions serve to impact their academic opportunities and successes. It is equally critical that we identify and examine ways teachers can advocate for their students, using their roles as mediators between the institution of school and the community to meet their diverse students' needs and support their academic opportunities and achievement.

We begin this article by proposing a cross-disciplinary theoretical framework with which to examine the phenomenon of critical teacher engagement. The theoretical framework merges concepts from the areas of critical teacher engagement, ecological systems analysis and action research theory. We use this framework as a lens to describe the Critical Action Research (CAR) process undergone by the Southern California Latino Coalition for Education[1] K-12 Teacher Group. This CAR was unique in that we used a deliberative process embedded within the critical action research approach. The objective of CAR is emancipation; to uncover and apply change in procedures that constrain justified claims for equity and support despotic hegemony (Fals-Borda, 1985).

In documenting the CAR process, we discuss the perils and promises of critical teacher engagement through themes that emerged from qualitative data, including: (a) obstacles to critically engaging "beyond school walls" (b) spaces and processes that support teacher empowerment, and (c) educators as informed change agents. We conclude with an argument for critical teacher engagement where teachers are seen as intellectuals and public cultural workers.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of critical teacher engagement is an area that is relatively understudied and thus in need of theoretical models that serve to both identify and examine the processes involved in this phenomenon. In part, this study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by articulating a theoretical framework that merges critical teacher engagement (Darder, 2002; Giroux, 1983, 1988, 2005), ecological systems analysis (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989), and critical action research theory (Fals-Borda, 1985; Kemmis, 2006; Ochoa, 2006). Here, we explore con-

1 Pseudonym

cepts from each of these areas and their contributions to a theoretical model of community-based, critical teacher engagement. This action research project is unique in that it draws from the deliberative process to operationalize critical action research with K-12 teachers.

Critical Teacher Engagement

A review of the literature on teacher engagement reveals a focus on mundane micro-level activities (Louis, 1995; Sessums, 2006; Zamoraski & Bulmer, 2002). Attention is often placed on the instructional activity—the recipe—that will help get teachers through tomorrow rather than on the complex realities of teaching and learning in an unequal social world (Walsh, 1995). This focus in the research parallels a focus amongst many teachers. Among the many challenges facing today's teachers are increasing standards, scripted curriculum, and demands to perform to standardized tests. With these pressures, it is easy for teachers to get caught up in the everyday micro-level demands of classrooms and schools, leaving neither the time, space, nor energy to step back and reflect on their individual and collective work and on the broader contexts and conditions that shape and frame their work (Walsh, 1995).

The focus on the micro-level activities of schooling is in part due to the insidious invisibility of dominant ideologies, which prevent educators from more accurately identifying and analyzing educational challenges and the socio-political forces that create them. Yet, in order for there to be a shift in the institution of education so that the needs of marginalized students are recognized and met, it is urgent that teachers have a strong ideological foundation that will sustain them as they work towards neutralizing unequal educational practices. Such action calls for teachers to develop a firm ability both to recognize and critically analyze multiple layers of socio-political forces and the inherent tensions they create to support or counter hegemonic practices within our education system (Alfaro, 2006; 2008a).

Giroux (1983, 1988, 2005) speaks of standardization as a political message of conformity that proudly packages itself as an escape from the necessity of critical thought. Moreover, if teachers become "technocratic teachers," then they themselves can be more easily controlled. This removal of the teacher from participation in the complex and socio-political issues involved in the process of producing educational policy can reinforce an image in which the teacher is viewed as only a conduit between homogenized policy and teaching. This image reinforces the impression that teachers need only to know about teaching methods, if that. Thus, in the hegemonic process, educators' ability to make reasoned choices and to explain these to the public is diminished.

To transform the current model of conformity and control of teachers requires changes involving personal redefinitions of the ways classroom teachers interact with the children and communities they serve; the implementation of change is

dependent upon the extent to which educators, both individually and collectively, redefine their roles as educators and respect the culturally and linguistically-diverse students and communities they serve (Cummins, 1995, 2000). Through the creation of alliances, progressive teachers can participate in counter-hegemonic political projects that do not dichotomize their work as cultural workers and social activists. Instead, such participation supports their work within schools while simultaneously providing the opportunity to take positions collectively on current educational issues that directly impact their teaching practice (Darder, 2002).

Ecological Systems Analysis

A major assumption underlying an ecological paradigm is that the different systems within an environment (e.g., family, school, community) are interdependent and that all interactions across these systems are bi-directional. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) classic ecological systems model includes five embedded systems:

1 Microsystems consist of individual identities.

2. Mesosystems represent the organizational or institutional factors.

3. Exosystems refer to the community level influences.

4. Macrosystems identify the cultural contexts.

5. Chronosystems denote the historical (time/space) contexts.

In creating a theoretical model for analysis of critical teacher engagement, we have adapted Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model to better fit the environmental context of teaching (Gregson, 2001).

1. Microsystem level teacher engagement refers to engagement within the classroom and/or school. This engagement includes activities such as student-teacher interaction, lesson planning, grade-level planning, and committee work.

2. Mesosystem level teacher engagement involves teachers collaborating with other teachers, as well as educational and social organizations outside their own school community in order to advocate policy and action towards social justice and equity for students. This advocacy and ensuing activities occur at a grassroots level.

3. Exosystem level teacher engagement involves regional and state level advocacy to influence educational policy change that impacts students, parents and teacher practices and expectations.

4. Macro-system level advocacy and action deals with federal and international level collaboration with educators to influence global philosophical and political educational issues.

5. Chronosystem level teacher engagement contextualizes the struggle teachers face to create community-based engagement over large segments of time and space. Analysis at this level includes the past, present and future patterns and trends in teacher engagement in any context.

Table 1 Brofenbrenner's Bioecological Model Applied to Teacher Engagement

Microsystem	Mesosystem	Exosystem	Macrosystem
Teachers engage in the classroom (e.g., pedagogy, implementation and student motivation	Teachers engage in school level (e.g., committees)	Teachers engage in wider community (e.g., district school board, community organizations)	Teachers engage in state and national (e.g., policy development or change)
Chronosystem The past, present and future patterns and trends in teacher engagement			

Brofenbrenner's (1972, 1979, 1989) model is useful in that it identifies the many systemic levels, including time and space, and the related forces at play in the context of the education system. Applying Bronfenbrenner's model to critical teacher engagement allows a multiple dimension analysis across and within different socio-political contexts via the systems and the people/organizations acting within these.

Deliberation as a Form of Critical Action Research for Transformation

We view CAR as a dynamic, cyclical and subjective process in which the goal is to work with and through individuals and institutions to improve the human condition (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). It serves the dual function of objective describing and subjective directing to the possibilities of joint human efforts for change, improvement, development, adaptation, flexibility and courage (Herr & Anderson, 2005). CAR enables the researcher to become involved, to intervene in a matter of genuine concern and to gather support for participants to act on

seeking solutions to issues and problems (Stringer, 2007). Effective CAR investigates developmental processes in institutionalized routines for schooling (Torres, 1992). The argument is that it includes learning for the educators and activity for the participant that leads to personal and professional development. More poignantly, Esposito and Evans-Winters (2007) argue that teacher-researchers, especially those in politically contested school communities, should be encouraged to conduct CAR that is contextually bound.

Adding to our conception of CAR is Kurt Lewin's work. One of the most influential researchers in the 20th century, Lewin brought to the theory of action research his work in social and organizational psychology. According to Lewin (1946, 1951), the basic change model of unfreezing, changing and refreezing is a theoretical foundation from which many processes emerge. The general idea is that stability of human behavior is based on a stationary equilibrium between driving and restraining forces acting on individual motivation, well-being and performance. Before change can happen, the entire organizational force field of drive and restraint must be altered. Such alteration calls for complex psychological change in the individual. When applied to education, this type of psychological dissonance in educators is needed in order for them to re-create their reality and thus see other possibilities within the realm of action.

As action research grows in popularity, Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggort and Zuber-Skerritt (2002) and Kemmis (2006), express concerns about the growing number of "technical" or "practical" definitions and approaches to action research. They point out that increasingly, action research studies lack a critical perspective. In addition to impacting pedagogy, it appears that educational trends in recent decades may have also led to the domestication of educational action research. Alrichter et al. and Kemmis argue for re-thinking educational action research initiatives as creating inter-subjective spaces for public discourse in public spheres. Similarly, Ochoa in a speech asserted:

> At the heart of critical action research is a need to explore people's social, educational, economic and political conditions that hinder their development. This calls for a comprehensive practical, political and pedagogical deployment in order to explore social strengths, problems, dangers and opportunities in current practices. Critical action research seeks shared decision-making as a legitimate objective that involves cooperation with people who are denied equal educational benefits as a consequence of societal conditions, exclusive privileges, political manipulation and other types of suppression. (October, 2006)

Embedded within CAR methodology, we draw on the process of deliberation to create a model that recognizes the individual and social cognitive spaces and processes needed when engaging in CAR. Both Dewey (1922) and, more recently, Noddings (1999), make a case for the need to allow the space for teacher's self-empowerment as decision makers. They recognize the unique conditions that make educational spaces ideal contexts for the practice of deliberation. Dewey

viewed deliberation as essential to shared decision making. For him, deliberation is a process whereby each of a series of choices is played out in the imagination. This dramatic rehearsal allows an individual to make decisions without the need for enacting each option to discover its ends. Noddings identifies two elements of political education that are necessary for equipping teachers to be participants in democracy: choice and discussion. Thus, Noddings takes Dewey's ideas about the individual's act of choosing and places it within the interactive context of a group setting. Instead of weighing options alone, members of a group weigh options together, informed by the sharing of beliefs, experiences, values, and opinions. This effort to reach a collective understanding lends itself to collective choice, in an educational environment where choice is sought.

Deliberation is the careful weighing of the tradeoffs implicit in choosing one course of action over another. Furthermore, deliberation "is open, exploratory dialogue...not taking positions and scoring points to win" (Mathews, 1996, p. 279). The act of deliberation must include a reflection of past positions and the ability to see what is really before us. Thus, rather than becoming constrained with polemic orientations, as educators, we try to keep our minds open to all the alternatives that best meet the needs of our students and community. To meet the community and students' needs effectively, it is imperative that we identify and understand the barriers, what Pinto (1960) calls "limit situations", that exist in the educational/political arena (p. 284). Pinto argues that limit situations are not "the impassable boundaries where possibilities end, but the real boundaries where all possibilities begin"; they are not "the frontier which separates being from nothingness but the frontier which separates being from being more" (p. 284).

The merging of these three areas serves to create our theoretical framework with which to examine the phenomenon of community-based critical teacher engagement. This theoretical framework serves as a tool for both the identification and analysis of community-based critical teacher engagement within CAR.

Study Context and Participants

The Latino community in Southern California has a long history of struggle for social justice and educational equity. This struggle stretches from *Roberto Alvarez v. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District* in 1930, the first successful school desegregation court decision in the history of the United States, through decades-long efforts to maintain viable bilingual education and biliteracy (Schirling, Contreras, &Ayala, 2000), to more recent support of the recent reconstitution of a school district board of education. In the early 1980s, the Latino educational and political leadership in the local community, sponsored by the Chicano Federation Coalition, began a series of meetings to consider issues that negatively impacted the community. These meetings culminated in forming an advisory committee to the superintendent of one of the largest school districts in the nation. In addition, this led to the formation of a Latino Summit in 1990

that focused on economic development, political empowerment and educational achievement.

In 1997, the Southern California Latino Coalition on Education (SCLCE) was formed to provide professional support that would directly address the educational issues of concern as identified by the community. An annual conference, the Latino Education Summit, was established to bring community together to dialogue and seek solutions to students impacted within the region. The Education Summit has brought together the best educational minds and community leadership in the local community concerned with the future of youth, particularly Latino youth. Furthermore, the SCLCE has led to the community becoming involved in implementing action plans to improve the achievement of Latino students from preschool to higher education. Specifically, the SCLCE has as its goal to improve the achievement of Latino students attending local K-12 schools, community colleges and universities, while placing attention on the issues of raising expectations, standards, and accountability.

Since 2005, the SCLCE K-12 teacher group has been engaged in critical action research with university professors. In the past two years, professors have added a public deliberation process, based on the Kettering Foundation Model (Mansbridge, 2007) to this CAR approach. The deliberation process served to name and frame explicitly the issues surrounding the Latino achievement gap. More importantly, it propelled the group towards strategically and effectively raising the level of consciousness and action.

This group is composed 30 Latina/o teachers, from eight school districts engaged in activism and advocacy to address the issues of educational access, academic rigor, teacher/school expectations, content standards, biliteracy policy and practice, and educational accountability. The majority of these teachers teach in low socio-economic communities where the majority of their students are Latinos and ELs. These teachers actively work towards promoting educational equity for all students, in general, and Latino youth in particular. These teachers understand that in order for real change to take place, they must work beyond the classroom walls to become politically engaged in the process of change.

Methodology

A CAR study was undertaken in the urban Southern California community over a three-year period between August 2005 and October 2008. The goal of the study was to document the efforts of a group of K-12 teacher activists in a large urban Southern California County as they actively struggled to create teacher advocacy and empowerment to address the educational conditions of low-income Latino students. The researchers considered themselves invested participants working with the education community to bring about positive change. Critical action research involves a cyclical process that allows for a more thorough understanding of a context and promotes reality change within the community (Stinger, 2007).

Moreover, it is collaborative and highly contextualized in nature and allows for the stakeholders to have a voice and impact the decision-making involved. Thus, a CAR methodology to explore K-12 teacher engagement concerned with promoting equity and social justice in our school communities is appropriate and needed. In addition, since CAR is not a clinical, pre-packaged research design where participants, methods, procedures are all predetermined, this methodology corresponded well to the issues this study intended to explore.

This study examined the following research questions:

1. What hinders or encourages K-12 teachers to engage critically with the local community to improve the educational conditions of low-income Latino youth?

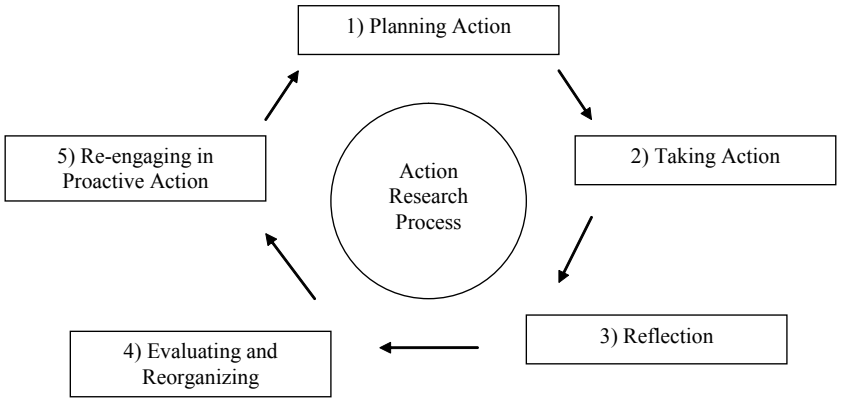
2. How can K-12 teachers advocate and work to address the pressing educational issues facing low-income Latino students?

Figure 1 outlines the process of self-evaluation that the teacher group underwent in this critical action research effort. The CAR cycle employed here is illustrated through a five step process: 1) planning action, 2) taking action, 3) reflecting on the process and results, 4) evaluation and reorganization, and 5) re-engaging in proactive action.

Participants in this study were 30 Latina/o K-12 teachers, from eight school districts, but also included 3-5 university professors (participation varied over the course of the study). Over a three- year period, participants met monthly in both large and focused groups to examine district and countywide issues related to educational equity. These monthly meetings led up to the planning of the annual Latino Summit. The Latino Summit is where the most pressing issues from the monthly meetings were organized in a public deliberation forum, in order for the Southern California community of educators to deliberate.

Within these monthly meetings, the teachers named and framed their limit situations in order to develop their limit acts, their planned actions in response to these limit situations. According to Pinto (1960), a strong step towards change is knowing the limit situations that inform the limit acts---the action towards the needed change. Thus, critical aspects of deliberation incorporated within our CAR was the naming of limit situations and then the identification of limit acts to frame and guide the action, as well as the CAR. The themes generated in the initial forum deliberation created a space and process for teachers to identify and name the inequities that contribute to the Latino achievement gap; the concern which initially brought the community together. These spaces and processes created a pathway for robust deliberations that helped teachers individually and collectively address the identified limit situations to engage in limit acts.

Figure 1. Action Research Cycle



Data included observation notes and minutes from teacher forums, focus groups, and interviews, as well as field notes and artifacts. Most importantly, in conjunction with an action research model, this study draws from the authors' personal experiences as active participants in the research activities. The authors' personal experiences ranged from leading deliberative forums to visiting school sites and conducting interviews and focus groups.

Our data analysis drew on Tesch's process for analyzing data (Creswell, 1994), which involves a process of reading the data, writing conceptual memos, identifying emerging themes, identifying categories based on these themes, annotating the data, coding the data, and writing summary notes.

Critical Action Research Themes

The peril and promise of creating teacher advocacy and empowerment through critical teacher engagement developed into three salient themes: (a) obstacles to engaging critically "beyond school walls," (b) spaces and processes that support teacher empowerment, and (c) educators as informed change agents.

Theme 1: Obstacles to Critically Engage "Beyond School Walls"

The dialogue with teachers revealed a process in which teachers are trained to be apolitical from the beginning of their careers, starting with their teacher preparation program and continuing throughout their careers via their in-service professional development. Addressing this theme, one teacher expressed the following: "I was told during my credential program to not rock the boat as a beginning teacher without tenure."

Through our discussions with participating teachers, and through our own experiences and observations, we found that professional development for teacher candidates and credentialed teachers focused on the "how and what" of teaching, and not necessarily on advocacy and empowerment of teachers, their students, and families. Reflecting on her professional development experiences, one teacher stated:

> I always felt that there was something I ought to be thinking/doing, but I had no idea what it was until…I was invited to confront the continuing existence and vigorous resurgence of un-named discriminatory practices toward low status students.

In fact, most participating educators reported being trained to believe that education as a whole is without politics as symbolized by the following comment: "I was taught that my job was to focus on my teaching and my students because education should not become political."

It quickly became evident through our work that teachers face many obstacles to critical engagement, especially at the local community level. For example, teachers, for the most part, are not taught or encouraged to think critically. On the contrary, we found that teachers were often discouraged from taking action beyond their school walls. We found that many of these obstacles occurred at the mesolevel, growing from the daily oppression these teachers faced from the educational system, exemplified by the following reflection:

> Wow, for the last four years I have worked and stayed between the lines of my classroom and the administration. But, I cannot contain myself any longer…how can I be ethically true to my beliefs and follow these unquestioned discriminatory practices that continue to deny equal access to my Latino students.

Such institutional oppression teachers experience when and where they speak up reinforces the microsystem level of teachers' identities as implementers of curriculum, often scripted curriculum, rather than as thoughtful, critical agents with professional opinions about the many aspects of education, both within and outside of the school walls.

> I have taught for 5 years, as a good Latina teacher, never questioned what I perceived as unfair practices toward English Language Learners because of the fear

> of losing my job. However, now that I have become involved in public deliberation and collaboratively named the equities that exist, not only at my school or district but county and statewide.

The voices above exemplify Freire's (2002) assertions that one of the basic elements of the relationship between the oppressor and oppressed is *prescription,* the imposition of one individual's choice upon another. In other words, the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior of the oppressor. Teachers (as the oppressed) are prescribed by the educational system to focus on specific apolitical activities.

Moreover, many teachers in this study recalled personally experiencing and observing colleagues experience what Freire (2002) calls "fear of freedom." Fear of freedom occurs subconsciously at the microsystem level, where individuals do not want to recognize the injustices in education, including their own role as oppressed and oppressor, and prefer to remain ignorant of educational realities and their own role within the educational system. For example, one teacher shared: "Things are going well…we are servicing students equally because we do not treat them differently…we met our AYP [Academic Yearly Progress]…"

On the other hand, for those educators who considered breaking from the domestication pressures, the majority shared a fear of administrative repercussions (i.e. being blacklisted or fired) if they openly voiced opposition to school, district, and/or state policy. This fear becomes even more pronounced in difficult economic times where full-time teacher positions are limited and many districts are laying off teachers and closing schools. This fear was shared in the following statement: "Once I started to see the inequities I was told to be careful about my advocacy by my principal because it was a form of insubordination and I could be reprimanded…I can't afford to get fired…"

In particular, the bilingual teachers involved in this critical action research reported being marginalized and "prescribed" a limited role without advocacy and decision-making. The teachers' perception was that their marginalization was clearly linked as an outcome of state legislation and federal policy, particularly California's Proposition 227, which essentially outlawed bilingual education, and the federal government's No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Together, these political forces created an anti-bilingual and top-down political climate at all levels of the K-12 education system.

> When Prop. 227 passed I was incredulous, that is also the day I realized that unless I became involved personally and professionally these discriminatory policies will not seize. I also realized that I could not work alone. When I was invited to participate in the SCLCE group I was hesitant, but thankfully my experience has been one of empowerment, I have found a place where my voice counts. More significantly, I no longer remain silent when unfair or non-researched based decisions are being made. I am no longer afraid to challenge because I find my strength with my *colegas* (colleagues) in this group.

In addition, all teachers described experiencing struggles and obstacles to advocate for students and parents in their school, demonstrating one way that mesosystem forces impacted the macrosystem level of cultural norms of what was considered appropriate behavior for teachers. However, these teachers actively worked not to cave into these pressures and disengage. With the support of the critical action research process, with an emphasis on deliberation, these teachers decided to take their advocacy to the local community level with a very clear and meaningful goal: to improve the educational conditions of Latino youth. In interviews, these teachers reflected on how many of their teacher colleagues (bilingual and non-bilingual) who were previously politically active were now forced to implement policies that they did not believe in but no longer challenged.

> The huge advantage I see in my involvement with SCLCE is that it helps me to not roll over and die when I feel that the situation is hopeless. I have the choice to give in, like many of my colleagues, or join in solidarity with members in this group. Teachers at my school tell me I have become too political…I tell my fellow teachers, I don't want to get political, but I will!

The reluctance from teachers to engage critically was also evident in the difficulty to recruit more K-12 teachers to participate in the SCLCE's effort to improve the educational conditions for low-income Latino youth. However, individual teachers began to work critically within their schools, as the following comment exemplifies:

> The research-based information I receive from engaging with this group has provided me with the knowledge base to rid my fear and to take action where action is needed. I have begun to work with a group of parents from my school. I am their advocate! The dialogues from this group have reinforced for me that parents have rights. I in turn have devoted myself to informing parents of their rights, particularly with respect to bilingual education. They are now, based on their rights, making demands from the school and district. I have learned to work around the system and through parents, in this manner they push toward their children receiving a pedagogically sound education and I don't fear administrative wrath.

Very often, when county and district "action" committees are traditionally formed to develop a strategic educational plan, they usually include participants at the "top" level of the education system, such as superintendents, county administrators, and possibly community members such as school board members. If teachers are included in this process, they are often hand picked and not given authentic voice or influence, but instead a symbolic advisory role. The selection process is indicative that teachers are not viewed or respected as "policy-makers" as evidenced by their exclusion. Consequently, most policy decisions impacting low-income Latino students are often developed without the direct influence of teachers who actually work with these students. In fact, throughout the length of

this three-year study, at the chronosystem level of analysis, we were not able to identify any formal institutionalized "spaces" for teachers that allowed educators to engage critically in intellectual discourse about the policies necessary to improve the education of low-income Latino youth.

In essence, the SCLCE provided a truly rare, yet critical space and opportunity for teachers from different school districts to connect and collaborate on important educational issues. Equally importantly, the reflective space that SCLCE provided has not been short-lived, but continues to exist. In so doing, the SCLCE continues to impact teachers on several levels, most immediately at the micro, meso, and chronosystem levels.

Theme 2: Spaces and Processes that Support Teacher Empowerment

We made a surprising discovery related to the meso and chronosystem levels of analysis, involving both the space and the process of CAR. While we anticipated benefits to providing this teacher engagement space, we were surprised to discover that this process, supported and facilitated by this space to engage critically, was just as important as the space itself. Recognizing the space and process to reflect afforded by CAR, one teacher commented:

> I am what you would refer to as a "seasoned teacher." I have taught through and around numerous California legislative propositions that clearly reflect racist ideologies meant to subordinate Latino/Mexican immigrants, such as the following propositions: 63, 187, 209, and most recently 227. Nowhere in my countless hours of professional development has a dialogue occurred where teachers analyze and act on these racist acts! The deliberative process and working with other educators that are willing to challenge and work toward changing the status quo has given me a renewed outlook and hope for the future.

The legislative propositions this teacher identified are forces coming from the macrosystem level that embody harmful ideologies, which not only affect our students, but are very often internalized by educators and manifested in their teaching and their treatment of Latino and other immigrant and minority groups. It was through the CAR process, particularly combined with public deliberation, that the group was provided both the space and the tools to collaborate with each other, and to reflect and dialogue with the broader SCLCE, including community organizations, higher education, parents and students.

> Having the opportunity to participate in the planning sessions for the Annual Latino Summit along with parents, university professors, county education leaders, and fellow colleagues has allowed me to gain first-hand knowledge and experience of the necessary steps needed to begin to organize ourselves in a way that demonstrates unity and a call for action.

Furthermore, the robust deliberation as embedded within the CAR process, supported educators with the tools to analyze, and thus better understand the educational context beyond their school walls.

> I have never spoken up in front of a large group before; I have lacked confidence and have been intimidated by others that always have the right words and supposedly the answers to working with English Language Learners. I now have developed a critical lens and have the tools to analyze educational issues; if I feel insecure or intimidated, I know I can come to this group for support. I no longer accept things as the dominant perspective presents them, I now research and question the administrative decisions, and better yet I serve on several committees where conversations that lead to decisions take place.

During the initial deliberation teacher participants engaged in the problem posing process outlined by Freire (1973):

- Naming significant dimensions of teachers' contextual reality;
- Analysis of reality;
- Interaction of various components of named reality;
- Generation of themes.

The process of naming and generating themes based on teachers' contextual reality enabled thinking about reality and action upon reality. This process then allowed teachers to go deeper in their dialogue regarding the generated themes, and in response to the following questions:

- What is the problem?
- What are the conditions that contribute to the problem?
- What are the possible solutions, options, and/or alternatives to the problem?
- What are the "*Limit Situations*," barriers to resolving the problem?

As a result of this problem posing process, teachers began to experience a level of consciousness that propelled them to work beyond the school walls and to engage politically. Below are some critical reflections about the process of deliberation via CAR and ensuing sense of political engagement from teacher participants:

> I never saw my role outside of the classroom; besides teaching the prescribed lessons…Through my serious engagement in dialogue with other teachers, I

> have come to realize that teaching is not neutral. Most significantly, I now find strength from my strength--to challenge the continued domestication of my vocation.
>
> In this journey, as a change agent, I reflect on the importance of personal awareness. From serendipitously becoming a school teacher to making a conscious choice to become politically engaged—searching for ways to work through and beyond limit situations, for the better good of our community.

After much deliberation, K-12 teachers narrowed the themes to what they believed were the most urgent action areas. Using the public deliberation process, they named the problems, the steps towards a solution, and the possible drawbacks. One outcome of these rigorous deliberations is that the teachers involved in the process developed a strong sense of community (hooks, 2003). This community further supported vigilant dialogues, which in turn helped teachers clarify and begin to use the language that spoke to the heart of the named issues. Collectively, this process allowed teachers to re-envision themselves as informed change agents. Together, space and process created the momentum to counter the institutionalized inertia with the objective of dismantling oppressive structures and mechanisms prevalent in both education and society.

As teachers came together in organized spaces to engage in critical discussions, informed by statistics and research, they began to see the power in their ideological clarity and solidarity:

> I have participated in the Latino Summit for several years, but many times we ended up preaching to the choir, you know everyone told their story of how bad things were at their school or district. However, once we initiated the deliberative process to our group work it allowed us to strategically weigh the pros and cons related to what we needed to change. It became clear to me that there is more power in collaborative work and dialogue that leads to action and that each of us must act as a change agent.

Theme 3: Educators as Informed Change Agents

The deliberation process allowed us to work alongside K-12 teachers in an effort to clarify the necessary steps needed to challenge the policies and practices that deter linguistically and ethnically diverse families and communities from accessing quality programs for their children. The cycle of critical reflection we engaged in gave real meaning to the following quote: “Public deliberation taps into a democracy of everyday life” (Mathews, 2002, p.279). The politics that we named opened doors for teachers who initially said, “I don’t know how to get meaningfully involved, I really don’t.” The following teacher quote is indicative of how teachers felt after participating in this CAR:

> I have gained courage within the solidarity that exists in this group of teacher activists. This group expects me to engage in advocacy and action, because of this engagement I now have changed my role from teacher technician to teacher/researcher/activist.

Yet, the public deliberation process as applied to CAR demonstrated, for the participating educators, that in order to begin the process, all one needed was first, an opinion about what *should* be happening around us; and second, a willingness to consider the opinions of others. These two provided the motivation for an exchange of views that led to the collective decisions we needed to propel our effective collective actions. These collective actions required teachers to engage in think tanks that allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of how to mobilize their fellow teachers and community. This was a long process. In other words, teachers were not able to jump right into making immediate changes; rather, they engaged with other educators through the deliberation process in which they analyzed and reflected upon the issues operating at the many levels within the education system, and learned the codes of power needed to prepare effectively for creating change.

The next strategic action involved the preparation of generated themes for a follow-up public deliberation among teachers, administrators, and community members. In seeking to clarify, understand, and attempt to solve some of the complex issues facing linguistically diverse school communities in our particular geographical area, surveys, related to addressing the educational needs of low-income Latino students, were distributed to K-12 teachers and administrators in this Southern California County. As a follow up to these surveys, a series of teacher interviews and focus groups were conducted. Collectively, this initial data set the framework for the second public deliberative forum. Overwhelmingly, this data indicated the greatest concern among the lack of (a) biliteracy programs, (b) linguistically and culturally responsive curriculum, (c) alternative use of assessments, and (d) access to higher education for Latino youth.

In order to provide focused dialogues in the areas identified by K-12 teachers in the initial deliberation, the follow-up forum was strategically divided into K-12 educators, parents, students, and higher education. While the deliberation process provided the space and process for educators to engage in critical action research, it simultaneously provided us, as researchers and educators, the opportunity to work with and through the community to address social and educational issues that work against the development of teachers as intellectuals.

Teachers responded to limit situations with limit acts (Pinto, 1960), directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the "given." The actions that were outlined during this forum included a division of labor in challenging and working with the county superintendent, boards of education, school administrators, other teachers, as well as the incorporation of parent education.

The work group has outlined specific responsibilities for themselves and follow up meeting dates to analyze the actions taken and to re-energize in order to re-engage in proactive actions. We came to the conclusion that the end segment of this cycle generated the first segment of the next cycle.

As of this writing, we have self-selected into specific work groups, including groups that meet with the county superintendent every two months, groups that meet with district superintendents on a monthly basis, groups that work directly with parents, and groups that continue to challenge boards of education. Something that is very clear to those that are in the position to make decisions, is that we have gained strength through this process and that we are not going to go away. Teachers are individually or/and collectively involved in community projects that are forcing school districts and administrators to rethink their practices. At the end of this lengthy process, teachers have proved their solidarity in theory and action. Their power, as a group, is now a central feature of this Southern California county landscape.

Discussion

To achieve "freedom" requires teachers (as the oppressed) to reject the "prescription" bestowed upon them and to replace it with autonomy and responsibility (Freire, 1998). The teachers must see themselves as historical active participants in creating and shaping humanity instead of as a-historical passive consumers of life. It became evident through this critical action research study that teachers who did choose to collaborate at the local community level, to advocate for the improvement for the educational conditions of low-income Latino youth, had developed an ideological clarity in terms of their beliefs and convictions about education and their role as educators. "Ideological clarity" refers to the process by which individuals struggle to identify both the dominant society's explanations for existing societal socioeconomic and political hierarchy and their own explanations (Alfaro, 2006; Bartolomé, 2008). However, the struggle for ideological clarity is confronted with fear of greater repression.

For those few individual teachers who struggle for social justice, their journey is often difficult and painful given the political context of a "one size fits all" approach led by NCLB, high stakes testing and scripted literacy curriculums. Most classroom teachers are neither taught nor encouraged to engage "beyond the school walls" to advocate for their students and families. Furthermore, administrators expect teachers to follow state/district/school level policies faithfully, regardless of their possible negative impact on low-income Latino students. The result is that fewer teachers actively advocate for their students and parents and challenge unjust school policies. In the end, teachers' perception of themselves as domesticated is impaired by their submersion in the reality of their oppression. In other words, it is not easy for educators, including administrators, to challenge a system that they have been indoctrinated to believe is fair and just. In part, this

critical action research project explored a philosophical, yet very practical question: what does it take for teachers to move beyond the school walls to advocate at the local community level? We found the answer via the space and process involved in critical action research utilizing a public deliberation model.

The CAR project described here demonstrates obstacles faced by educators to engage beyond school walls. The CAR model, in conjunction with the deliberation process, supported the self-empowerment of these teachers as change agents. But, in order to succeed, developing a critical consciousness and advocacy must be a community-based effort, one that is at once supported by and rooted within the community. Their common disposition and struggles built solidarity among the group of K-12 teachers, as well as the researchers. Educator engagement in policymaking is especially important in the forthcoming years because, as national politics change, new education policies take new directions and are implemented at local, state and provincial, and federal levels. In addition, NCLB itself is a work in progress. The law is due for reauthorization in 2010. Educators need to be a part of that dialogue and be forceful in their advocacy for their students when deliberations begin. Policymakers need to hear the voices of educators who are engaged in the community, because it is these educators who have engaged in a deeply analytical and reflective process that enables them to develop an intimate understanding of the needs of the linguistically and ethnically diverse children they serve; and thus who are best able to recognize the most effective practices and approaches to support academic equity and success amongst the diverse children of their community (Carter, 2005).

Conclusion

In our view, the teacher is not merely a technician, but an intellectual, experienced in critical thinking and civic action. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) clearly make their case that the teacher-as-intellectual will not emerge from a system focused on legitimating existing social relations. Instead, they argue that through social projects, critical interrogation of existing systems, and organizational alliances, teachers can create the conditions for emancipatory forms of self and social empowerment among both educators and students. In order for the K-12 teachers to address their collective concerns and struggles strategically, we employed the use of the deliberation process as a direct pathway to critical action research.

Over a period of three years, we engaged in critical action research as a method to both document and analyze the efforts of teachers as they fought institutional inertia and the actions of school personnel that served to neglect the educational opportunities afforded to low-income, linguistically diverse children. Three themes emerged from the data: (a) obstacles to critically engage "beyond school walls," (b) spaces and processes that support teacher empowerment, and (c) educators as informed change agents.

Given the cyclical process of action research and the critical lens of this particular study, we concluded it was not enough to plan and implement a single-faceted plan of action. Rather, as critical action researchers, our actions must continue to undergo systematic analysis in order to determine whether desired improvements take place and whether unintended consequences, good or bad, turn up as well (Hinchey, 2008). For this reason, we continue to engage in our work with the SCLCE, in which this critical action research is an ongoing process that does not end with the reporting of these results.

In addition to documenting the efforts of these teachers, this paper also seeks to contribute to a model of critical action research that draws on an interdisciplinary framework so as to more fully identify and analyze the processes involved in such research. In doing so, we applied a critical action research lens that draws from critical teacher engagement, ecological systems analysis, and action research theory. This integrated framework demonstrated a good fit in that it allowed for an examination of critical teacher engagement via action research through the analysis of the various players (e.g., teachers, administrators, professors) within multiple layered systems of education (e.g., classroom, university, community spheres) and across time and space. Hence, we observed teachers acting as both technicians and others who struggled to think and act in a critical fashion leading to engagement as change agents. We documented the multi-leveled forces impacting these teachers' abilities to plan and enact change so as to positively address the needs of low-income Latino youth. Our findings demonstrated, as ecological systems analysis indicates, that these forces were not unidirectional, but rather dynamic, ever-changing bidirectional forces at play across time, which leads to spaces that may simultaneously appear both constant and ever-changing (depending on the level and the force) within which the critical teacher activists engage.

According to Giroux (1988), teachers as transformative intellectuals must engage in a form of intellectual labor, not as technicians, in order to experience education in a transformative way. The process these teachers underwent, first to learn how to name and frame issues, as well as deliberate, was a powerful force in propelling them to develop and implement a bottom-up plan based on critical analysis of the issues via dialogue, shared decision-making, and citizen action. One of the most significant findings in this deliberative engagement was the action taken by the participants to incorporate deliberation into their personal and professional practice, beyond the scope of the action research project.

One outcome of this ongoing process is that it is proving to engage teachers' solidarity in practice. Their power is now a central feature of this Southern California County's landscape. Even after three years of vigilant work in creating change, new administrations come in and begin to apply spin to the outcomes of deliberations and agreements established with previous administrators with decision-making power. The type of psychological and ideological dissonance teachers in this study experienced helped them re-create their reality and thus see

other possibilities within the realm of action. As of this writing, Southern California County teachers maintain a solidly united front in the face of the institutional inertia that attempts to play on their individual interests.

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