Maestras Dedicadas:A Portrait of Chicana Teacher Activism in Troubled Times

by
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Two researchers document how veteran Chicana teacher activists, who have taught more than 15 years, remain in the classroom and challenge the pedagogy of control in urban schools. Our findings show that networking and relationships for Chicana teacher activists is developed on the basis of a common political agenda and a love of children. All of these teachers assist their students in retaining their Chicana/o language, culture, and Chicana/o identity is of primary importance and subversively alter the standardized curriculum to do so. The *testimonios* of these *maestras dedicadas* provide insights into the daily challenges veteran Chicana teachers face while negotiating the classroom during these troubled times. The seasoned activists also offer advice to new teacher activists.

Introduction

The Educational Climate: "Prescribed, scripted learning- and life is not like that!"

While public schools in the United States reflect increasing diversity in their student populations, schools do not reflect such diversity in their teaching force. In California, the state with the largest Latino/a population in the nation, the ratio of Latina/o teacher (16/1%) to student (48/71%) is minimal (CBEDS, 2007-08). It is no surprise that Chicana/o-Latina/o students face barriers that impede their par-

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ticipation in higher education and lag behind all other ethnic groups in finishing secondary and postsecondary school (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002).

Without question, educational conditions for an overwhelming number of Latino/a students are deplorable. One of the solutions is to hire teachers who understand the "cultural backgrounds," the economic circumstances, the language, and history of Chicano students (Verdugo, 2006, p. 30). But these recommendations are troubling, given that Latinos/as comprise the fastest growing student population nationwide and the teaching personnel remains predominately white.

We wish to make our position perfectly clear. We do not entertain the simplistic notion that replacing white teachers with those who reflect the complexions of Latino/a-Chicano/a students will lessen the dehumanizing conditions faced in our nation's schools. We are cognizant that teachers need to not only be "mindful of the cultural norms, values and practices of their students, but more importantly of the political realities and aspirations" of their students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, p. 705). We recognize that in this society, it is essential for children to have teachers who understand their language, who embrace the richness of their culture and history, who can communicate effectively with parents and community members, and who can relate to Latino/as as a distinct race of people who are marginalized in this society. We also understand that Chicana/o-Latino/a teachers must possess a sociopolitical understanding, a Chicana/o critical consciousness. Chicana/o teachers must have the knowledge and skills to identify unjust pedagogical practices and engage in the collective dismantling of unjust educational policies. In the words of one of our activists, Lizbeth, we must engage in the active dismantling of hegemonic policies such as No Child Left Behind (NLCB) because such policies promote curriculum that is "prescribed, scripted learning - and life is not like that!"

Maestras y Mujeres Dedicadas: Chicana Teacher Activists Through Thick and Thin

We have chosen to center our current study on Chicana teacher activists, maestras dedicadas, who have subversively provided an enriched curriculum for the students who share their culture and language. This qualitative study follows the experiences of six Chicana teacher activists, who have recently encountered difficulty in teaching because they believe that current curriculum practices negatively impact the learning of their students. For the past eight years, these teachers have been subjected to an educational environment that is "one-size fits all, reductionist, teach-to-narrow-required-standards, and the educational institutions dismiss as irrelevant the complex sociocultural, linguistic, and individual need of students" (Ahlquist, 2003, p. 58).

Our present study is the third of three separate studies on Chicana teacher activists. From 2006-2007, the purpose of the first two ethnographic case studies

was to document the socialization process experienced by seven new Chicana teacher activists and seven experienced maestras. Through a series of dialogical inquiry groups (tertulias) and in-depth interviews (pláticas) las maestras shared their testimonios. We found that networking and socializing among new Chicana teachers was empowering, but it was not enough to keep them in teaching. Further, we found that the experienced Chicana teacher activists negotiated the difficult environment of standardized testing, packaged curriculum, and the lack of autonomy in public schools (Montaño & Burstein, 2006). We documented how the more experienced teacher activists balanced their social justice identity, teaching and activism.

The research on both groups of teachers yielded similar results (Montaño & Burstein, 2007; Montaño & Burstein, 2006). The most pronounced was that a common ideological framework or teacher belief system was the strongest bond for Chicana teacher activists. When developing collegial relationships, teacher ideology was the primary factor. The research also revealed that social networks helped teachers negotiate the educational system and the longer these *mujeres* (women) remained in the profession the more diverse the activist circle became. Finally, the teacher activists utilized their classrooms and schools as "sites of activism." Schools were used to teach Chicano/a Studies, to advocate on behalf of Latino/a children, and establish relationships with parents. However, a disturbing consequence was found; while committed to their students, these activists could not commit to remaining in the profession.

The underlying motivation for engaging in this third critical project is to document how seasoned Chicana teacher activists view current educational reforms and to identify what keeps them in the profession. What can we learn about what sustains activist engagement and longevity in the classroom? And, given the high rate of teacher turnover in urban schools, can we create the conditions for Chicana teacher activists to remain in the profession?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Chicana Pedagogy

We situated this study in critical pedagogy, since "critical pedagogy is first and foremost an approach to schooling that emphasizes the political nature of education and "aims to understand, reveal and disrupt mechanisms of oppression imposed by the established order, suturing the process and aims of education to emancipatory goals" (Grande, 2007, p. 317). However, we also acknowledge, as have many indigenous and Chicana scholars, that one can "import the message of critical pedagogy without the wholesale adoption of its means" (Grande, 2004, p. 200). We believe that though these Chicana activists may not intellectualize or verbalize their struggles against neoliberalism, hyperaccountability, marginalization or corporatization in schooling using the same jargon as most critical researchers, the work (praxis) these Chicana activists do is ideologically and

politically a participatory, collective and critical project. According to Montaño, Lopez-Torres, deLissovoy, Pacheco & Stillman (2002), a teacher activist embodies and enacts the term "social justice" and considers the term a call to action.

Further, a teacher activist is involved in community or social justice issues outside of the school context. Teacher activists are not only interested in advocating for the transformation of traditional curriculum, but in creating substantive societal change. These *maestras* are engaged in a political battle (through teachers unions) to reclaim the public schools from those who seek to corporatize them and to turn them into institutions that are culturally, socially and linguistically responsive to the needs of disenfranchised communities (Montaño, Lopez-Torres, deLissovoy, Pacheco & Stillman, 2002). Given this definition of teacher activist, this study is situated in the praxis of critical pedagogy. But, to borrow a phrase from Red pedagogy, we wish to initiate a conversation or critical project that is a Chicana educational dialogue that can engage our *maestras* in a "dialogical contestation with critical and revolutionary theory (Grande, 2008). In addition, they need to examine points of tension and intersection between *Chicana critical pedagogy,* a framework base largely upon a borderland *mestizaje* feminist ideology and critical pedagogy (Saveedra & Nymark, 2008). Given the positionality, identities and ideologies of these women, it would be an injustice to do otherwise (Grande, 2008; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008).

We studied the frameworks of Chicana epistemology and borderlands *mestizaje* feminist ideology articulated by Chicana scholars such as: Alarcon, 1998; Anzaldúa, 1999; Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Elenes, 2003; and, Saavedra & Nymark, 2008. We acknowledge and affirm the experiences of these Chicana teacher activists as "experiences of Chicanas living in the in-between geographical and metaphorical spaces of the borderlands" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 269). *Mujeres* who, through their activism and stories, not only unweave the "legacies of colonization" in schooling but also through their actions are rebuilding and living the "transformative *nuevas teorias*" which is central in the struggle "to decolonize education" in the classrooms of urban schools (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 269).

These activist teachers identify as Chicanas and joined the teaching workforce on the heels of the Chicana/o civil rights movement. This is the generation of Chicanas who became activists when "identity was centered on race and ethnicity with a strong male overtones" and where women were "playing a critical role within the *movimiento* but their role was marginalized (while contesting marginalization) in the pursuit of a broader Chicano identity" (Rios, 2008, p. 3). In accepting the identity of Chicana, they have also embraced the inherent activism and social justice leanings that are crucial to being Chicana. Moreover, their identity or *Chicana critical consciousness* is subject to the social construct of race, language, gender and historical oppression. Chicana is a critically assumed identity (Alarcon, 1998) that when adopted is a social and political consciousness. Chicana carries a personal responsibility to critically analyze the societal context

of Chicanas, to name the political and social injustice placed upon a marginalized community, to instill in their students a love of Chicana/o culture, and to teach the forgotten and neglected history of their people (Montaño & Burstein, 2007). By accepting the label Chicana, these women have accepted the additional responsibility to become activists and agents for social and political change.

These women selected the educational arena as their sites of activism. These teachers were the activists who demanded that Chicana/o Studies be taught in school, struggled for bilingual education, and benefited from affirmative action. For many of these Chicanas, becoming a teacher was a political decision. They responded to the call for more Chicano/a teachers when students, parents and community members realized that teaching was a political act—a political act aimed at fundamentally changing education by radically restructuring a system that had lied to Chicano/as about their history, disrespected their language and endeavored to confine their population at the lower end of the economic scale.

For them, teaching was a calling, not just a job. A calling is defined as "the development of commitment and devotion, of a willingness to undergo personal sacrifice. It meant individual conditioning and the development of self understanding" (Adler, 1984, p. 5). While engaging in a process of personal sacrifice is considered a fundamental aspect of any teaching job, for these teacher activists the calling includes a willingness to "take a risk of confronting dissent and resistance" (Rendon, 2009, p.145) and for remaining in the profession for the long haul. When asked what made them different from new Chicana teacher activists, one teacher said, "We became teachers because we believe that we could make a difference in the lives of our children and since we were the first to benefit from a college education—we had to give back to the community. Teaching was a calling, a life-time commitment—not an in the meantime job."

Maestras Dedicadas Defined

We appropriated the term *maestras dedicadas* from a conversation with one of the *mujeres.* The term embodies the experiences of the veteran Chicana teacher activists, not because these women represent the stereotypical construct of the self-sacrificing, suffering, super Chicana, but because these *mujeres* have remained socially and politically active throughout their teaching careers. These women as life-long *radical educators* have approached the classroom as not only as a site of learning, but a political and cultural site. It is a site where they have learned to "produce, reinforce, recreate, resist, and transform" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 194) the standard curriculum into a culturally responsive curricula.

Secondly, while term *dedicated* suits these women because it symbolizes a long-term commitment to a political cause or social struggle, according to Marina it also characterizes teachers who "can be beaten down, but will never give up. You can pass repressive laws like Proposition 227 and No Child Left Behind, you can give us scripted curriculum and standardized tests, but a *maestra dedicada*

will never shut up or give up." As such, their identities as Chicanas is further developed by their participation in the struggle for educational equity, their daily interactions with other Chicanas, Latinas and progressive allies, their deliberate inclusion of Chicano/a cultural knowledge in their lesson plans, and the passion and love they have for their students.

The notion of *authentic caring* (Valenzuela, 1999) is another defining factor in these *maestras dedicadas*. Authentic caring is not only situated in critical pedagogy, but also in the historical and political struggles of the Chicana/o community. These teachers challenge, confront and resist dominant pedagogies by subversively altering the curriculum mandates of the present to teach for social justice. The concept of dedicated teachers reflects resiliency, resistance and engagement. Resilience is defined as the "ability to live with ongoing fear and uncertainty, namely the ability to positive adaption in spite of significant life adversities and to adapt to difficult and challenging life experiences" (Meichenbaum, 2005, p. 4). These women reflect the *audacious hope* "that stares down the painful path" of educational injustice; they are the ones who, despite the overwhelming odds against them, find the hope and the commitment to stay on the *hopeful path* (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 9).

We are privileged to bring you their *testimonios*, stories about how they have relied upon their Chicana cultural knowledge, their experiences in challenging sexism, racism and oppression, and the contestations and ambiguities that are a part of the on-going selective construction of their Chicana teacher activist identity. It is this "Chicana" experience that we believe has helped these teachers develop the political and ideological clarity (Bartolome, 2007) necessary to remain dedicated activists. In response to the limitations teachers face, these *mujeres* have used both pedagogical and activist skills to navigate the classroom setting. Perhaps sharing their stories will help others, who are as committed to changing the social, economic and educational context and to remain in teaching under the most adverse of circumstances.

Methodology

Borderland-*Mestizaje* feminism is more than a theoretical, epistemological or pedagogical framework. According to Saavedra & Nymark (2008) it is also a tool used to "travel and exist in our past and current sociopolitical borders and (multiple) *realidades"* (p. 257). Much like Critical Race theory and LatCrit, a theoretical framework used to explain, analyze and give voice to the racialized experiences and perspectives of Latino/as (Gonzalez & Davis, 2007), Chicana feminist methodology uses the *testimonios* and *, conversaciones* to make sense of the lives of Chicanas. In this ethnographic study, we engage in in-depth dialogue with teachers who identified themselves as Chicana activist teachers. For Chicanas engaging in *pláticas*, sharing their *testimonios* and otherwise breaking their silence is a form of resistance. For the researcher, it is a means for disrupting the

parameters of "traditional research." It engages the researchers and participants in a more critical, authentic approach that reveals the lived experiences of people. This is the methodology we employed throughout, from developing the framework, to the selection of the *maestras,* to the analysis of data and to reaching our conclusions.

Participants

We determined the criteria for participation and chose the participants through purposeful sampling using the snowball sampling method (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The selection criteria was to choose *mujeres* who: 1) identified as a Chicana, 2) had 15 years or more of teaching experience, 3) were currently teaching in urban schools, and 4) were involved in an activist organization. We chose this group of women because it mirrored the teaching population in urban settings that had imposed mandates. Through one-on-one *pláticas* lasting one hour or more, we documented the process used by these women to construct knowledge and negotiate current reform policies. We collected and transcribed their stories (*testimonios)* looking for commonalities in experiences and ideas. If we needed clarity on a point or had questions, we followed up with phone calls and emails. In fact, the title for this paper was developed during a phone call with one of the *maestras.*

The *maestras* are six teachers from urban schools in predominately Latino communities. Marina and Tatianna have 20 years of teaching. Sylvia and Lizbeth have 16 years of teaching experience. Rita has 21 years in the classroom and Rosamaria has over 33 years of teaching experience. We collected data between 2008 and 2009. Each teacher was asked to fill out a sociogram (graphic organizer) of her support network in and outside of schools (Burstein, 2001). After the sociogram was reviewed, each participant, who will be identified by only using pseudonym, answered a series of questions from a semi-structured interview protocol. Using themes from the literature, we created questions about identity, teacher philosophy, sources of activism, sustaining activities and relationships, and strategies to sustain and connect new and more experienced teacher activists. Each *testimonio* was audio taped, transcribed word for word, and analyzed in multiple sessions in order to uncover patterns, commonalties and emerging themes. In the data analysis process, we used a constant comparative method to analyze and triangulate the data (Creswell, 1998). We confirmed the emerging themes with the participants to test the reliability of their responses.

Findings

Beyond La Chicana: Expanding the Circle

After careful analysis of the data collected from *testimonios*, five major themes emerged from the *pláticas*. Our first finding was a reemerging theme, one that had

previously appeared in our two earlier studies. Not surprisingly, the primary social and support networks for these Chicana teacher activists were established with other socially and politically conscious Latinos/as. The second commonality was that they had realized their identity as Chicana while in college. Moreover, many of these Chicanas had other family members who either identified as Chicano/as or were activists. The third theme was their description and ownership of their activist identity. The fourth and most powerful theme was expressed when these *maestras dedicadas* shared how their commitment to community and children is what keeps them in the classroom. Finally, the last theme was that although many of these *mujeres* do not have close relationships with the new Chicana teacher activists, all of them believe that the more experienced *maestra* is responsible for establishing the relationship and for beginning the *comadrazgo,* a system of spiritual bonding among women much like related sisters.

Social Networks: Chicanas/os and Social Consciousness

The majority of sociograms drawn by the participants included close relationships with those who were Latina or Chicana. The *maestras dedicadas* were more selective in establishing a network of more critically, socially, and politically consciousness people and the establishment of these relationships did not center on whether or not the person was Chicana/o or Latino/a. The activist circle included not just Chicanas who shared their belief system and teaching philosophy but also other whites, males, and women of color. Many of these connections were formed initially as grade level contacts with teachers in their immediate school, but then developed into supportive school and personal relationships. The important factor for establishing a relationship was a shared loved for teaching children of color, whether those children are Latino or African-American. These teachers also looked for others who were committed to culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. The *maestras dedicadas* initiated most of these relationships because they had more teaching experience. Clearly, what drew these women to other activist teachers was the passion they held for children, parents, and the community.

These activist colleagues provided a range of support, from the practical fundamentals of teaching to providing critical emotional and ideological support. Most of the veterans shared their lesson plans with each other especially if they were team-teaching. They supported each other's teaching style, used culturally relevant teaching materials and held similar views about teaching Chicano/a-Latino/a culture and history. The most crucial nature of collegial support is emotional and ideological. Lizbeth said, "These people get it. I don't have to explain myself." Since their backgrounds and viewpoints were similar, they spent more energy and time on connecting on pedagogy rather than having to explain their ideology. In talking about her other colleagues who do not share her ideology or life experiences, Sylvia said,

> There is a spectrum of where people are and what they understand. It is one thing to understand cultural relevance and it is another thing to develop it or to have it innately. Some [teachers] have none or very little or don't really care. Some are struggling to understand because they have to step into a different culture to meet their students' needs. It is easier for me because I do not come from privilege or entitlement like my white counterparts. If you haven't experienced racism then you do not see when you are practicing it either. You don't know what it feels like. You see it all the time when you have lived it.

While ideological support was the most important factor for establishing and maintaining relationships, many of the *maestras dedicadas* also had colleagues outside of their activist circles. The circle of camaraderie included some who were not activists but who supported the *maestras* activism in the community. The teacher's union was the primary site of activism. Several *maestras* bemoaned the constraints of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), specifically the testing and accountability craze. Many look to their work with the teachers union at the local and national level to support their activist philosophy. Their work with the union gave them a place to work on issues within their schools and to implement a pedagogical project that was culturally and critically responsive to the needs of their community. Beyond the issues impacting their particular community, these union activists also worked on the larger issues of teacher protection and the politics of large school districts.

Chicana Identity

All of the women in the study identified as Chicana, except one who identified as Latina, but acknowledged the Chicana-ness on "her mother's side." Becoming Chicana was a deliberate and conscious choice. These Chicana teacher activists became Chicana in college. Like many Chicanas, they were influenced by political movements for an end to an unjust war, for self-determination and for the recognition of Chicano/as as an oppressed people in this country. For many Chicano/a students this struggle included the demand for Chicano/a Studies, bilingual education, and affirmative action. For Chicanas, this political quest was coupled with a desire for an end to sexism and the attainment of an equal space in the Chicano/a movement for social justice. For the first time, these Chicanas interrogated the more "traditional" United States history and studied the history and culture of Chicano/a people within newly established Chicano Studies programs and departments. In their *testimonios*, these Chicanas reflected on their disengagement during their K-12 education, because their Chicano/a story was invisible and because Chicano/a culture and history was never taught in schools. Sylvia stated,

> It wasn't until college that I got courses in Chicano History. I was very hungry at that time to learn my history as a part of U.S. History. It was like this person was developing and then college made it come together. I felt complete [with filling] in the missing pieces.

Lizbeth stated another example of the college awakening:

> The principle reason for becoming a teacher was that I was so disengaged with my own schooling, especially in middle and high school. When I went to college and became involved with La Raza studies, I had this amazing awakening. I think about identity and see myself in these kids.

Along with these pivotal college experiences, many of these Chicana teacher activists pointed to activist family members who had raised their consciousness. Several women had immediate family members who were involved in unions. Others learned to be activists from the *testimonios* shared in their homes by fathers would who taught them Chicano/a history or told stories about great Latino leaders. Some women witnessed the quiet examples of activism exhibited by their parents. One teacher during a *plática* shared her mother's *testimonio* about a courageous challenge against racism.

> In a simple way, my mom was an activist. I moved to a white neighborhood and we were the only Latino family for miles. All my friends were little blond girls. The first time I had any clue about race was when a little boy said, "Get out of my house, you stupid taco." I remember being numb and running back to my house and saying, "*Me llamo* stupid taco." I just knew it was different from being called stupid fatty or whatever. My mom hugged me and took me to the house and told me to call him a "stupid hot dog." I never forgot that. (Lizbeth, 2008)

Teacher Activist Identity

These *mujeres* became classroom teachers to enact a critical and social justice pedagogy. They see their life's work as classroom teachers as part of a community struggle for hope and opportunity through educational attainment. Marina shared, " I teach to give back to the community and to offer hope, a light at the end of the tunnel for other girls in the community."

Through their *testimonios* these *maestras dedicadas* shared the difficulties of enacting a social justice stance in the schools where they worked, where they were often seen as troublemakers. These Chicana teacher activists were singled out for their tenacity and their reputation for always verbalizing an oppositional opinion about policies that did not seem to consider what was in the best interest of Chicano/a-Latino/a students. While all of these teachers were compelled to speak up, they were frequently silenced or ignored. It seemed that faculty meetings were one of the greatest sources of stress for these educators. They felt they had to raise issues because others did not. Sylvia stated,

> I have to pick and choose now. My concern is that when you are the voice all the time, I just become a voice and my words are not heard. That can really burn a person out. It is difficult enough to speak out—it is crushing to speak out and your voice is gone and not heard. You are screaming but it is silent.

In addition to speaking out, many of these teachers act and teach subversively because the current educational climate conflicts with their teaching philosophy. Many veterans find that the administration monitors everything so closely because testing/accountability are the main focus in schools. Rita said,

> The administration monitors every "i" that you dot and wants to see everyone on the same page in the same lesson. Real teaching is not like that. [You] cheat the system. You cheat and skip some stuff to get in good lessons. I teach subversively.

Many of these *mujeres* describe strained relationships with their administrators because they were vocal. The *maestras dedicadas* were charged with bringing up issues and causing discord among the staff. In one case, this teacher talked about how her principal singled her out for "petty things". After a while, the battle is just too hard, and someone else needs to step up. Lizbeth laments,

> I have been here for 16 years and I hate to say this, but I think I have backed away little by little. There is a point where you just get tired of the battle, of constantly speaking up. We have a few young Latino/a teachers and they should start speaking up now.

These activist teachers continue to speak up and question the status quo even if others do not. All the women recounted that like-minded colleagues inside the school and activist colleagues outside the school supported them. But the main reason they stay in teaching is because of their dedication to the children and families in their communities.

Resilience, Resistance and Engagement: What Keeps Las Maestras Dedicadas in the Classroom

All of the veteran activist teachers chose teaching as a calling, a way to give back to their communities. They felt compelled to lead by example. These teachers made conscious decisions to go back to their communities or similar communities to connect with Latino/a children in a way that valued these children as Latinos/as.

Many Chicana teacher activists talked about voice. As teachers, they were the "voice" who spoke up in staff meetings or the "voice" that advocated for Latino children in grade level meetings. These teachers were the conduit between the families and communities because they came from a place of understanding. Tatianna stated,

> I feel I have to stand up for [the little guy] because the underdog in my situation are my teachers who are afraid to speak up. They are my parents who don't have the language or advocates to defend them. They are my students who don't know any better. This is what sustains me, especially this year.

It was not enough to just teach but to teach for social justice and include the history and culture of their people. In the classroom, these *maestras dedicadas* wanted children to know that their teacher was one who shared their history, language, experiences, and culture. All of the participants included the history and culture in the school curriculum. Lizbeth shares her passion to include the Chicana/o-Latino/a voice:

> The kids see me as a role model. They see me and know about my activism and social justice and we talk about race. My philosophy for my students of color is for them to know how important their history is every day and also to validate their home life and language.

For many of these activists, sharing Latino/a-Chicano/a heritage and history with their children is a form of early exposure to the information these children will learn later in college. These teachers brought in multiple perspectives and added units about Latino/a-Chicana/o history. Children studied about famous social movements as part of an integrated curriculum instead of waiting for holidays like Cesar Chavez Day. Rita said, "I give my students the parameters to explore who they are." Marina takes a different approach to include more multicultural strands. She said,

> I go to workshops and see that some teachers have never heard of multicultural education. How can you not know? Because of who I am and my interest in multicultural education, it is something I expect my students to learn. I don't want my kids to be ethnocentric. But what this scripted teaching and learning does is not authentic and not true.

They challenged the status quo of teaching Open Court Reading (OCR) as a scripted program and instead want to make connections to a greater project of social justice. In addition, these activist teachers modify and scaffold the curriculum for students who are acquiring English.

While access to a full curriculum is considered by most of these teachers an act of social justice, the *maestras dedicadas* also work on issues of equity and access. Several teachers stated that educating the families about the American school system is an assumed personal responsibility. They want parents to know what their children are learning in school, how to support homework, and to be involved with their children's schooling. Rita commented, "Connecting with families is the center of my activist framework. I am constantly fighting for the rights of the kids and pushing them to get an education and pushing the parents to get involved with the school." Lizbeth spoke about how many of her immigrant children did not raise their hand when asked if they were going to college.

> All the affluent and bilingual kids raised their hands. I wanted it to be a safe place so I asked those kids to go in the hall. [I then asked] 'What makes you think you

> can't go?' They said they think they just can't go. They said, 'I don't think I am ready or I'm not smart enough. I have never heard that at this school.

Moreover Lizbeth, because she is of Mexican background and the daughter of manual laborers, shared a special connection with her children. She took every opportunity to share her background. The teachable moments included *testimonios* about how her mother worked in factories and hotels and her father was a cook. She was a living example that as a Chicana, "if she could go to college, so could they."

Connecting with New Chicana Teacher Activists

These Chicana teacher activists have tenaciously and consistently negotiated the school environment, but finding and connecting with new teacher activists has been problematic. They lament the lack of opportunities and complain about the failure to find time during the school day to connect with the new Chicana teacher activists. Several of the *maestras* blamed the mandates of Open Court, testing and accountability measures for taking up time that could otherwise be used to develop relationships with new teachers. Many described how new teachers have outside obligations such as mandatory participation in induction programs, coursework to clear their credentials or move up the salary schedule. In the past, new teachers had more time to connect with veterans after school. Now, these new teachers leave as soon as their work is done, making it nearly impossible to connect socially.

The *maestras dedicadas* also commented on the quietness of the new teachers in faculty meetings. These veteran Chicana activists commented that new teachers who have social justice leanings are not vocal and therefore are hard to recognize. Many of the veteran activists commented that new teachers were not involved in the same way the veterans were at that age. New teachers feel more connected to global issues than community issues. Tatianna shared a good example,

> Their social conscience is global whereas mine is more community. I look at their issues and say yes, I want to save the world but let's save East LA first. I want to make sure students have their rights and things our students need are addressed.

Despite these challenges, the *mujeres* were adamant that it is their responsibility to reach out to new teachers. They all mentioned that is was their leadership that would bring new teachers into activist circles. They suggested that they could provide help, materials, lesson plans, and ideas at first and then the new teachers would see what the *maestras dedicadas* had to offer. Once the bond is made, they could collectively move toward social justice work in school communities or on union issues. Tatianna stated, " I think it is the leaders who need to

reach out. We need to focus on change. We should find people with similar goals to attain change, even if they don't have similar beliefs."

In addition, social gatherings were identified as places Chicana teacher activists could convene. The Chicana teacher activists reported that while there was no time to connect during the school day, a social gathering after school might work. Rita commented, "Find ways to navigate the waters—if it is humor or something that interests them, then it is easier to bring them in and get that respect between the two [veterans and new teachers]. Two veteran teachers said it was too risky to be active before getting tenure so "toe the line and advance your agenda with veteran partners." Rita disagrees; "it is our responsibility to get our hands on them. You can't let them sit there and let them be. [Sometimes] you have to agitate to get them involved."

One of the *maestras dedicadas* advanced the idea that the connection starts at the university level in the teacher education programs. "We have to get Latinos into college and graduating from our teacher education programs," said Sylvia. By starting when they enter the credential program, there is more time to develop an activist framework and to teach the skills and tools they need to navigate the schools. In addition, the university is where future principals are trained. If principals were immersed in ways to make schools culturally relevant for all students, social justice educators would be hired and supported at the school site.

Conclusion

While there are differences among the women, the similarities are astounding—all of these teachers believe that their responsibility to assist their students in retaining their Chicana/o language, culture and Chicana/o identity is of primary importance, and that subversive transformation of the curriculum is the means for attaining this goal. Moreover, *mujeres* in all three studies remain steadfastly committed to the eradication of oppressive conditions in schools. Collective and personal *resistance* are factors which help teachers negotiate the standardized curriculum, and their personal resistance is modeled by changing the curriculum. Collective resistance is evident by their continued engagement in activist communities.

In all three studies networking and relationships with other Chicana teacher activists help keep these women in the profession. These women deliberately seek others who have a common political outlook, educational and political ideology, and a love of children. The *mujeres* develop social relationships with other like-minded Latinas but, they longer they remain in the profession, the more diverse the activist circle becomes. More experienced Chicana teacher activists have activist circles that include others who are socially conscious, regardless of race or sex. The *maestras dedicadas* were much more vocal than less experienced teacher activists and their activism was a constant outside the classroom. Unfortunately we must reiterate that the "current culture in our schools does not allow the *maes-*

tras to enact a social justice agenda in full view but subversively' (Montaño & Burstein, 2006, p. 196). A question worthy of future study is since networking is a strategy for coping and one that appears to keep teachers in the profession, can schools become not only sites of activism, but a means for bringing Chicana teacher activists together?

Another question to investigate is how veteran teachers use unions as a site of activism. Most veterans are union activists and this lack of involvement by the younger generation is an issue of concern. As Rita asked, " Do they recognize the role of the union in defending public education?" We would like to examine the possibility of teacher unions as a potential site for engaging in activist work across generations.

In light of the data collected and analyzed, we need additional research on the generational differences between new and veteran Chicana teacher activists. For example, since networking is a strategy for coping and since teachers network with others who have the same perspectives, why is there a disconnect among generations*?* Since it appears they all share a common thirst for radical, fundamental changes in the education of Chicano/a children, why do they choose to enact their social justice agenda apart from one another?

One fundamental difference among the women is the time these women have spent in the profession and as activists. The *maestras dedicadas* have developed life-long patterns of resilience, resistance and engagement, some of which was learned during their college years. The height of the *Chicano movimiento* was the point of entry in *activist work* for the veteran teachers and played a significant role in shaping their world outlook. Since many of the younger activists were children during the height of the movement, does this make a difference in their world outlook or in how they perceive the struggle for educational justice?

Completing this study raised several questions for this project. As critical teacher educators, we hope to find ways of bringing these women together, so that they might share curriculum, strategies of coping and resistance, and successful ways to communicate with peers, administrators, and community members. We must provide opportunities to unite the social justice activists in activist circles, social and political movements and in collective community projects. It is clear from our interactions with these *mujeres* that much more work is needed to expand the research base on teacher activism and through the examination of the lives, *testimonios,* and experiences of Chicana/o teacher activists.

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