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Latinx Youth Counterstories in a Court Diversion Program

Gerardo Mancilla

Abstract

The study explores the counterstories of Latinx¹ youth participants in a court diversion program. The Esperanza program works to re-integrate Latinx youth back into the educational system as a way to divert them from the juvenile justice system. This narrative qualitative research study included 33 interviews with youth participants, parents, program staff, and other stakeholders using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) as theoretical frameworks. The youth were referred to the Esperanza program, engaged with the program, changed their thinking, and transformed their lived experiences. In particular, they created their own counterstories about immigration and identity. The findings of this study are significant because they provide examples of Latinx youth needs that are not being offered in their current educational system.

Keywords: Counterstories, Latinx, School-to-Prison pipeline, Critical Race Theory, LatCrit

Introduction

Many scholars have focused on the educational attainment for Latinx students. Yosso and Solórzano (2006) highlighted “the serious and persistent leaks in the Chicana/o educational pipeline” (p. 1) and addressed the conditions that affect youth in this pipeline. Students are dropping out or being pushed out at various stages throughout their educational pipeline trajectory. In 2006, only 46% of Chicana/o

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students graduated from high school (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). Recent data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014) suggests that the graduation rates for Latinxs have improved, yet they remain below the national average. In 2009-10, the national graduation rate was 78% for all students and 71% for Latinxs. Then, the White House released a report stating that national graduation rates reached an all-time high at 83.2%. For Latinxs, however, the graduation rate was 77.8% (White House, 2016).

In Wisconsin, the graduation rates for the state have remained between 86% and 88% from 2010-2013 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2014), the 4-year graduation rate for White students increased from 85.7% (2009-10) to 88% (2012-13). During that same time period, the 4-year graduation rate for Latinxs increased from 69% (2009-10), to 72% (2010-11), 74.3% (2011-12) and 74.3 (2012-13). Although high school completion rates continue to improve, there are many Latinx students who are not graduating from high school. It is important to understand the barriers to educational success that students face.

In addition to the leaky educational pipeline, many policies criminalize youth of color including Latinx students. United States schools began adopting zero tolerance policies modeled after the “tough on crime” or “get tough” policies to address school discipline between 1980 and 1993 (Wrightsmann, Greene, Nietzel, & Fortune, 2002). According to Heitzeg (2014), “the school to prison pipeline refers to this growing pattern of tracking students out of the educational institutions, primarily via ‘zero tolerance’ policies, and tracking them directly and/or indirectly into the juvenile and adult criminal justice system” (p. 12). The zero tolerance policies affect youth of color disproportionately and criminalize youth. U.S. news coverage and educational researchers have documented stories of the effects of zero tolerance policies on students. Ayers, Dohrn, and Ayers (2001) list four clichés that demonstrate a disturbing pattern of the impact zero tolerance policies have on students. They list the following examples:

- A high-school boy pulls out a steak knife in the cafeteria to peel an apple, and is expelled for weapon possession.
- A fifteen-year-old Chicago youth is assigned to bring an object from home in order to write a report for his English class; when he enters the school with a large, elaborate carved cane, he is expelled for bringing a weapon to school.
- A fourth grader forgets his belt at home and is suspended for violating a school dress code.
- Another Chicago boy, in a disagreement with a teacher over writing “I will not misbehave” on the board several hundred times, says, “I’m going to take this to the limit,” and is expelled for threatening a teacher’s life. (Ayers et al., 2001, p. xii)

School discipline policies are supposed to be implemented and enforced equally for all students; however disciplinary policies are often disproportionately applied

and enforced against African American and Latinx students. Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) have explored the disparities in disciplinary consequences for students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. They found that students of color are often disciplined for subjective reasons (e.g. wearing a cap, speaking loudly, or tone of voice), while white students are disciplined for observable behavioral reasons (e.g. smoking marijuana). *Dignity in Schools* (2014) further explains the disparities in school discipline, “70% of students arrested or referred to police at school are Black and Latino. While Black students represent 16% of enrollment, they represent 31% of school-related arrests.” Students of color are criminalized through the unequal application of school disciplinary policies. Scholars have begun to discuss this criminalization as the “school-to-prison” pipeline. According to Heitzeg (2014), “In part, the school to prison pipeline is a consequence of schools that criminalize minor disciplinary infractions via zero tolerance policies, have a police presence at the school and rely on suspensions and expulsions for minor infractions” (p. 12).

Scholars such as Wald and Losen (2003), Gregory et al. (2010) and Heitzer (2014) have addressed the concern of inequalities in a system with high-stakes testing where minorities disproportionately experience lower high school graduation rates, reduced levels of academic achievement, and higher rates of attrition. The authors note that schools mimic the “get-tough approach” of the criminal justice system. Alexander (2012) explained how the War on Drugs and the “three-strike” policy under the Clinton Administration increased sentencing for drug violations. The policies were based on the idea that the police had to be tough on crime in order to get rid of it. The policies disproportionately affected people of color. Similarly, the school system began to introduce zero tolerance policies based on fear sensationalized by the media. Heitzeg (2014) explained the media construction of crime and criminals, “TV-driven notions of black and Hispanics as ‘predators’ provide whites and others with justification for pre-judgment and negative responses. Media-based preconceptions may play a role in the school to prison pipeline” (p.15). The policies in the school system and the juvenile justice system are driven by a rhetoric of fear that affects people of color disproportionately.

Latinxs and other ethnic and racial minorities are also overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. The concept of Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) (Short & Sharp, 2005) has been used to discuss this overrepresentation of minorities in the justice system. Villaruel and Walker (2001) reported that, compared to their white counterparts, Latinxs were arrested 2.3 times more often, prosecuted as adults 2.4 times more often, and imprisoned 7.3 times more often between 1996 and 1998. They also found that Latinxs were 2 to 3 times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts. According to Heitzeg (2014), “nationally, 1 in 3 black and 1 in 6 Latino boys born in 2001 are at risk of imprisonment during their lifetime” (p. 18).

Court diversion programs were established by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the court systems to divert youth from entering the juvenile justice system. Municipal courts referred students court diver-

sion program for many reasons including aggression, alcohol and other drugs, and gang prevention. Hamilton, Sullivan, Veysey, and Grillo (2007) stated that diversion programs worked to decrease cost for juvenile justice involvement and reduced the stigma associated with juvenile delinquency. In addition, the programs promoted students' wellbeing and family functioning. The diversion programs varied from recreation, advocacy, resource brokering, to vocational or educational training as well as group or individual counseling (Palmer, 1994). In the United States, there were 52 different juvenile justice systems plus tribal juvenile justice systems (Porter, 2011). However, there was no uniformity in court diversion programs because most were handled at municipal levels offering different programs and different implementations. There are also critics of court diversion programs. Strategies for youth (n.d.) addressed "scared straight" strategies that use consequence of illegal behavior as forms of deterrent for youth. The programs focused on punishment and fear, similar to tough on crime, in an attempt to reduce juvenile crime.

The Current Study

This study explored the Esperanza program as a court diversion program. Many Latinx students in the municipal courts were referred to this program in this county. The program served to interrupt the school to prison pipeline. This research attempts to understand the impact the program had on youth and families. Two of the research questions that guided this study were:

- How is "success" defined in the Esperanza program?
- What stories (and counterstories) do Esperanza participants have?

Theoretical Framework

Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) were utilized as analytical lenses to explore how the court diversion program in this study interacts with multiples systems and offers a voice to Latinx youth and their parents. Both Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from Critical Legal Studies, which challenges the notion of "hegemony" by drawing attention to how the dominant culture perpetuates ideas and uses language to maintain power and control, and to keep certain populations marginalized (Gramsci, 1971). Bell (1992), widely considered the primary architect of CRT, addresses issues of race and the persistence of racism in the United States. He states, "Indeed, the very absence of visible signs of discrimination creates an atmosphere of racial neutrality and encourages whites to believe that racism is a thing of the past" (Bell, 1992, p. 6). He linked racial disparities in poverty, unemployment, and income to the Rules of Racial Standing. The rules address the legitimacy of Black people, the validity of their experience, objectivity of their arguments, and perceptions when they take

actions. Bell suggests that people need to understand these rules to understand policies, laws and everyday interactions. His fifth rule states,

True awareness requires an understanding of the Rules of Racial Standing. As an individual's understanding of these rules increases, there will be more and more instances where one can discern their working. Using this knowledge, one gains the gift of prophecy about racism, its essence, its goals, even its remedies. The price of this knowledge is the frustration that follows recognition that no amount of public prophecy, no matter its accuracy, can either repeal the Rules of Racial Standing or prevent their operation. (Bell, 1992, p. 125)

With a central focus on race, CRT challenges race-neutral, color-blind, meritocratic and apolitical policies and structures (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado Bernal, 2002). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain:

But examination of class and gender, taken alone or together, does no account for the extraordinarily high rates of school dropout, suspension, expulsion, and failure among African-American and Latino males. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 51)

CRT also acknowledges the historical and contemporary realities of race, racism, and white privilege (Yosso, 2006) and serves as a tool to deconstruct whiteness, privilege, and oppression. Using a CRT lens, scholars can explore the oppressive aspects of society and individual transformations (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). CRT's commitment to social justice is demonstrated through the individual and societal transformation it seeks to accomplish.

Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) emerged from Critical Race Theory (CRT) to further understand the multidimensional impact of dominant constructions and narratives surrounding race in relation to Latinx people and culture including language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype and sexuality (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2006). Similar to CRT, LatCrit calls for both social and legal transformation with a specific focus on Latinx issues. Social Justice is a part of LatCrit and uses the theoretical framework to call for action. Valdes et al. (1997) introduced the concept of LatCrit as part of a symposium between the *California Law Review* and the *La Raza Law Journal* in an attempt to bring together critical legal scholars focusing on issues affecting the Latinx community. He stated that LatCrit incorporates four main functions including:

(1) the production of knowledge; (2) the advancement of transformation; (3) the expansion and connection of struggles; and (4) the cultivation of community and coalition. LatCrit also can be expanded to examine concerns that impact Latinx communities beyond the U.S. borders (Yosso, 2006). Perez-Huber (2009) further explains that LatCrit is an extension of the efforts of CRT that allows researchers to better understand the lived experiences specific to Latinxs. CRT and LatCrit both "acknowledge that educational structures, processes, and discourses operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize and the potential to emancipate and empower" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 109).

One particular aspect of LatCrit and CRT that applies to the Esperanza participants is the importance of counterstories. Delgado (1989) uses the term counterstorytelling to describe a technique of telling the stories and experiences that are usually marginalized, ignored or simply not told. Yosso (2006) would add that counterstories recount the experiences of racism and resistance from the perspective of marginalized populations. Counterstories demonstrate hope and possibilities for success. Yosso also (2006) identifies four ways in which counterstories may be helpful: (1) counterstories can build community among those at the margins; (2) counterstories can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center; (3) counterstories can nurture community cultural wealth, memory, and resistance; and (4) counterstories can facilitate transformations in education. Gonzalez, Plata, Garcia, Torres, and Urrieta (2003) also add *testimonios* [testimonies] as a pedagogical tool and as a way to capture the counterstories. *Testimonios* also acknowledge the political context and lived experience of people. Lastly, testimonios and counterstorytelling are critical because they challenge prevailing narratives about oppressed groups that are constantly being legitimized by those in power. Tate (1994) emphasizes this point when he states, "The dominant group of society justifies its power with stock stories. These stories construct reality in ways to legitimize privilege. Stories by people of color can counter the stories of the oppressor" (p. 249).

Methodology

LatCrit (Yosso, 2006; Perez-Huber, 2009) and CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado Bernal, 2002) were the theoretical frameworks used in this study. In alignment with these frameworks, a Critical Race Methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) was implemented to explore the intersection of race, class, gender and the multidimensional aspects of Latinx people. In this study, CRT was used to (1) challenge deficit-thinking models, (2) highlight race and racism, and (3) apply the multidisciplinary aspects of the research. I drew from LatCrit to (1) challenge disproportionate minority contact, (2) focus on experiential knowledge, and (3) emphasize counterstories. This type of theory, methodology, and analysis forces the researcher to constantly evaluate and reevaluate the context and participants, and to unpack the complexities of the data. This approach also helps maintain "theoretical sensitivity" throughout the process (Glaser, 1978, p. 3).

The Esperanza Program

Esperanza was the court diversion program that was used for this study. The program was established in 2007 through a collaboration between the municipal courts and a community-based organization. The program was located in a small Midwest city where the Latinx community is growing. According to a recent report, the Latinx population in 2014 in the county was 30,662 people representing 6.1%

of the population. The population was previously around 26,000 people in 2010. Esperanza was designed to allow participants to talk and discuss issues affecting their lives. Esperanza used a workshop model to provide youth with communication and interpersonal skills, community resources, and a safe space to reflect on personal experiences and to challenge the barriers students face. Municipal courts referred students to this program for a variety of citations including truancy, use of alcohol and other drugs (AODA), or violation of municipal ordinances (e.g. retail theft). Students attended twice a week and completed 40 hours in the program. The students would attend workshops and presentations facilitated by the program coordinators. The program was funded as a way to reduce youth recidivism. The program coordinator created quarterly service reports as a part of their process to maintain their funding. The reports included the number of sessions provided, the number of unduplicated youth serviced, the average number of youth, the number of youth graduating, and the number of youth continuing on to another youth program. The report also had two open-ended sections to capture the narratives of the program as well as how the program was meeting the program goals. The municipal judge stated that “success” in the program occurred when he did not see youth returning to his courtroom. Between 2007 and 2012, the program served over 130 youth.

Participants

This study used interviews as part of a narrative research project. According to Creswell (2007), narrative research explores the lived and told stories of individuals. In order to capture these narratives, a total of 33 people were interviewed: twelve youth participants, nine parents, five program staff, and seven other stakeholders (i.e., county staff, social workers, judges, etc.). Twelve youth were interviewed for this research project (11 males and one female). Ten participants were from Mexico and two of them were from Honduras. At the time of participation, one of the youth was 12 years old, two were 14 years old, one was 15 years old, five were 16 years old, and three were 17 years old. The youth participated in the Esperanza program between the Summer of 2007 and the Fall of 2011. Six of the students were referred for truancy, two were referred for trespassing, two of them related to alcohol, and two of them for disorderly conduct.

There were also nine parents who were interviewed for this study. Two of them conducted their interviews together. Four of the parents also had their children interviewed for the study. Five of the parents elected to participate in the study even though their children were not interviewed but had participated in the program. The interviews also included five Esperanza Program staff who identified as Latinx. Three of them had served as program coordinators and two of them were Esperanza facilitators. Most of them had worked with several cohorts of students. There were seven other staff members who were important stakeholders. The interviews included

two staff members worked in the court diversion unit, one youth service coordinator, one social worker, one judge, one police officer, and one detective. The staff included one Latinx, two Black/African American, and four White participants.

Procedures

Each participant agreed to take part in a semi-structured interview for approximately 45-60 minutes in the language of their choice. I developed an interview protocol to obtain information about the participants, their referrals, and their feelings about the program, and notions of success. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed to allow participants to discuss their experiences with the program. The interviews provided important data about the concept of “success” and what it meant to each participant and stakeholder. As part of this study, participants also completed a basic demographic sheet that asked about their age, sex, school, and employment status. This demographic information was used to update the program’s database.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred throughout the data collection process. As the researcher, theoretical sensitivity and critical consciousness were important in addressing the intersections of race, class, gender, and the multidimensional Latinx identities. The data analysis was conducted in alignment with a critical race-grounded theory. The strategy uses a CRT lens to situate lived experiences within a broader sociopolitical frame. According to Malagon, Pérez Huber, and Velez (2009),

A critical race-grounded methodology draws from multiple disciplines to challenge white supremacy, which shapes the way research specifically, and society generally, understands the experiences, conditions, and outcomes of People of Color. It allows CRT scholars to move toward a form of data collection and analysis that builds from the knowledge of Communities of Color to reveal the ways race, class, and other forms of oppression interact to mediate the experiences and realities of those affected by oppression. (p. 264)

The first phase of the data analysis occurred after the pilot study. For the pilot study, 8 youth participants and parents were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and I looked for emerging themes using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The framing allowed me to identify and develop themes that emerged from the lived experiences of the participants. The critical race aspect of the analysis comes through the “critical frameworks with explicit anti-racist and social justice agendas, to reveal oppressive experiences dominant ideologies mask” (Perez Huber, 2010, p. 84).

As the researcher, I focused on Saldaña’s (2009) work to guide the data analysis process using NVivo software. According to Saldaña (2009), the data analysis process includes various stages of constantly questioning the data. He goes on to explain different cycles of coding. During the first cycle of coding, I created descrip-

tive codes (p. 70). These are codes that described something specific, for example AODA, depression, and mental health. In addition, I used “In Vivo” coding (p. 74) to address concepts in Spanish where the words used had a stronger impact, for example “*buen ejemplo*” or “*buen camino*.” After doing these codes, I wanted to compare and contrast how similar codes might be different for each participant. For this exploration, I used “versus coding” (p. 40). While these codes were very informative, they were not providing a deeper understanding of the process that was occurring for participants.

The results from the pilot study were then presented to coordinators of the Esperanza program as a form of member-checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The program coordinators provided feedback and discussed the ongoing data analysis. The second phase of the study included 25 additional interviews. The program coordinators and other key stakeholders were interviewed for the second part of the study.

The rest of the interviews were transcribed and coded with the themes from the pilot study. I then moved into what Saldaña (2009) describes as a second cycle of coding. This step was important to deconstruct the themes and concepts that had been previously identified. For example, previously I had coded many data points as “success.” I then used axial coding (Saldaña, 2009, p. 77) to search for consequences of actions and interactions between my codes. Additionally, I began to use gerunds (“-ing” words) to capture a process, interaction, or activity. With this process, I began to understand what causes success, what are the stages of success, and what supports success for the participants in the study. In this way, the data analysis was a constant process of interrogation, reflection, and application.

Results

Creating Counterstories

The Esperanza participants often had to challenge or overcome the perception that they had deficits. Rather than looking at their strengths, school staff perceived them as flawed and labeled them negatively as troublemakers. The youth in the Esperanza program pushed back against these perceptions by offering narratives that highlighted meaningful occurrences from their own lived experiences. The participants in the Esperanza program created their counterstories of success.

Students in the program felt that they had been labeled as troublemakers and that people often expected them to be deficient. Eder, one program participant, talked about teachers labeling him as a bad kid and treating him with disrespect. He stated, “When I came to class. They would make a big deal about it. They would say, oh, look who decided to show up. You actually want to work and things like that.” Lorenzo, another program participant, shared similar experiences, “On the first year, I never really cared about school. But they didn’t care about me either. Like they thought that I was a delinquent.” The students’ stories were echoed by Domingo and Fernando, the program facilitators:

I think it would be things like that. The teacher saying to them things that might have been racist or talking down to them. I would say that it was situations like that. (Domingo)

We start from the assumption that schools are a hostile environment for a lot of the youth. And this is when we would ask youth, Latino youth, about their experience with the school. I mean the vast majority of those responses are not positive. So, we really draw from that experience and the schools and we really, we honor those experiences that the youth want to share. (Fernando)

Youth must overcome many obstacles in order to be successful. This section of the results focuses on how participants overcame barriers to success and created their own counterstories. Two of the challenges that participants mentioned in their interviews were (1) immigration and (2) identity. The following counterstories demonstrate how youth and their families challenged these deficit-focused ideas associated with immigration and identity.

Immigration

For immigrants, one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome is arriving in a new country and having to deal with all the challenges that come with it. Lucas and Jasmine² were both immigrant youths who attended the Esperanza program. They are both undocumented youth working towards degrees in higher education. They had attended the Esperanza program when they were in high school and the program changed their trajectories. After attending the Esperanza program, they joined other support communities, became leaders, and contributed back to the community.

Lucas immigrated to the United States from Honduras and lived with his older sister and mother while his two younger siblings and father were still in Honduras. Jasmine immigrated to the United States from Mexico and lived with her mother and two older siblings while her father remained in Mexico. Both Lucas and Jasmine come from transnational families, in which some members of the family live in the United States, and other members live in another country (Dreby, 2007). Lucas attended high school in Great Lakes while Jasmine attended both middle school and high school in Great Lakes. At the time of the interview, Lucas had completed one semester at Great Lakes College, and Jasmine was in her third year of study at another college. Both were first-generation college students.

Lucas and Jasmine each faced the challenge of being undocumented in the United States, which affected their perspectives and their self-esteem. “Undocumented” means that they do not have the proper paperwork to be in the United States. Passel (2006) uses the term “unauthorized migrants” to refer to people who are not U.S. citizens, not permanent residents, and do not have authorization for temporary or long-term residence. The term unauthorized or undocumented describes a person who entered the U.S. without inspection or a person who has overstayed their visa or permission to be in the U.S. There are an estimated 11.1 million undocumented

people in the U.S. (Passel, 2006). The U.S. Supreme Court decision *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) established free and equal public education for unauthorized immigrant children for K-12 education. As undocumented youth consider higher education, Drachman (2006) explains that Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 prohibits them from receiving federal aid. However, neither federal nor state law forbids undocumented students from attending college.

Lucas

As youth grow up and realize that they are undocumented, they see many doors close and become discouraged. Before Lucas realized that he was undocumented, he was very successful in school. He noted,

Mi sueño era ser futbolista. En los dos años que estabas en la escuela llegué a estar en el Varsity. Estuve dos o tres años y obtuve medallas por, en los dos años que estuve con el Varsity recibí reconociendo de la ciudad. Estuve entre los 8 mejores de la ciudad. Estaba positivo durante ese tiempo, eso fue en el 2007.

[Translation: My dream was to become a soccer player. During the two years that I was in school, I made it to Varsity. I was there two or three years. I had medals, and in the two years that I was in Varsity I received recognition from the city. I was among the top 8 players in the city. I was very positive during that time, which was in 2007].

Lucas then went on to explain that his motivation changed after he found out that he was undocumented.

His soccer coach was leaving to coach at a university and wanted Lucas to come with him to play soccer. Lucas remembered sadly,

Pero ya que cuando me dijo que necesitaba seguro. No sé pero las personas del ESL le dijeron que yo no tenía seguro. Y que no podía. Entonces, cuando me dijeron las personas de ESL, como que eso me dio para abajo, ya que el fútbol siempre ha sido lo mío. Y cuando me dijeron eso, me decepcione mucho. Ya mi último año, ya no lo hice bien, porque ya no tenía las mismas metas, ya que no tenía las mismas ganas de seguir estudiando porque decía, pues si sigo estudiando y no voy a cumplir mi sueño, entonces fue un año de rebeldía.

[Translation: But when they told me that it required a social security number. I don't know, the people from the ESL program told him that I didn't have a social security number. And that I couldn't. Then, when the people from the ESL program told me, it brought me down because soccer has been my thing. And when they told me that, it disappointed me a lot. Then my last year, I didn't do it well because I didn't have the same goals. I didn't have the same desire to continue studying. I thought to myself, if I continue studying, I won't be able to reach my goals. So, it became a year of rebellion.]

Lucas lost his hope of playing soccer and of continuing studying. He felt that he did not have anything to work for.

Jasmine

Jasmine had a similar story. She understood that she was undocumented, and noted, “*Y ahorita no tengo papeles.*” [And right now, I don’t have papers/documentation]. Reflecting on her experience as an undocumented immigrant, Jasmine is now more knowledgeable about immigrant rights and options for undocumented students. Earlier in her life, she had to learn how to navigate the educational system. Her knowledge about resources was something that she began to learn about as a participant in the Esperanza program. She noted,

Cuando uno sabe de los recurso por ahí, y sabe de sus derechos, sea inmigrante, ósea, uno va a decir, no yo sí puedo. Siempre se puede con la mente. Cuando uno quiere, uno puede.

[Translation: When one knows about what resources are there, and knows about their rights, whether they are immigrant or, one may say, no, I’m able to do it. One can always do it with the right mindset. When one wants it, one can achieve it.]

Jasmine became an advocate for immigrant rights after she learned more about the resources and opportunities available to undocumented youth. When Lucas and Jasmine first went to Esperanza, both seemed discouraged and felt hopeless because of their undocumented status.

Going to Esperanza

Lucas and Jasmine’s immigration status was contributing to their feeling of alienation in school. Instead of supporting them when they faced challenges, the school policies required punitive consequences. One day, Lucas was skipping classes and went to a local grocery store to buy snacks. When he returned to school, he was given a ticket for skipping classes. He had to do community service and decided to fulfill his community service requirement at Centro Cultural, which housed the Esperanza program. Jasmine received a warning ticket for getting into a fight on a bus and was also required to complete community service. Both Lucas and Jasmine did their community service in 2007 and met their requirements by cleaning around the center, sweeping the floors, and clearing tables. The Esperanza program started that same year. Lucas and Jasmine were asked if they wanted to participate in the program as a way to complete their community service hours, and they both agreed. Neither knew what to expect from the program, but they wanted to make sure they did not get in trouble again.

The Esperanza program provided information, hope, and a sense of community for Lucas and Jasmine. The program included workshops, field trips, and presentations. The program was new, but it left a lasting impression on both Lucas and Jasmine. Although “scared straight” diversion strategies are seen as generally ineffective in the literature (*Strategies for Youth*, n.d.), a field trip to jail changed Lucas’ thinking. He decided that he did not want to end up in prison and committed himself to changing his behavior. Lucas explained the experience,

Entonces, vivimos una experiencia los pocos que fuimos, los pocos que éramos. Vivimos una experiencia que nos cambió ya que convivimos con ellos por un buen rato, unas dos horas. Vivimos, vivimos como ellos vivían en la cárcel, como dormían en las celdas y como la comida que ellos comían. Y no me comí la comida porque no me gusto. También, ellos hablaron con nosotros, los reclusos, hablaron con nosotros. Nos dijeron porque ellos estaban ahí. También nos dieron consejos y de esa forma, cambio mi perspectiva. Y creo que eso fue.

[Translation: Then, we experienced something for those few of us who went; there were few of us there. We lived an experience that changed us because we hung out with them for a long time, I think two hours. We lived; we lived like they live in jail. We experienced how they sleep in the cells and how they ate food. I didn't eat the food there because I didn't like it. Also, they talked to us, the inmates, they talked to us. They told us why there were there. They also gave us advice and, in that way, my perspective changed. I think that was it].

As a result of that field trip, Lucas realized that if he did only negative things, he would only attract negative energy. He did not want that for himself. He wanted to be different.

Changing Their Thinking

Lucas observed that the Esperanza program changed his way of thinking and provided knowledge of resources. He had felt hopeless and believed that he could not overcome his legal status, but his attitude changed. Lucas did not feel connected to other Latinxs in Great Lakes because he was from Honduras, and most Latinxs in Great Lakes are from Mexico. He had believed that all Mexicans were bad, a belief that stemmed from his experience of crossing the borders from Honduras to Guatemala to Mexico to the United States. People from Honduras have to cross the Mexican border and then the U.S. border. Immigrants face many harmful risks including exposure to crime (i.e., being robbed) or actually dying. In the Esperanza program, Lucas realized everyone is a human regardless of nationality. He learned,

Que yo no era diferente a ellos. Que yo soy un humano y eso es nada mas falta de educación... Aprendí que cada quien tiene una historia por cual ellos están aquí en los Estados Unidos. Y que solo por haber estado en Honduras, se me hace difícil, y que para algunos mexicanos solo cruzar la frontera de aquí para ya, pero algunos se les hacen difíciles también.

[Translation: That I was not different from them. That I am a human and that is nothing more than a lack of education... I learned that each person has a history of why they are here in the United States. And that just by having been in Honduras, it becomes difficult for me and that for some Mexicans just crossing the border is from here to there, but for some of them it becomes difficult, too.]

Lucas looked for a community to belong to and prior to the Esperanza program; he did not feel that he was part of the Latinx community. He did not feel

accepted because he was from Honduras. The program allowed him to challenge the stereotypes that he had about Mexicans, about people in general, and about people willing to help him. This realization occurred as he interacted and developed caring relationships with other participants of different nationalities, including Mexicans, and with the staff. Surrounded by people who cared about him, Lucas realized that people can be good.

Jasmine also changed her thinking about her situation as an undocumented student through the Esperanza program. As an undocumented student, she felt that she did not know much about resources available to undocumented youth. In the program, Jasmine used theater as a way to address issues of immigration. She explained,

Hicimos una dramatización, un skit, era uno de los talleres que hicimos. También hicimos una demostración de lo que pasan las familias inmigrante cuando cruzan: buscando una vida mejor. Y porque muchas veces no pasan. Arriesgar la vida ahí para que sus hijos tengan una vida mejor una mejor educación y que vivan bien. Porque allá hay mucho crimen y se trabaja muchísimo.

[Translation: We did a dramatization, a skit that was one of the workshops that we did. Also, we had a demonstration of what happens to immigrant families when they cross. They are looking for a better life. And why a lot of the time they don't make it. They risk their lives so that their children can have a better life, a better education, and better way of living. Over there, there is a lot of crime and people have to work a lot].

The ability to discuss immigration issues was key to Jasmine in becoming an advocate for immigrants. The theater dramatization provided an opportunity for Jasmine to explore other possibilities in the community.

Giving Back

After participating in Esperanza's program, Jasmine became politically active at another grassroots community organization. She stated, "*Y de ahí me empecé a meterme más a la política de aquí, de los derechos civiles, derechos de los inmigrantes, y todo eso.*" [Translation: And from there I began to get into politics, civil rights, immigrant rights, and all that]. By creating the space to discuss issues affecting the immigrant population, Jasmine became aware of the resources and opportunities available to immigrant youth, which gave her a sense of purpose to do further work to support the community. Jasmine actively sought out more information on scholarships, community resources, and resources for undocumented youth. "[The Esperanza program] *ayudo a los estudiantes a enfocarse en cosas positivas y hacer algo por su comunidad.*" [Translation: [The Esperanza program] helped students to focus on positive things and to do good things in the community]. Like Lucas, Jasmine was determined to be positive about her life and the lives of others. She searched for ways to stay involved in non-profit organizations committed to immigrant rights.

Both Lucas and Jasmine finished the 40-hour program to complete their community service. However, after experiencing a positive program, they were challenged with returning to the same school environment. They processed their own stories and how the school and society impacted their experiences. They also developed a sense of community and wanted to be agents of change for that community. Both of them returned to Esperanza for a second time as volunteers. Lucas explained that he wanted to be around positive people and youths who wanted to change their lives. Jasmine said that she returned because learning in the program was better than being at home and not doing anything. The program allowed the youth to return, build community and surround themselves with supportive people to move forward. After Lucas and Jasmine had returned, they began to reach out to other youth programs to continue building a community.

Sin Nombre

Four or five years after he attended the first Esperanza program, Lucas became involved with a program called *Sin Nombre*³ [Without a Name].

Lo que me hizo regresar a Centro fue la necesidad de hacer lo que estaba haciendo. Ya que estaba involucrado con pandillas y algo en mi me hizo que cambiara la página. Regrese a Centro no sé, para salir de los problemas y de la falta de rechazo de las personas.

[Translation: What made me return to Centro was the need to do what I was doing before. I was involved with gangs and something made me want to turn the page. I returned to Centro, I don't know, to leave the problems and to leave the feeling of alienation.]

The Esperanza program had helped Lucas the first time around. Then, he recognized that he was experiencing problems again; he knew that he could go to the Centro. The Esperanza staff welcomed him back. He volunteered for a cohort of Esperanza program participants and joined another program, Sin Nombre. Some of the facilitators from Esperanza and youth who wanted to continue learning after they completed the Esperanza program founded Sin Nombre. The youth wanted to use art to express themselves, and they were very positive and proactive about using art to speak their minds. They created a mural representing the challenges of immigration, which they presented at a Great Lakes University conference and for which they received an award. Lucas was a prominent member of this group, and he had much to contribute. He helped other young people in the program and was an active participant in group discussions, events, and projects. He was motivated to make positive changes in the community and to create a community for youth. The group created a safe and welcoming space for youth to express themselves and discuss the issues that affected them.

Jóvenes Trabajadores

Jasmine also returned to Esperanza to continue learning. She returned the same year as her first program and participated in the next cohort. When she went back, she was more motivated to get involved with other non-profits and to be an activist for immigrants' rights. The Esperanza program helped make Jasmine more aware of resources for immigrants; Esperanza provided information about scholarships for undocumented students, had undocumented presenters and provided educational resources for undocumented youth. There, Jasmine found out about a group called *Jóvenes Trabajadores* [Young Workers], which worked with unions to address the rights of workers and immigrants. Jasmine noted that

Mi compañera Claudia, una compañera me había comentado de Jóvenes Trabajadores en la middle school, pero no empecé. Pero ya ahí fue donde me fui abriendo más y este unos compañeros de línea me invito.

[My friend Claudia, a friend had mentioned the *Jóvenes Trabajadores* in middle school, but I didn't join. But then, I began opening my mind more and an online friend invited me].

In high school, she joined *Jóvenes Trabajadores* after participating in the Esperanza program. Working there, she learned to do presentations and became comfortable with public speaking. *Jóvenes Trabajadores* helped organize a walkout for immigrants' rights and the May 1st March for immigrants in Great Lakes, along with the workers' union. Members of the organization also volunteered at the Mexican Mobile Consulate. The youth from *Jóvenes Trabajadores* were active community participants and helped inform people about civil rights and immigrant rights. Jasmine's experience with Esperanza encouraged her to become more active in promoting immigrants' rights.

Lucas and Jasmine were both undocumented youth who created their own success stories. They attended the Esperanza program to complete community service hours that were required by the municipal courts. They had been feeling alienated due to their immigration status and instead of helping them, the school assigned them punitive consequences. Fortunately, the Esperanza program was beginning at the same time that Lucas and Jasmine were completing their service hours. The Esperanza program provided new positive perspectives about people and resources. The students used these perspectives to continue to grow, unlike before when they felt they had limited opportunities because of their immigration status. As a result, Lucas and Jasmine engaged with other youth programs to continue to support the community and other youth. They turned their hopelessness into positive hope for the future.

Identity

Esperanza emphasized culture and identity, which students often did not receive in school. Ernesto was an Esperanza participant who learned and grew culturally in

the program. His counterstory demonstrates how he developed cultural consciousness by spending more time with Latinx people. He also developed a stronger relationship with his family.

Ernesto

Ernesto lived in Great Lakes and was a junior in high school at a neighboring town. His school had a small population of Latinxs, and as a result, he felt that he did not have many opportunities to be around Latinxs. His plan was to work for two years after high school, and then enroll at Great Lakes College before transferring into Great Lakes University. Ernesto hoped to open his own business someday.

Ernesto faced obstacles of cultural identity growing up. He observed, “I don’t spend much time with my culture, it was different being in a whole room of people who are of the same race as me, because I don’t know how to communicate with them. I don’t know what their interests are. What they are interested in, I basically grew up knowing what Americans like to do.” Although Ernesto identified as Hispanic, he did not feel part of the Latinx community. He said that even when he was invited to family events, he did not want to participate in them. He felt alienated from his culture and did not feel part of it.

Going to Esperanza

Ernesto attended the Esperanza program because of truancy. The municipal judge required Ernesto to complete community service hours. Ernesto went to Centro Cultural to complete his hours. Similar to Lucas and Jasmine, Ernesto was asked to attend the Esperanza program as a way of completing his hours. Ernesto said that he did not attend school much at all during his freshman year. “I didn’t use to go to school, ever. Not until I finished the [Esperanza] program,” he said. However, the school policies and monitoring procedures did not recognize Ernesto’s attendance situation until the end of his freshman year. By that time, Ernesto felt that he had lost a whole year and did not receive any academic credits towards graduation. Like Lucas and Jasmine, Ernesto was feeling alienated from school and instead of helping him, the school policies offered punitive consequences.

Ernesto suffered from depression as the result of an incident that occurred when he was young and he used marijuana as a way to cope with it. He pointed out, “Yeah, I started way back and freshman year is when it got worse, that’s why I skipped school pretty much the whole year. Finding a different life, I didn’t even realize that people actually do that. I thought that I was one of the only people that got really into that. And then I got into a group of people.” Ernesto was searching for coping mechanisms to address his depression and substance use. He felt that this was something that was only occurring to him. He found a group of other students that also used marijuana and skipped school. The school policies criminalized both

the use of substances and truancy. Instead of proactively supporting students who experienced substances use and truancy issues through therapeutic interventions, school policies were usually reactive in nature. Rather than trying to understand what students need, schools resorted to punitive consequences.

Normalizing the Experience

The Esperanza program helped normalize and validate Ernesto's experience. He said, "I thought that the program was just great; I loved it. It was fun." Through the program, Ernesto could address two of his challenges: cultural identity and family relationships. Ernesto appreciated the workshops that the program offered. He remembered a workshop on Capoeira. He said,

That was the first time I learned how to do it. And getting into the rhythm, that's when I learned that every human has a rhythm to their heart and that they can follow it.

Ernesto experienced the program with other young people, which helped normalize his experience. He realized that he was not alone, and that other youth also faced obstacles in their schools, communities, and families. Instead of focusing on the obstacles, the program focused on their humanity and helped them understand their lived experiences.

Through the Esperanza program, Ernesto also learned more about his culture. He said,

I thought it was going to be a boring program, but it actually turned to be something I enjoyed doing. I learned a lot from the Hispanic community because I go to an all American school, so I'm not a really part of the Hispanic community in my actual life outside of here, so it's fun coming here, learning about the Hispanic community and how they work and how we can try to help each other survive here.

Ernesto shared a room with other Latinxs, which exposed him to some of the diversity witnessed within the vast Latinx community. Through workshops, the students discussed how different issues were affecting them. They listened to each other and supported each other. The workshops also focused on learning more about Latinx heritage, past and present. The group dynamics and cultural curriculum were important to fostering an understanding of what it can mean to be a Latinx person. He acknowledged that there were many nationalities present in the room and not everyone was from Mexico, which encouraged him to begin talking to others, and became part of the group.

The Esperanza program also taught Ernesto a second important lesson, which was that it was okay to ask for help. As he says,

I always had someone to rely on when I needed support. If I were having a stressful day, I would talk to Fernando.

Fernando was a program coordinator who wanted to make sure students felt com-

comfortable and heard in the program. Ernesto developed a close relationship with Fernando, which created a sense of support. As Ernesto noted,

That is something I learned through Centro. Fernando actually taught me, he said, “don’t close yourself in. Always ask for help.” They just tell us; you are never alone. You always have someone to help you.

Ernesto heard that it was normal to ask for help. Most importantly, the staff stated that they were there to support him. Knowing that people were available to help him was a new concept for Ernesto. Previously, he had not known where to go to seek help, but then he found Centro. Knowing that the doors were open at Centro was important because it allowed students to return anytime they needed help. Like Lucas and Jasmine, Ernesto also returned to Centro after he had completed his program. He reached out to Centro to ask for support in dealing with his depression and to continue being part of a supportive group.

After the Program

After the program, Ernesto felt that he focused more on his education. He was absent fewer days during his sophomore year. He noted that he attended all his academic classes, and only skipped his study skills class:

I take seriously my education now. I realized that it’s basically what I have as a job right now. It’s my duty. I’m trying to better myself for the future. I want to make a lot of money when I grow up. The way to do it is through an education.

Ernesto now volunteered at the local fire station and noted that community service was a good thing,

At first, I thought to myself, I could party, I can do this, but I never thought of the long term consequences of my actions.

After the program, Ernesto not only knew to seek help when he needed it, but he could also think through his actions and their impact.

Ernesto also received professional help for his depression. He met with a psychologist and actively worked on addressing his depression. He wanted to stop using drugs and change his life for the better: “You know because I realized that I needed to change and that drugs are not a way to escape reality. If anything, they keep you trapped in reality.” Ernesto wanted positive change in his life and the Esperanza program had provided that for him. The staff and the program created a welcoming environment in which he felt comfortable asking for help. Furthermore, the program was more interested in the root cause of Ernesto’s behavior rather than on giving him consequences for his actions. The school can be positioned in a way to support students; however, they focused on the consequences for students’ behaviors instead of helping them.

Family Relationships

As a result of the Esperanza program, Ernesto also became more comfortable with his Latinx heritage and with his family. The Esperanza program emphasized family dynamics as they work with youth by also inviting parents to have their own workshop. The program works on developing communication and understanding between parents and youth. In his freshman year, Ernesto did not feel connected to his family and he stated that he did not want to participate in their events. Through the parent workshops, Ernesto's parents explored his experiences in school and in the community. Ernesto and other youth were also encouraged to understand their parents' sacrifice and commitment to them. The Esperanza program allowed them to see their lived experiences through their family member's perspectives. Ernesto did not say that it was directly connected to Esperanza, but the family became closer together. Ernesto also changed his behavior and wanted to attend family gatherings where other Latinx people were present. He stated,

Once I got to know Hispanics as people, they were not that bad to be around. And now I actually go out with my parents to like Hispanic gathering, because their friends go to parties and I would actually go now.

Ernesto began to feel more connected to his Latinx heritage and culture. He was also less shy talking to other Latinxs than he had been before. Prior to attending the program, Ernesto did not go to those events. This new connection was partially the results of the program's emphasis on language and culture. In the program, Ernesto was around people who spoke Spanish, and he became comfortable with them. He began to enjoy being around other Latinxs in the program, which also made him more willing to participate in family activities. He noted, "Yeah, I feel more, not a duty, but I feel more inclined. I can have a good time, talk to some people, and meet someone new." As a result of the process that began at the Esperanza program, Ernesto felt more connected to his family and his culture.

With the program's help, Ernesto's counterstory focused on cultural and family connectedness. The program helped normalize his experience, taught him that it was okay to ask for help, and how to further develop his cultural identity. It also allowed his family to work on their family dynamics and encouraged more family involvement through understanding of each other. Ernesto wanted a positive change for himself by addressing his depression and leaving drugs. He also aspired to one day own his own business.

Ernesto became involved with the Esperanza program because of truancy. School policies required punitive consequences instead of providing therapeutic support for his substance dependence and truancy. As a Latinx student growing up in a predominantly White community, he was alienated from the Latinx community. Ernesto's need caused him to lose his ninth grade; he did not receive any academic credits. CRT calls attention to the extraordinarily high rates of school dropout, suspensions, and expulsion. Furthermore, Ernesto's story counters the

master narrative that Latinx students do not care about their education. Ernesto was in the 9th grade when this occurred, which is a crucial grade for student retention. Fortunately, Ernesto was attending the Esperanza program, which focused on his humanity first and his lived experience.

Implications

Latinx youth need to be validated, supported, encouraged, and intentionally addressed to support their success. The counterstories presented here demonstrate how youth can be successful after attending the Esperanza Program. Prior to them attending, they felt alienated from school and were struggling socially and academically. Instead of focusing on how to help them, school policies focused on how to punish them for their behavior. Part of that punishment was to complete community service hours. The participants became connected with the Esperanza program to fulfill their service hours. Their counterstories demonstrate that youth need to be humanized, supported, and validated.

The two primary counterstories presented here focus on immigration and identity. The counterstories talk back to the master narrative, which is rooted in deficit-thinking and claims Latinx students cannot or do not aspire to achieve academically. The counterstories demonstrate that, with the right support and encouragement, youth can be resilient, overcome the obstacles they face, and create their own success stories. The counterstories highlight the work that the Esperanza program and staff did to support youth. This type of work can benefit both community-based organizations and schools.

Through my interviews, it was revealed that students and parents had strengths that the school staff did not acknowledge. In contrast, the staff at Esperanza built relationships with the youth and treated them with respect by humanizing their lived experiences. The staff used culture and language to help build on the ideas of strengths rather than deficits. Another example of the cultural deficit-thinking model claims that parents of color do not care when their children get into trouble. My interviews with parents countered this assumption. Parents participated in workshops, provided transportation for their children to the program, and sought further support for their sons and daughters. This was evidence that parents were invested in their children's education. Thus, the interviews contribute to a new counterstories of Latinx parents who are willing to exhaust all their resources when trying to support their children.

The Esperanza program was a court diversion program that attempts to interrupt the school to prison pipeline. In the spirit of the Esperanza program, school districts and administrators should focus on proactive youth supports instead of reactive punitive consequences. By implementing this approach, school districts and administrators can help normalize and validate students' stories and experiences. Students reported feeling alienated and disconnected from schools and

staff. Schools should focus on the root cause of students' behavior. Osher et al., (2012) discussed how schools can help interrupt the school to prison pipeline:

. . . teachers and others need (a) to be culturally and linguistically competent, (b) to be able to use positive behavioral approaches, (c) to apply their understanding of learning and emotional/behavioral disorders, and (d) to identify students' strengths as opposed to employing a deficit approach. (p. 6)

Osher et al. (2012) explained that teachers and administrators needed to understand the school to prison pipeline and be intentional in discussing these matters in staff development and espousing the importance of strength-based approaches that do not criminalize students. Schools should also address the need for more mental health support for youth. In this study, youth brought up depression, alcohol and other drugs abuse, and understanding immigration as issues of concern that impacted their school processes. Instead of being reactive and punitive, schools should address these needs proactively to help youth become successful.

The Esperanza program allowed participants to understand their Latinx heritage, history, and lived experiences. The program coordinators developed the Esperanza program with four philosophies including *La Cultura Cura*, *In Lak'ech*, Restorative Justice, and Positive Youth Development. According to the U.S. Government website Youth.Gov. (n.d.), positive youth development is developed through positive experiences, positive relationships, and positive environments. The philosophy behind positive youth development is that youth will develop better when they are engaged through a strength-based approach, which include opportunities to build affirming relationships. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) argue that while positive youth development is an improvement over punitive consequences, the framework has two shortcomings. Positive youth development has the possibility of dismissing how social, economic, and political ideologies and policies impact youth of color. Secondly, Ginwright and Cammarota argue that positive youth development is based on universalistic, white middle-class conceptions of youth that do not apply to youth of color. They promote social justice youth development (SJYD) as a different approach to focus on critical consciousness and social action. They believe "Critical consciousness can be described as an awareness of how institutional, historical, and systemic forces limit and promote the life opportunities for particular groups" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 87). Ginwright and Cammarota identify self-awareness, social-awareness, and global-awareness as important concepts that should be addressed when working with youth to promote critical consciousness.

Other scholars have focused on critical literacies to promote youth development. Morrell (2008) explains that youth need to understand dominant literacies and that youth must actively intervene to contest them. According to Morrell, youth "must speak back and act back against these constructions with counter-language and counter-texts" (p. 5). Morrell lists the following examples of critical literacies: critical reading, critical textual productions, cyberactivism, and critical media and cultural studies. In

a similar vein, Winn's (2011) book *Girl Time* focuses on a theater program, literacies, and experiences for formerly incarcerated girls. *Girl Time* was about building coalitions, improving the lives of girls and women, negotiating lives between incarceration and freedom, and developing critical literacies. Clark-Ibanez's (2015) also address using photo elicitation as a way to unpack the lived experiences and immigration knowledge of youth living in the border cities. These are all examples of building critical consciousness and metacognitive awareness for youth. It is also important to allow youth to create their own counterstories in the process.

Future Directions

Participants in the Esperanza program, a court diversion program, created their own counterstories about success. The program was developed as a collaboration between a community-based organization and the municipal courts. The program represents one point on a spectrum of the school to prison pipeline. As schools are being challenged to move away from zero tolerance policies into more restorative justice practices, it is important to explore how these new behavioral policies affect youth of color. In addition, future research can focus on the staffing decision between Education Resource Office and more counselors in the schools. Lastly, it is salient to investigate the population who is entering the youth detention center and how disparities may continue to occur.

Meiners (2011) has also identified other tensions in researching the school to prison pipeline. She has four questions that interrogate the intersection between the theory and movements around the school to prison pipeline that could inform a praxis of positive youth development for students of color:

- (1) How do we negotiate work that often centers youth or juveniles as "exceptional" within the larger mess of the criminal justice system?
- (2) How do we negotiate shifting state structures capable of appropriating our justice work?
- (3) Why is it important to focus labor on how to change and build practices and paradigms of public safety that are not reliant on punishment, isolation, and stigma? And finally,
- (4) How do we center an intersectional lens in our organizing and research? (Meiners, 2011, p. 554)

Conclusion

Latinx youth are not graduating at the same rates as their White counterparts. This can be attributed, in part, to the fact school policies routinely criminalize Latinx youth and push them away from school. The school-to-prison policies focus on consequences for youth's behavior rather than on focusing on what youth need. The Esperanza program worked with the youth who had to complete community service hours. Based on interview data, the program validated, supported, and helped the youth. The Esperanza program provided the space where youth could create counterstories about how they confront various issues including immigration

and identity construction. The program offered a space where youth could address their lived experiences. The youth felt supported by the staff and their experiences were normalized and humanized. They learned about family dynamics and were able to understand their parents' perspectives. Youth also found resources, learned about their rights, and became advocates for their communities. Most importantly, the youth learned to believe in themselves and create their own success stories. These stories push back on the dominant deficit-thinking model that Latinx youth are inherently incapable of learning or that they are socially enabled to behave as troublemakers. The existence of the Esperanza program buttress the idea that it is important to create safe spaces where Latinx youth can be free and safe to express themselves and have their lived experiences validated.

Note

¹ Latinx (latin-ex) is a gender neutral pronoun that is inclusive of all people of Latin American descent. It addressed the intersections of gender, race, and class (Scharrón-Del Río & Aja, 2015).

² These names are pseudonyms.

³ The names of the programs are also pseudonyms.

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