

# ***A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF CAFETERIAS AND COMMUNITIES The Power of Multiple Voices in Diverse Settings***

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This article examines an after-school program in which English language learners (ELLs) collaborated with their mainstream peers at an urban middle school to produce a multilingual video that addressed a social issue. The project, which was grounded in the tenets of critical and culturally relevant pedagogies, allowed the young people to mobilize their social and cultural resources to attempt to solve a problem in their community. The data presented reveal how projects that build on shared knowledge bases can serve to create a sense of community that allows diverse students to recognize each other's contributions as they work together to promote change.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

Immigrant students and their urban, low-income peers often share the spaces of some of our nation's lowest performing schools without engaging in meaningful educational or social interactions (Olsen, 1995, 1997). In all too many instances the only connection between the two groups is their legacy of underperformance in traditional classroom settings. In recent years educational researchers have started to recognize that the achievement gap associated with these vulnerable populations is more aptly described as an opportunity gap. Progressive pedagogies have helped stu-

dents and teachers alike to not only recognize the significance of this gap, but also to take steps to close it by constructing learning environments that meet the needs and build on the strengths of the young people they serve. Critical pedagogy calls students' attention to the inequalities and injustices that plague society before asking them to take steps to address those problems in their own lives, a stance that empowers young people to challenge the type of institutional biases and social injustices that can exist in U.S. schools (Giroux, 1992, 1994, 1996; Jones, 2006; Shor, 1999). Culturally relevant pedagogy relies on a different type of empowerment by acknowledging the

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resources possessed by nonmainstream students (Au, 1980; Gutierrez, Larson, & Kreuter, 1995; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Gutierrez & Stone, 2000; Moll, 1994, 2004; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Moll & González, 1997; Ladsen-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1992, 2000). While numerous studies have documented the effectiveness of these approaches with immigrant or urban, low-income students, less research exists on how these approaches to learning might serve to create contexts in which young people from diverse backgrounds can learn with and from each other. This study documents an effort to bridge linguistic and cultural divides between youth from different backgrounds through collaborations within a project-based, problem solving literacy-based curriculum grounded in the tenets of critical and culturally relevant pedagogies.

Over the last several years, demographic shifts have occurred in a wide variety of settings, affecting smaller cities and suburban and rural areas as well as the large metropolitan centers generally associated with such diversity. Because of these changes, the need to unite students from distinct linguistic and cultural groups is more pressing than ever. In May of 2005 a group of Latino immigrant and urban, low-income youth living in Rockingham (the names of places, programs, and participants in this article are pseudonyms), an incorporated area located within the limits of a medium-sized Midwestern city, attended a statewide film festival that featured *Language Lessons*, the bilingual video they had made to address the issue of language discrimination at their school. Prior to this joint project the students involved were enrolled in two distinct after-school programs. PODER specifically served Spanish-speaking students who had recently arrived to the area while YES provided additional academic and social support for young people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. This separation mirrored a common situation in the urban schools of the United States.

While language has become a divisive issue in the political realm at both the local and

national levels, the inclusion of Spanish in the video actually proved to be a point of connection among the youth who took part. When the staff of each program introduced the projects to the students, they were clear that participation in the bilingual video was voluntary. They were pleased when most of the YES students from Greendale Middle School, the site of the PODER program, opted to work with their Latino peers from PODER to address the topic of language discrimination. They were even happier when after a few rehearsals YES students asked to be given lines in Spanish. These requests were noteworthy because the premiere of the video coincided with the introduction of English-Only legislation into the state House of Representatives. When they embraced bilingualism within the video the middle school students recognized what some local politicians could or would not: immigrant students arrive in U.S. schools with a variety of resources that should be recognized, including their home languages.

As the coordinator of the PODER program I had lobbied for the cooperative effort with the YES students because I felt confident that two groups could learn from one another if they worked together closely. For immigrant students, segregation from their English-speaking peers represents missed opportunities for learning language and improving cultural competence. At the same time, when kept apart from English Language Learners (ELLs), mainstream students do not benefit from the perspectives and knowledge of their newcomer peers. I believed that working together to make the video would create a space for cross-cultural collaboration, and it did. This article will analyze how such spaces can be created and the impact they can potentially have on the youth who take part in such endeavors.

### **DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

This study was designed in response to the influx of Mexican and Latin American immigrants within the host school district as well as

within countless other districts facing similar demographic shifts. The districts in question find it difficult to serve these students well. The program featured here offered immigrant students and urban low-income youth, two groups who have traditionally struggled to succeed in school, the opportunity to participate in socially driven pedagogical activities intended to heighten student awareness of themselves, their language and learning potential, and their capacity to resist situations and labels that limit their opportunities for social and academic success. These projects essentially functioned as pedagogical interventions, a condition that qualifies the study as action research.

Action research is generally defined as research in which the investigator plays an active role in the context being studied, but there are also ideological aspects of the approach. Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (1988) define action research as,

A form of collective, self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. Groups of participants can be teachers, students, principals, parents and other community members—any group with a shared concern. The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, although it is important to realise that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members. (p. 5)

This description emphasizes that the process is critical and collaborative as well as reflective. In action research the researcher examines his or her practices with the goal of improving them, a condition that highlights the transformative nature of the method. Kemmis and McTaggart also emphasize the collective nature of the approach: the different participants must be aware of their roles in affecting change as both individuals and as part of a group. Active collaboration is also at the center

of participatory action research (PAR). Alice McIntyre (2000) refers to three principles that guide PAR: the collective investigation of a problem, the foregrounding of indigenous knowledge, and the desire to take collective action. In particular, the final tenet complemented the critical elements in this study.

The action researchers cited here embrace Paulo Freire's (1970) assertion that revolutionary leaders must seek emancipation with and not on behalf of oppressed groups, sharing his concern with collective, democratic action. His description of the connection between an educator and his or her students reveals the importance he placed on collaboration:

From the outset her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust of the people and their creative powers. To achieve this they must be partners with their students in the relations with them. (Freire, 1970, p. 75)

Relationships are important within the Freirean mindset, and they were at the center of this research.

### ***PROGRAM DESIGN: THEORY IN ACTION***

The success of the joint video production had convinced the staff of PODER and YES of the value of both the project itself and the integrated programming it promoted. As the first video project was ending, both programs lost the majority of their funding. The staff managed to procure new funding through a research initiative designed to promote partnerships between the local schools and a nearby university. The new funding was for a redesigned program, a fusion of PODER and YES based on educational research that recognized the overlooked resources that nonmainstream students bring to educational settings. I became the coordinator of PODER-YES, and over the course of the next year I worked

closely with concerned educational researchers, dedicated educational practitioners, generous members of the university community and a dynamic group of middle school students. Together we attempted to realize the potential of our shared vision of cross-cultural collaboration.

I designed the study I describe here as Participatory action research in the tradition of Kemmis and McTaggart, McIntyre and Freire. I paid careful attention to the effectiveness of my practice as an educator as I worked with a group of middle-school students to investigate the social practices of their school. PODER-YES was an example of praxis or “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 51). In this case the ‘world’ in question was the social spaces occupied by the youthful participants in the PODER-YES program. The inauguration of the program in the fall of 2005 represented an attempt to reduce the divide between immigrant students and their schoolmates. As the program coordinator, with the support of my colleagues and the input of the students we served, I designed the literacy-based pedagogy according to the principles of two related schools of thought: culturally relevant pedagogy and critical pedagogy.

Traditionally, U.S. schools have been considered to be apolitical places where young people from different backgrounds receive the same quality of education. Within the last 40 years researchers from various fields have worked to debunk that assumption (Anyon, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Finn, 1999; Gee, 2008). This study further questions that conventional wisdom by presenting a portrait of a group of urban, Mid-Western Latina immigrant and their critical and collaborative work with peers at a multicultural after-school program. Key moments in the programming coincided with two controversial political events, the introduction of English-only legislation into the state House of Representatives in May of 2005 and the planning and execution of a demonstration in which Latino immigrants boycotted work and school in May of 2006.

Framing the study with these two episodes highlights the impact that critically oriented educational programming that recognizes their linguistic and cultural resources can have on immigrant students as well as on their classmates.

The students completed two major projects during the first year of joint programming. In the introductory project students worked individually and in groups to create social maps of their school, an assignment borrowed from Laurie Olsen (1995, 1997). Making the maps cast the students in the role of expert by asking them to share the insiders’ knowledge of the spaces of their school that they had acquired through using them. They were able to share that knowledge with a wider public first through a family night in which they displayed and explained their maps and then through a new multilingual video, *From Bad to Worse: The Rumor Cycle*, which traced the path of a hurtful rumor through their school.

The culturally relevant elements of the maps and the video were evident through the ways in which the collaborative ventures relied on the students’ mobilization of their funds of knowledge (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) or resources such as the cultural, spatial and linguistic awareness that they had acquired through participation in social networks in their school, their homes and the surrounding community. Most notably these knowledge bases included the students’ insider knowledge of their school, their exhaustive knowledge of popular culture, and their comfort with and connection to their home languages.

The students chose to speak to the topic of gossip at Greendale, a focus that invited a critical analysis of the role that students themselves play in what they called the ‘rumor cycle’. This topic first emerged within the entrance interviews held with students during the initial month of programming. The video served to generate dialogue on the subject within the school as a whole: the students shared the short film with their peers during advisory period, using it to lead discussions of gossip at Greendale. In doing so they trans-

formed the negative talk of gossip into productive dialogue about a common concern. *From Bad to Worse: The Rumor Cycle* provided the students with a forum in which to offer a critical stance on some of the social practices thriving within the social spaces of their school, and as such it represented their attempt to take collective action to improve their community

According to Critical Literacy theorist Ira Shor (1999), “Silenced students find ways to make lots of noise, in the unofficial spaces of halls, toilets, lunchrooms, yards and streets” (p. 4). Within those unofficial spaces it can be assumed that young people discuss subjects that really matter to them using language that reflects who they are and what they value. In the case of the students of PODER-YES, their cooperative work on the social maps and the multilingual video revealed and built on their intimate knowledge of both the official and unofficial spaces of their school. These collaborations also allowed them to coconstruct figurative spaces in which they were able to learn to recognize and utilize not only their own social and cultural resources but also the resources of their peers.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN: DOCUMENTING TRANSFORMATION**

As I managed PODER-YES during its initial year, I also conducted research across the multiple spaces occupied by the program, one of the conditions of the funding we received. My formal investigation centered on issues related to language, literacy, agency and identity. In the field of New Literacy Studies (Heath, 1982, 1983; Gee, 1996, 1999, 2008; Luke, 1991; Street, 1984, 1995, 1999) literacy is viewed as a social practice that cannot be separated from the context from which it emerged. In keeping with this orientation, throughout data collection and analysis I focused on key interactions between students from distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These interactions did not always occur naturally. Instead

they emerged within the collaborative activities described in the previous section.

### **Participants**

At the heart of this study were the seventeen students who participated in the first year of the PODER-YES program and shaped the interactions that occurred there. These young people came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, speaking five languages in addition to English and representing six countries of origin other than the United States (Table 1). Eight of the participants spoke a language other than English in the home while nine were essentially monolingual speakers of English. Twelve of the students were female and five were male. Because they assumed a leadership role during both projects much of the analysis here focuses on the seven eighth grade girls enrolled in the program, particularly the five Latinas. These focal participants are marked in bold-face on the accompanying table.

The students came from distinct backgrounds to share the space of a diverse school. During the 2005-06 school year, Greendale, the sole middle school in Rockingham, enrolled close to 750 students. The demographic breakdown was as follows: 57.8% White, 28.2% Black, 6.8% Hispanic, and 5.5% multiethnic. Students identified as having limited English proficiency constituted 10.4% of the school population, and 66.9% of the student body was labeled as economically disadvantaged.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

As action research and praxis, the PODER-YES program mixed theory with reflective practice, both within the programming as described above, and during my investigation of it, which is delineated below. During its first year the PODER-YES program met twice a week for 2.5 hours between the months of November, 2005 and May, 2006. The home-base was the family and consumer science room

TABLE 1  
Research Participants

<i>Student</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Birthplace (Origin)</i>	<i>Language(s)</i>
<b>Alejandra</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Guatemala</b>	<b>Spanish, Intermediate English</b>
<b>Alison</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Mexico</b>	<b>Spanish, English</b>
April	F	7	England	English
B.J.	M	7	Ethiopia	Amharic, English
Bob	M	7	U.S.	English
<b>Diana</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>U.S.</b>	<b>English, Basic Spanish</b>
<b>Dulce Maria</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>U.S. (Mexico)</b>	<b>Spanish, English</b>
Howa	F	7	Djibouti	Arabic, French, English
Jimmy	M	7	U.S.	English
Maia	F	7	Sudan	Arabic, English
<b>Marisol</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>El Salvador</b>	<b>Spanish, Beginning English</b>
<b>Mikaela</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>U.S.</b>	<b>English, Basic Spanish</b>
<b>Patricia</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>California (Mexico)</b>	<b>Spanish, English</b>
Sara	F	7	U.S. (Ethiopia)	Tigrinya, Amharic, English
Tefere	M	7	U.S. (Ethiopia)	Amharic, English
Tonya	F	7	U.S.	English
Tyler	M	7	U.S.	English

located in a back corner of the school, but the two major projects described above required us to explore and make use of most of the building. A typical session included tutorials, a group game or team-building activity, a snack, work on the featured project and free time. The participants also made four educational field trips to the university funding the project.

To conduct this study of literacy practices I used literacy events (Heath, 1982), or meaningful interactions around text, as the primary unit of investigation. I documented the literacy events promoted by the PODER-YES pedagogy by writing extensive narrative style field notes after each session. I also made digital recordings of key interactions during the programming and analyzed numerous student documents produced during the projects. I used semi-structured entrance and exit interviews as well as member checks to gain a more complete understanding the literacy practices rooted within the literacy events: all partici-

pants were interviewed in December and in May as well as intermittently when I had questions about specific incidents. I analyzed the data collected using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify key interactions and microethnographic discourse analysis (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Farris, 2005) to examine the language use within them.

## ***FINDINGS***

Of particular interest within this article and the study as a whole was the concept of community or the formation of strong working relationships among young people from diverse backgrounds. These connections became visible as the students began to recognize that they possessed a common knowledge base: a keen awareness of the social spaces of Greendale Middle School and the practices that thrived

there. During the initial weeks of programming the PODER-YES students worked together on the social mapping project. This collaboration not only allowed the students to become more familiar with their peers and the resources they possessed, it also served to make them more aware of a commonly held fund of knowledge. Coconstructing social maps helped the PODER-YES students to recognize the commonalities within their perceptions of the spaces of Greendale Middle School, particularly the more public locations such as the cafeteria. The spatial knowledge shared by the PODER-YES students then became the heuristic through which they organized the narrative of gossip portrayed in the script and the video filmed from it: the story traces an increasingly hurtful, sexualized rumor from the most restricted (classroom) to the least restricted social spaces (cafeteria). The title chosen by the creators, *From Bad to Worse: The Rumor Cycle*, reveals their awareness of the link between spaces and their social practices.

From the start students relied on a shared form of indigenous knowledge, their familiarity with the spaces of their school, to organize their ideas for the video. They investigated their chosen problem by conducting informal surveys of their peers not in the program, seeking their insight into the mechanics of gossip at Greendale. In the initial brainstorming session, facilitated by the program staff, one of the more vocal Latinas, Dulce Maria, identified the cafeteria as the logical place for a multilingual scene:

Dulce Maria: I was thinking, for one of the scenes ... let's say we're all like in the lunch room, everybody has their own table ... like they're sitting together, we're sitting together and like they're sitting together and like in each thing we should have people talking about the same rumor.

Courtney: Oh, so you want to have a big scene with all three languages...

Dulce Maria: And like each group is talking about the same rumor

Maia: So like one of them, so like goes from each group tells this group and then the same. (Script Brainstorm, February 13, 2006)

To start the dialogue I had reminded the students that there were two guidelines for the video: its focus on gossip and its multilingualism. That prompt was enough for Dulce Maria to suggest the cafeteria for the "big scene," an idea that resonated with seventh grader Maia. The students recognized that in many ways the cafeteria was the social nexus of Greendale, and it had appeared on everyone's social maps, both individual and group.

During the mapping project almost all of the groups created computer-generated drawings of the space. Despite notable similarities, the students' visions of the cafeteria did differ in subtle but important ways. These representations faithfully depicted the physical setting of the cafeteria, with most featuring hexagon-shaped tables with attached chairs scattered in a large room. For the Latinas, the proximity of those tables evidentially failed to capture how each one could be viewed as a discrete community, and their map included labels of the different social groups and where they typically sat. Dulce Maria's vision of the cafeteria as a relatively segregated environment shaped her participation in the drafting of the video script: during the brainstorming session cited earlier she stated that "everyone has their own table" and she repeated the word "together" three times to emphasize the separation between distinct groups gathered in the same space. This notion of school cafeteria as contact zone (Pratt, 1991) is present in key examples of popular culture, including well-known movies such as *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004). The familiarity of these representations likely influenced the immediate and positive reception of the cafeteria as the setting of the story's climax. Popular culture was another communal fund of knowledge.

Drafting the climactic scene required students who sat at different tables in the cafeteria to develop a shared vision of that complex social space. Eighth graders Dulce Maria and Mikaela assumed a leadership role during the crafting of the cafeteria drama, envisioning what the cafeteria would look like if it were the space in which a rumor reached its peak. Their

negotiation of how to best structure that crucial scene showed a common idea of how the cafeteria worked as well as distinct senses of how it felt like to be there:

Dulce Maria: I don't know, she gets up in the middle of the cafeteria and walks towards her boyfriend's table and like ... just like starts to yell and then she's like "I heard you were doing it with Carmen Hernandez" and that Carmen goes up and then.... That's my idea

Mikaela: Well, I was thinking about like Carmen walking to the cafeteria and everybody like looks at her and she's like "what the heck is goin' on?" and then like she walks to like either her friends' table or her boyfriend's table ... well ... I was gonna say... if she walks to her friends table, wouldn't they like ask her what was going on?

Dulce Maria: Yeah

Mikaela: And then, she's like ... and then since we're gonna have like ... like ... some ... one of her friends tell her like what's going on and then she gets all mad and stuff like that, and then she walks over to her boyfriend's table and ... I don't know ...

(Brief interlude with a staff member)

Mikaela: Oh, I don't know ... okay ... um... well ... let her like walk into the cafeteria and then she can walk to a different table and then like everybody's like ... everyone's just walkin' down the ... like ... aisle

Dulce Maria: Oh yeah (hums wedding march)

Mikaela: But then she walks down the aisle, and then like everybody's like looking at her and she just sat at her friends table and then they're like "you know what's goin' on?" ... or she asks like ... she asks like "what's going on and why's everybody staring at me" and then one of them tell her. (Script Negotiation, February 13, 2006)

Both girls have a sense of how to capture the drama of the situation, with one suggesting a public confrontation between a couple and the other proposing a representation of public shame. Both options hinge on the cafeteria as a public space, the ideal forum for an interaction of interest to the school community. Both, particularly Mikaela's version, also capture a darker side of the cafeteria that was not immediately evident in the earlier written and pictorial

representations of the maps, its potential to become a site of public humiliation.

Interestingly enough, the videos from 2005 and 2006 both featured climactic scenes set in a school cafeteria. This coincidence is not surprising given the importance of that space in the social lives of most middle school students and its feature role in popular culture. However, the two representations of the social practices of the cafeteria were quite distinct. The first video, *Language Lessons* used the cafeteria as a space for conflict resolution and cultural connection: a young Latina danced *bachata* with the football player she had generously tutored in Spanish despite his angry confrontation of her use of that language in the hallway. The story itself incorporated the ever-popular romantic element into a narrative focused on the issue of language discrimination, and the cafeteria became a space for making cultural connections. *From Bad to Worse: The Rumor Cycle* presented a less idyllic version of the cafeteria, one that revealed its creators' insiders knowledge of how that space sometimes functioned in darker ways.

The students may have displayed a more nuanced spatial knowledge in the second video project because, unlike the previous year, the video was filmed at Greendale with the help of students from a video production club at the research university that had provided the program funding. The cafeteria scene in particular benefited from the students' spatial awareness, a connection illustrated by a crucial interaction between the Latinas after we held a rehearsal in the cafeteria. Enacting the script while sitting at an actual table in that space helped the girls to evaluate the Spanish-English portion of the script from a more critical perspective. Afterwards they asked if they could revise their portion of the scene and then proceeded to conduct a line-by-line analysis of its language (Appendix 1).

The Latinas' knowledge of Spanish, one of their fundamental funds of knowledge, received little recognition in the school spaces, particularly within the classrooms. In contrast, the bilingual revision of the script validated

that knowledge base and even allowed them to expand it by concentrating on the nuances of their primary language. In lines 9 through 27 the girls pay particular attention to the task of providing an accurate translation of the idiomatic expression *french kiss*, debating which preposition is the correct choice. In line 28, I intervene to ‘speed up’ the task by suggesting that Patricia, the girl who will speak the line in the video, should assume ownership of it by choosing the preposition herself. Paying attention to the clock rather than the quality of the interaction taking place is an all-too-common educator misstep, but I was fortunate that Patricia resisted my effort to end the debate. In line 38 she maintains her focus on the dialogue, encouraging the group to continue with their analysis until they are all satisfied with the choice. They do so for another twenty-one lines, asserting their status as experts in Spanish. Indeed, they feel authoritative and comfortable enough to disregard my input. The Latinas assumed responsibility for their own language, and they relished the opportunity to do so.

The video itself turned out to be quite a public forum for student voices: it was featured at both an on-campus premiere at the university and a meeting of the city council as well as at the local film festival. Dulce Maria was aware of how the conflicts that flourished in the cafeteria were not far removed from those that plagued the surrounding community. When asked about the impact of the video’s multilingualism she recognized that including more than one language in a public forum in the United States is a political act:

I think it was nice because right now with all that things going on with the walls and the immigrants, it shows that immigrants help out a lot and in school there’s a lot of diversity, its not just black and white, its Hispanic, Asian ... um... all different kinds of cultures ... and that anything that happens, let’s say in English it can happen, in any other language it can be ... it can be ... it can be wrote in many different languages. Like in the movie

it was wrote in English, Spanish and Amharic. (Exit Interview, May 18, 2006)

Her analysis shows her awareness of the connection between the personal and the political in the day-to-day lives of immigrant students in U.S. schools. The official premiere of the video took place in early May, two days after a protest in which Latinos across the state and nation had boycotted work and school to call attention to their contributions to their communities and the injustice of the prejudice they faced in spite of them. Much to the girls’ disappointment, the families of the Latinas of PODER-YES had required them to attend school that day rather than join the protest occurring in the city center. During the session that day they expressed their frustration at being so close to the action but unable to take part. As it turned out, at least one of the five believed that the video itself provided a comparable opportunity to make a political statement. In sharing their voices with their classmates and the surrounding community the Latinas of PODER-YES positioned themselves as responsible and resourceful leaders at Greendale Middle School. They shared one of their most fundamental funds of knowledge, their home language, and in doing so they not only made the video stronger, they helped their peers to recognize the importance of that contribution.

Recognizing the value of what others had to offer was a key element in the success of the PODER-YES programming, and the students taking part understood its importance. During her exit interview Mikaela, Dulce Maria’s partner in the original script negotiation, revealed her insight into the power of cross-cultural collaboration:

Courtney: What helps people to work together at PODER-YES?

Mikaela: Um, by meeting others and trying to cooperate and showing others ... like how talented you are ... and showing them your work ...

Courtney: Yeah... How do you think you showed how talented you are?

Mikaela: Um ... I tried by ... um being nice to others and giving them a chance to show me their ideas and once they were done, I tried to show them mine.

Mikaela's analysis echoes Freire's emphasis on the importance of the profound trust of "people and their creative powers" within critically-oriented collaborations. The students of PODER-YES did recognize their own potential and the potential of their peers, and they did work together to resist situations and labels that might serve to limit their opportunities or stifle their voices.

## **DISCUSSION**

The voices of immigrant students are too often silenced in U.S. schools. Educational policies that do not prioritize the learning of their first languages and pressure from peers and staff alike to speak English serve to deprive the newcomers of one of their most powerful funds of knowledge (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Alvarez, 2001; Halcón, 2001; Martínez-Roldán, 2000). Urban, low-income students regularly suffer a similar fate as their social and cultural resources are discounted or ignored. Young people from all backgrounds benefit when the knowledge they use in unofficial spaces such as their homes and the spaces they occupy with their peers is acknowledged in official spaces such as classrooms. The impact can be even stronger if the youth use those resources to address a problem in their community. When used together critical and culturally relevant pedagogies can serve to promote student voices across a variety of contexts.

While the program itself emerged around research principles grounded in a belief in the need for reform within U.S. schools, the shared setting of school actually formed the center of the PODER-YES pedagogy. The young people involved spoke different languages at home and came from different neighborhoods in their urban community, but they were united by the lived experience of their day-to-day

lives at Greendale. Their knowledge of the social spaces of their school, helped them to recognize their connectedness and their common funds of knowledge while also promoting a critical awareness of their complementary resources. In turn, their expertise as Greendale students allowed them to speak with authority in high-status spaces within the surrounding community, including the nearby research university and the local city council.

Common and complementary knowledge of the spaces of their school, in conjunction with other key funds of knowledge, allowed students from PODER-YES to work together to attempt to solve a social problem. The video project also broke down the barrier between "official" and "unofficial" spaces, allowing the young people involved to inject their voices into high status public gatherings. Within those forums the students were able to share their concerns with their classmates as well as to inform a more general public about their thoughts and feelings. The timing of the video project also highlighted how the personal is political, a relationship that is too often ignored in the school setting (Cammarota, 2004; Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Fernandez, 2002; Moll, 2004). The students' residence at the edge of an urban area in which immigration was a controversial topic helped them to make that connection.

Over the course of the program, the students of PODER-YES became more aware of themselves as members of overlapping communities connected by common interests and concerns. The successful collaborations between them were possible because they united to pursue projects that held personal significance for them. Their shared purpose allowed them to mobilize complementary resources such as their home languages as well as common knowledge bases such as their awareness of the social spaces of their school. They took the responsibility of representing themselves seriously, working to represent their school authentically but also in such a way that left room for the possibility of transformation.

Working together so closely also helped the students to develop interpersonal relationships grounded in mutual respect. The young people recognized each other's contributions to the projects and they understood how what they created together was richer than what they could have produced as individuals. Together they assumed accountability for their own problematic behavior, the rumors that spread among students at schools across the country.

The PODER-YES program was designed to make students more aware of themselves and their peers by asking diverse students to work collectively. Several scholars have written on the power of such collaborations (Fine, Weis & Powell, 1997; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995) and most of them agree that such endeavors can also be problematic. When Pratt (1991) talks about the contact zone as a space in which individuals from different backgrounds "meet, clash, and grapple" (p. 173) her language conveys both the energy and the danger of promoting cross-cultural contact. The students' choice of the cafeteria as the setting for the climax of their video indicated their awareness of the power of such spaces, both literal and figurative. Educators who commit to a program like the one described in these pages must be prepared for a certain amount of messiness and tension as young people negotiate with peers who hold differing views. They must also be willing to intervene if necessary by helping students to recognize any beliefs that undermine the program's commitment to social justice.

While transformative education does at times require its practitioners to question their coparticipants, educators who ask their students to be critically literate must also give them the autonomy to express themselves. While the PODER-YES students did successfully collaborate across the lines of language and culture, the Latina students at times felt the need for their own space. At the beginning of the year they actively questioned the newly integrated format, expressing nostalgia for the past years' separation. That desire for distance

did not prevent them from interacting productively with their peers from other cultural groups, but it seems likely to have been a factor in moments such as the bilingual revision in which they collectively defined a distinct space for themselves within the program and its pedagogy. Cross-cultural collaborations within the school setting rely on the willingness of young people to open their minds to the perspectives of others, a process that is not without tension. While the staff actively promoted intercultural interactions during the PODER-YES programming, we also respected the need that young people have for their own space. While the end result of such programs may not be a reshuffling of the seating arrangements in the lunchroom, the students involved will recognize that they can learn with and from each other.

### ***IMPLICATIONS***

While I was officially "in charge" of the day-to-day workings of the PODER-YES program, I relied on the strengths and talents of everyone involved to make the program a success. The staff of the program encouraged student input and we careful to hear their voices when they spoke. The young people generally extended each other this same courtesy. While this democratic model might seem more natural in a less formal setting like an after-school program, it can be transferred to the classroom if the teacher is willing to share authority by recognizing student expertise and sharing his or her 'stage' with other experts from the surrounding community.

The results cited above have some fundamental implications for learning in educational settings like after-school programs as well as classrooms:

- Young people, particularly middle school students who are passing through a time of transition, enjoy and benefit from projects that allow them to critically examine themselves and their communities.

- Students are engaged and empowered by projects that allow them to mobilize and extend their cultural resources, especially their home languages and their social awareness.
- Effective collaborations allow for the mobilization of common and complementary resources held by equals in pursuit of a common goal or motive.
- Effective collaboration can promote efficient and enjoyable relationships across the divides of language and culture.
- Agency can include productive forms of resistance as well as the assumption of responsibility.

As I described the implementation and impact of PODER-YES I told the story of a particular program with a personalized pedagogy designed in response to a specific problem. While I believe that programs similar to PODER-YES can and should be implemented in schools and communities experiencing demographic shifts, the staff and students involved must personalize their efforts to meet the needs and accommodate and extend the existing knowledge of the young people involved. Within PODER-YES, promoting the right projects through the common purposes that linked a diverse group of participants involved focusing on the students' awareness of their school and its social spaces and the social practices that marked them. For the program participants, writing, starring in and promoting a multilingual video against hurtful gossip proved to be an ideal vehicle in which to highlight their creativity and their individual and collective knowledge bases. The project also allowed to them to collaborate as equals with university students and researchers to work for change in their school. I hope that this article will inspire educators from various settings to work with their students to identify projects that could have similar transformative effects within their own context.

**APPENDIX 1: MICROETHNO-GRAPHIC TRANSCRIPT OF THE BILINGUAL SCRIP NEGOTIATION (TRANSCRIBED USING JEFFERSON CONVENTIONS)**

- Dulce Maria 1. Yeah, well ok  
 2. so we got Alejandra saying  
 3. >Yeah I already heard that<  
 4. and then se volteá y nos dice  
*she turns and tells us*  
 5. >Oyeron de lo que están hablando Megan y Alex se besaron<  
 >Did you (pl) hear what they're talking about Megan and Alex kissed<  
 6. luego Patricia dice  
*later Patricia says*  
 7. yeah, fue un beso de=  
*yeah, it was a tongue kiss*  
 8. =con lengua  
*kiss with tongue*
- Patricia 9. Fue un beso y con lengua  
*It was a kiss and with tongue*
- Dulce Maria 10. Y con lengua  
*And with tongue*
- Alejandra 11. Pero eso  
*But that*  
 12. that don't make sense  
 13. porque dice Es un beso y con lengua  
*because it says it is a kiss and with tongue*
- Dulce Maria 14. Fue un beso de lengua  
*It was a tongue kiss*
- Patricia 15. Fue un beso y con leng(h)ua  
*It was a kiss and with tong(h)ue*
- Courtney 16. It's kind of like  
 17. and with TONGUE
- Group 18. Yeah, Yeah
- Courtney 19. If you heard it in English  
*[Group chatter]*
- Marisol 20. [Léelo así ]  
*Read it like that*  
 21. como tu lo quieres poner  
*how you want to put it*
- Group 22. Yeah, Yeah
- Patricia 23. Fue un beso  
*It was a kiss*  
 24. Y con lengua  
*And with tongue*
- Dulce Maria 25. No

- Patricia 26. Y con  
And with  
27. no
- Courtney 28. Who's line  
29. Is that your line Patricia?
- Patricia 30. Yeah
- Courtney 31. Then I would say  
32. whoever's line it is  
33. let her
- Dulce Maria 34. Yeah  
35. that's what I'm saying
- Patricia 36. But I me[an]
- Courtney 37. [Can you write it down for me?]
- Patricia 38. I mean, I'm saying that it looks, it sounds kind of ok  
39. but I don't know like (.) what other people [(.)]
- Courtney 40. [What are you saying?]
- Patricia 41. It's like  
42. It's not like  
43. you don't make
- Dulce Maria 44. In Spanish it don't make sense but in English it probably does
- Courtney 45. I think if it has that emphasis=  
[Group Chatter]
- Courtney 46. [Y con lengua  
And with tongue  
47. you know  
48. emphasize it  
49. like woo-hoo↑  
50. you know
- Alison 51. O con la lengua, O  
Or with the tongue
- Courtney 52. Y con la lengua  
And with the tongue
- Patricia 53. No no  
54. Un beso  
A kiss  
55. un beso con lengua  
A kiss with tongue
- Dulce Maria 56. Ya pon beso con lengua  
Now put kiss with tongue
- Alejandra 57. Un beso con lengua  
A kiss with tongue
- Dulce Maria 58. Aha, pon beso con lengua  
Aha, put kiss with tongue
- Alison 59. > A qu(h)ien le gusta los tacos de leng(h)ua?<  
>Who likes tongue tacos?<

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